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Editor's Choice

Empowering Refugees through Technology: Commit Global's Digital Response to the Nagorno-Karabakh Exodus (2023-2024)

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Introduction

In this paper, I will present Commit Global's humanitarian digital intervention in Armenia, aimed at supporting the integration of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh.

First, I will explore the origins of the conflict. Next, I will analyze the impact of the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive on Nagorno-Karabakh. Finally, I will focus on the humanitarian response, with particular emphasis on Commit Global's digital intervention and its role in the ongoing crisis.

The data and insights presented were gathered during Commit Global's field trips to Armenia and multiple online meetings with various Armenian stakeholders between October 2023 and December 2024.

Nagorno-Karabakh: Conflict, dissolution, and the impact of the 2023 offensive

Nagorno-Karabakh, or Artsakh (the historical Armenian name), is a disputed region between Armenia and Azerbaijan, internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. However, until recently, much of this region was self-governed by the **Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh**, which was never officially recognized by the international community.

The term "**Karabakh**" comes from a Russian transcription of the Azerbaijani word meaning "black garden," while "**Nagorno**" comes from a Russian word meaning "mountainous," reflecting the region's geographical characteristics.

The history of Nagorno-Karabakh, as British journalist and writer Thomas de Waal tells us, is deeply rooted in over a century of competition between Christian Armenian and Muslim Turkic and Persian influences. In the

19th century, Karabakh, traditionally home to both Christian Armenians and Turkic Azerbaijanis, became part of the Russian Empire. The early 20th century saw acts of violence on both sides, leaving a lasting imprint on the region's collective memory. Following World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet authorities created the **Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region** within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan, despite its ethnic Armenian majority.

As the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence, leading to the escalation of tensions into the **First Karabakh War (1992-94)**, which resulted in approximately 30,000 deaths. Armenians gained control of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding Azerbaijani territories, displacing over a million people. A ceasefire brokered by Russia in 1994 left Karabakh and surrounding territories under Armenian control, but the region remained in a state of frozen status until 2020, when the **Second Karabakh War** broke out. Azerbaijan recaptured significant territory, and after six weeks of intense fighting, Russia deployed peacekeepers to monitor a ceasefire, which required Armenia to return territories outside the former Soviet Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast. Tensions flared again in 2022, with border clashes leading to numerous casualties. In September 2023, after a prolonged Azerbaijani blockade, Azerbaijani forces rapidly took control of Nagorno-Karabakh, and most ethnic Armenians fled the region. On January 1st, 2024, Nagorno-Karabakh was formally dissolved, marking the end of its existence as an autonomous region.

Azerbaijan's military operation from 19-20 September 2023 brought an end to over thirty years of de facto self-governance for the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and triggered a mass exodus of its population. The offensive followed a months-long blockade of the Lachin Corridor, the only route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia, which had been in place since 12 December 2022. In April 2023, Azerbaijani authorities formally solidified the blockade by setting up a border checkpoint at the entrance to the corridor. Starting in mid-July, they deliberately and unlawfully blocked the delivery of humanitarian aid to the region, violating International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This blockade cut off Nagorno-Karabakh's access to essential resources, including food, medicine, electricity, and fuel, leading to a severe humanitarian crisis. Transport through the corridor resumed on 18 September, just one day before the military operation began.

Humanitarian support and intervention

According to the latest data published by the UNHCR Armenia and the Government of Armenia, as of January 2024, over 100.000 refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh required humanitarian assistance. Armenia, with a population of just under 3 million, is still struggling to accommodate this influx.

Since the outbreak of the war in and around Nagorno Karabakh in 2020, the European Commission has allocated in total €38.4 million in humanitarian aid to provide emergency support to the affected people. EU humanitarian assistance includes: food, hygiene and household items, multi-purpose cash assistance, shelter, education in emergencies, health and psychosocial support, medical equipment and other urgent assistance.

In 2023, in the aftermath of the ethnic Armenians exodus from Nagorno Karabakh, both the EU and U.S. pledged additional funding in support of the displaced. In 2024, the EU strengthened its humanitarian operations in Armenia with additional €5.5 million to ensure that refugees have access to basic needs such as shelter and food, health care, livelihoods assistance and protection.

Additionally, The Council of Europe developed a comprehensive response package to the refugee influx in Armenia totalling 2.8 Million Euro in support to Armenia in addressing the issues related to hosting Karabakh Armenians.

Governmental measures

On 26 October 2023, Armenia adopted a decree granting refugee status to over 100,000 people who fled Nagorno-Karabakh. The government registered arriving refugees and helped them find shelter in population centres. All are eligible for Armenian citizenship, of which some have already availed themselves.

The Armenian authorities have allocated over 54 billion drams (\$135 million) for the needs of Nagorno-Karabakh resettlers. Every adult has received a one-off payment of 100,000 drams (\$250) for urgent needs, followed by a \$185 monthly stipend from October 2023 to December 2024 – the minimum wage in Armenia in 2023 – to cover rent and basic needs.

International organisations and coordination

The Refugee Response Plan (RRP) was launched in October 2023 by the Government of Armenia in collaboration with the **UNHCR** and over 60 other

social and humanitarian organizations in response to the large-scale displacement of ethnic Armenians following Azerbaijan's military offensive and the subsequent collapse of Nagorno-Karabakh as an autonomous region. The RRP aims to assist 101,000 refugees and over 95,000 members of the host community, with a funding request of USD 97 million. By the end of March 2024, the plan had been 52% funded, and it continues to guide humanitarian efforts in tandem with government-led initiatives.

Other international organizations involved in the RRP include **UNICEF** which focuses on child welfare; **World Food Programme (WFP)**, which provides food aid and nutritional support; **World Health Organisation (WHO)**, which coordinates medical assistance and supplies; **International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC)**, through the Armenian Red Cross Society, offering emergency relief; and ICRC, alongside **Doctors Without Borders**, delivering humanitarian aid and emergency medical care.

Commit Global's intervention in Armenia

The mission of Commit Global is to build technology with social impact that addresses critical global issues. Built on the experience and history of Code for Romania, Commit Global has taken on the role of creating a global civic and humanitarian infrastructure that is equally accessible to governments and small grassroots organizations. The goal is to ensure coordination, increase the efficiency of humanitarian intervention processes in the event of disasters and conflicts, and eliminate redundancy and duplication of efforts and resources by not reinventing the same systems and technologies each time.

In response to the mass displacement of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, Commit Global is contributing its digital tools and expertise, designing tailored solutions to support both the immediate needs and the long-term integration of refugees into the host country.

In early October 2023, Commit Global's humanitarian team was on the ground to assess the needs, understand the challenges in the humanitarian response, and offer its support through the provision of free technology for coordination and humanitarian intervention. Over the course of several weeks, the team engaged with more than 50 local and international organizations and representatives from the Government of Armenia. The EU Delegation to Yerevan and the Embassy of Romania to Armenia played a key role in facilitating the team's field visits. The research was conducted in Yerevan, in centers hosting refugees (such as those in Chambarak,

Gegharkunik province), and in Goris, in Syunik province, at the border with Iran and Azerbaijan, the main entry point for refugees coming from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Over the past year, Commit Global continued collaborating with local organizations and identifying partners to address the urgent needs and challenges faced by both refugees in their integration process and the organizations involved in the response.

One of the key findings highlighted the urgent need for psychosocial support to address post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues experienced by the population at large. Armenians face various forms of trauma, including intergenerational trauma from the 1915 genocide, which claimed 1.5 million lives. Over the years of ongoing conflict, PTSD has become widespread among both former combatants and civilians living in border regions, who have endured constant stress and psychological strain. Currently, in Armenia, treatment for post-traumatic stress is available through only one specialized institution—the Center for Psychosocial Rehabilitation.

In response to this need, Commit Global will deploy the PTSD Help mobile app, a confidential and free tool for individuals with PTSD, for their loved ones, and for mental health professionals which can be used as a standalone tool for information and self-management and/or as a complement to treatment with a mental health professional. Designed in partnership with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, PTSD Help has already been successfully deployed in support of Ukrainian refugees and offers practical exercises, tools, and coping mechanisms ensuring that users can receive immediate, accessible support for trauma-related issues. Its content localization and translation is ensured through our local partner—the Armenian Progressive Youth organisation and with the support of Armenian psychiatrists to secure cultural sensitivity and clinical accuracy.

During the research period, the need for specialized support for women facing domestic violence or reproductive health challenges were also highlighted. Commit Global along with its strategic partner—Armenian Progressive Youth is addressing this by launching the Women's Center, a digital platform that ensures women have access to counseling, support services, and critical information in a safe and confidential manner. The platform also provides vital resources on reproductive health and domestic violence, empowering women with the tools they need to navigate these challenging circumstances.

Another major challenge in providing aid to refugees and ensuring their successful integration into Armenia is their dispersed geographic distribution, doubled by their reluctance to settle near the border regions with Azerbaijan. A notable concentration of displaced individuals is found in Yerevan, where 39.85% of the displaced population has sought refuge. Kotayk follows with a substantial, though lower, percentage of 15.05%, indicating a significant presence in the region. Ararat and Armavir also have notable shares, accounting for 11.01% and 8.89%, respectively. The distribution then gradually decreases across other regions, with Syunik, Lori, Aragatsotn, and Shirak each representing percentages between 6.13% and 3.54%. The remaining regions—Gegharkunik, Tavush, and Vayots Dzor—make up smaller proportions, ranging from 3.29% to 2.00%.

To navigate the complex web of services available to displaced populations, Commit Global along with a series of local partners will launch a digital service map. This needs-based map brings together information on support provided by various donors, CSOs, and humanitarian organizations, aiming to improve coordination, quickly identify needs, and prevent duplication or gaps in services.

Last, but not least, legal challenges, especially related to refugee status, and state assistance programs, remain a significant barrier for many displaced people. To address this, Commit Global will redeploy **Law Made Simple**, a digital guide that provides legal information in an easy-to-understand decision-tree format. This tool helps displaced individuals make informed decisions about their legal rights and navigate complex processes such as registration, citizenship, and assistance claims.

Both **Law Made Simple** and the **Women's Center** were originally developed and launched to assist refugees displaced by the war in Ukraine. Currently, they are available in multiple languages, including Romanian, English, Ukrainian, and Russian. These platforms are widely used by both refugees and economic migrants living in Romania, providing timely support, counseling, information, and guidance for their most urgent legal and women's health-related needs.

In conclusion, Commit Global's digital humanitarian interventions in Armenia represent a critical response to the identified needs of refugees displaced by the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis. The deployment of localized digital tools like **PTSD Help**, the **Women's Center**, the digital service map, and **Law Made Simple** proving their efficiency in other crises and geographies demonstrates a tailored approach to addressing specific challenges faced

in the context of Armenia. These digital solutions represent only a small part of Commit Global's efforts to create a common and shared digital infrastructure that can be widely and equally used by institutions, humanitarian and international organizations, as well as grassroots organizations responsible for and involved in emergency humanitarian response during disasters and conflicts.

Technology, when designed correctly and tailored to the needs identified through field research and UX discoveries, can become one of the most effective methods for optimizing resources in the humanitarian sector. A crisis triggered by armed conflict in Sudan will lead to similar needs as a crisis triggered by an earthquake in California: shelter, emergency medical services, water, food, psychosocial support and intervention, etc.

Correctly designed, technology therefore plays a key role in improving the humanitarian response in the event of disasters and conflicts by providing rapid access, accessible content that is culturally and linguistically adapted, as well as an intuitive navigation experience for those in need. This way, resources are used more efficiently, and aid reaches people faster and in a more relevant way.

More about Commit Global work:

<https://www.commitglobal.org/en>

Access to current digital solutions implemented in Romania:

- Law made simple: <https://cezicelegea.ro/en>
- Women Center: <https://womencenter.info/en>
- PTSD Help (mobile application)
 - iOS:
<https://apps.apple.com/ro/app/ptsd-coach-psychological-help/id6452725263>
 - Android:
https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=ro.code4.ptsdcoach&pcampaignid=web_share

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