

IOM SOUTH CAUCASUS COVID-19 STRATEGIC RESPONSE AND RECOVERY PLAN

JANUARY-DECEMBER 2021



IOM Georgia, Photo taken by Eric Gourlan. Bakiza and Mahmood left Jordan in 2018 to protect their family from Bakiza's violent ex-husband. Before COVID-19, they worked in a beauty salon in Tbilisi, which unfortunately closed down due to the pandemic. The family is now left without any income, struggling to pay their rent and school fees. Bakiza and Mahmood hope to get residence permits in Georgia in the near future. IOM Georgia provided support to the family in 2020 as part of its COVID-19 response. [Read more.](#)



TOTAL FUNDING REQUIRED

7.768 Million USD

TOTAL PEOPLE TARGETED PER CATEGORY¹

30,000

Returned migrants and individuals in migration-dependent communities

5,120

Stranded migrants in vulnerable situations

15,000

People displaced by conflict

500

Border and police staff

SITUATION OVERVIEW

March 2021 marks a year since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus SARS-Cov-2 (COVID-19) a global pandemic. Migrants, populations displaced by conflict, and migration-dependent communities in the South Caucasus have been among the most vulnerable to the impacts of the protracted crisis.

Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia continue to record considerable numbers of new infections each day² while vaccination efforts are slow or pending. Mobility in and out of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia continues to be constrained for all categories of migrants and travellers, as over 47,000 restrictions remain in effect around the world, and land borders in South Caucasus remain closed.³ Lockdowns, social regulations, and economic restrictions introduced to curb the pandemic have brought significant socioeconomic decline to the region, manifesting in a dramatic increase in prices of food and consumer goods as well as record levels of unemployment.

1 Numbers of direct beneficiaries are indicative, capturing a sum of beneficiaries of all interventions proposed.

2 [COVID-19 Data Repository by CSSE at Johns Hopkins University](#), accessed on March 12, 2021

3 [COVID-19 Mobility Impacts portal](#), accessed on March 12, 2021

4 [IOM Global Covid-19 Strategic Response and Recovery Plan \(SRRP\) for 2021](#)

The countries of the South Caucasus entered 2021 recovering from a severe second wave of the pandemic. In early November 2020, the pandemic peaked in an unprecedented manner in Armenia, reaching over 2,000 new cases daily in a population of 2.3 million. In early December 2020, Georgia and Azerbaijan experienced between 4,100 and 4,500 new infections and nearly 40 deaths each day, with Georgia reaching the world's worst per capita figures on 2 December 2020. To date, the pandemic claimed over 10,200 lives in a region of 16.8 million people.² As of spring of 2020, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are experiencing an outset of a third pandemic wave.

In 2020, IOM rolled out major humanitarian programmes in the South Caucasus to deliver urgent direct assistance and support to the Governments in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in responding to the emergency, in line with IOM's 2020 COVID-19 Global Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan. **In 2021, IOM seeks to extend its efforts to address humanitarian needs exacerbated by the pandemic's escalation in the region and promote recovery among vulnerable foreign migrants, populations displaced by conflict, and migration-dependent populations in the South Caucasus, in alignment with [IOM's 2021 Global COVID-19 Strategic Response and Recovery Plan \(SRRP\)](#).**⁴

Critical needs prevailing among migrants and migration-dependent populations during the COVID-19 crisis derive from the health risks associated with the disease and barriers in access to medical care. However, they are also strongly exacerbated by the consequences of preventive measures implemented by local Governments and lack of access to support measures. Mitigation plans introduced by the Governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have primarily targeted local populations, including those citizens residing abroad and those who returned home during the pandemic. This assistance

was often available only upon request, and the level of awareness of the assistance was low among returnees. The measures have not meaningfully addressed insecurities (income, livelihood, health) faced by foreign migrants in the region during the pandemic. Additionally, populations in Armenia and Azerbaijan displaced by the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh are exposed to high levels of pandemic risk in the absence of both information and access to preventive measures, such as personal protective equipment. The situation and most pressing needs of each vulnerable group are outlined below.

RISKS AND NEEDS OVERVIEW

Vulnerable foreign migrants in the South Caucasus

In the South Caucasus, hundreds of thousands of foreign migrants have found themselves in vulnerable situations — stranded, in deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, and facing linguistic, legal, and other types of barriers in access to support. A regional situation and needs assessment conducted by IOM in November 2020⁵ shows that many are without income (74% are unemployed) and unable to cover their basic needs, such as housing and food. Foreign migrants in the South Caucasus also experience disproportional exposure to COVID-19 due to life in close living quarters, reliance on public transport, and lack of awareness of prevention measures. They are overwhelmingly uninsured (97-98% in Armenia and Azerbaijan, 67% in Georgia) and unable to afford medical care. Many also avoid seeking help from State services due to a lack of regular migration status. Restrictions on freedom of movement coupled with suspensions or delays in immigration proceedings have also increased the migrants' risks of falling into an irregular situation and need for legal assistance. IOM's research also highlights the urgent need for counselling and mental health and psychosocial support services to address high anxiety levels linked to being stranded and fear of life in irregularity.

In 2021, IOM anticipates a continued deterioration of living conditions for foreign migrants amid the protracted crisis and during what is expected to be a slow socioeconomic recovery period. Foreign migrants struggle to keep or find employment in the present economic climate in the South Caucasus. With the harsh winter and continued depletion of personal savings, the need for safe housing has become even more critical among

foreign migrants struggling to cover living expenses. The global economic consequences of the pandemic will deprive additional migrants in the South Caucasus of financial support from their families in countries of origin — especially foreign students at local universities. Any re-opening of the countries' international borders and international travel routes is likely to be slow in the foreseeable future, rendering independent returns or departures complicated and very costly, further increasing demand for assistance with return to countries of origin. IOM also anticipates the continued need to advocate for inclusion of non-citizens in Coronavirus vaccination plans in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The roll-out of vaccination plans and campaigns has been slow in the South Caucasus — at the start of January 2021, only Azerbaijan had begun a vaccination campaign. IOM foresees the need to advocate for inclusion of migrants in local vaccination efforts irrespective of legal status to combat future resurgence of COVID-19 effectively.

Humanitarian assistance provided by IOM in 2020

In 2020, 610 foreign migrant households of 47 nationalities were assisted by IOM in the South Caucasus. IOM supported those most vulnerable with food and hygiene vouchers, cash assistance as a contribution towards accommodation costs, and coverage of urgent medical needs. IOM established partnerships with NGOs providing legal services to respond to pressing legal needs. Since January 2021, already more than 800 people seeking material humanitarian assistance have approached IOM missions in the South Caucasus. IOM requires additional funding for 2021 to support these and other vulnerable migrants.

5 IOM (2020) COVID-19 PANDEMIC: Vulnerabilities, risks and needs among third country migrants in the South Caucasus

Needs of migration-dependent populations

The pandemic and related restrictions have significantly increased the socioeconomic vulnerabilities in communities of origin dependent on remittances and among returned migrants. In 2020, tens of thousands of migrants from the South Caucasus returned to their countries of origin in light of insecurity or unemployment and inability to afford to stay abroad during the pandemic.⁶ Reintegration of migrants who returned to Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in 2020 has proven particularly difficult, primarily due to the ongoing economic downturn but also due to the often-unplanned, crisis-motivated nature of the migrants' return and closure of service points. Physical distancing recommendations limit contact within communities, increasing returnees' post-return isolation. Remittances have formed a significant proportion of GDP in the South Caucasus⁷ and provide an economic lifeline to approximately 20% of local households, covering basic expenses such as food and education. Prior to their return, migrants sent hundreds of Euros each month back to their families.⁸ Households now struggle to cover basic costs that used to be covered by remittances, such as healthcare, education expenses, and in some cases, even daily subsistence.^{8,9} Support for facilitating local income-generating activities is also critically needed to promote recovery. Furthermore, migration-dependent households and returnees would benefit from information on how to access existing State support schemes.

In 2021, IOM anticipates the continued disruption of mobility-based livelihood strategies among a large proportion of households in the South Caucasus. In the absence of local livelihood opportunities in communities of origin, IOM expects migrants who returned during the course of the pandemic to begin increasingly seeking pathways for re-migration in face of poverty.

Ongoing crisis: Population displaced by conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict escalation in September of 2020 resulted in a large-scale displacement in the region. At the peak of displacement, over 90,000 persons had been displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and were living in informal settlements and communities in Yerevan (39%), Kotayk (18%), Syunik (9%), and other areas.¹⁰ Similarly, at the peak of the displacement, over 40,000 persons had been temporarily displaced to Azerbaijan.¹¹ The displaced population is exposed to severe health risks stemming from limited access and affordability of local health services, as well as due to inability to maintain physical distancing in collective housing centers. Those displaced also lack sufficient access to protective equipment and exhibit high levels of misinformation on the risks associated with and prevalence of COVID-19 in their area.¹²

FROM RESPONSE TO RECOVERY: IOM SOUTH CAUCASUS' PLAN

IOM is working to ensure that a well-coordinated, comprehensive, equitable, and timely response to the crisis continues to halt further transmission of the disease, limits the humanitarian and socioeconomic effects of the pandemic, and supports affected communities in recovery. IOM's approach to preparing for and responding to disease outbreaks is anchored in IOM's Health, Border and Mobility Management framework. The framework links an understanding of population mobility with disease surveillance and provides a platform to develop country-specific and multi-country interventions, emphasizing health system strengthening along mobility corridors in line with the 2005 International Health Regulations (IHR). IOM aims to continue responding to the acute health and multi-sectoral needs of affected populations and communities of concern, while also implementing programmes to mitigate and address the longer-term socioeconomic impact of COVID-19.

In 2021, IOM intends to provide assistance in the continuation and extension of operations established in the South Caucasus in 2020. The proposed response is based on evidence of growing needs validated through a number of surveys and needs assessments. These studies include, among others, the regional assessment among stranded and vulnerable foreign migrants on the impact of COVID-19 in the South Caucasus, conducted by IOM in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia from October to December 2020, and a study of Georgian returnee experiences and needs in the time of a global pandemic.¹³

Activities will be implemented at the regional, national, and community levels in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, fully aligned with and structured alongside the Strategic Objectives of IOM's Global COVID-19 Strategic Response and Recovery Plan (SRRP) for 2021, as follows:

- 6 Official statistics capture the mass returns only partially: 21,206 Armenian migrants were assisted to return to Armenia within a single month (March-April) in 2020, and more than 20,000 Azerbaijani citizens and over 23,000 Georgian migrants made use of repatriation channels by August 2020. Most returns are unaccounted for.
- 7 Remittances formed 12.7% of GDP in Georgia and 11% in Armenia in 2019, [The World Bank](#), accessed December 3, 2020
- 8 IOM (2021), Return in times of Covid-19: Georgian returnee experiences and needs in the times of a global pandemic
- 9 In Georgia, for example, migrant households lost on average 69% of all income due to the return.
- 10 [IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix \(DTM\) analysis for Armenia](#)
- 11 [The humanitarian fallout of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict](#), New Humanitarian, 5 November 2020
- 12 [Rapid Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment](#) conducted within the framework of UN Coordination Steering Group
- 13 IOM (March 2021), Regional assessment among stranded and vulnerable foreign migrants on the impact of Covid-19 in the South Caucasus; IOM (2020), Assessing realization of socio-economic rights of Foreign migrants in Georgia, Georgian migrants abroad and Georgian returnees during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic: A review of reach and relevance of measures taken by the government of Georgia to vulnerable groups; IOM (forthcoming 2021), Return in times of Covid-19: Georgian returnee experiences and needs in the times of a global pandemic

Strategic Objective 1: Ensure continuation of essential services, mitigate risks, and protect displaced persons, mobile populations, and host communities

Mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on crisis-affected populations (Specific Objective 1a of SRRP)

IOM will implement mitigation measures to directly reduce the impact and risk of transmission of COVID-19 among populations displaced to Armenia by the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh or otherwise affected. Activities will include the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) and hygiene items among displaced populations and efforts to improve water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure in formal and informal settlements hosting the displaced in coordination with relevant partners.

Provide protection and assistance, reduce protection-related risks and vulnerabilities, and combat xenophobia (Specific Objective 1c of SRRP)

IOM will continue to identify and support vulnerable foreign migrants in need of care or protection, directly assisting those stranded and those in vulnerable situations with services adapted to their specific needs, including shelter, food, life-saving primary healthcare and mental health and psychosocial support services, and legal assistance. IOM will also continue identifying and providing tailored protection and assistance services to victims of trafficking, separated and unaccompanied children, and other migrants in vulnerable situations whose assistance needs have been exacerbated by the crisis. IOM will collate case data and generate regular (quarterly) statistical snapshots on the number of foreign migrants requesting assistance, the types of vulnerabilities and exploitative practices identified, and the types of services needed. IOM will continue to advocate for the inclusion of migrants in ongoing preparedness and response plans to avoid stigmatization. On the basis of needs observed, psychosocial support services will be included and/or scaled up throughout relevant interventions.

IOM will also continue to work with counterparts at national levels to ensure that migrants have access to timely, context-specific, and correct information on COVID-19 and prevention measures. To this end, IOM has established a repository of products and practices for migrant-inclusive communications and continues to contribute to the development and translation of standard messages for migrants on recommended measures and rights to assistance. IOM will also continue engaging national migration authorities in risk communication activities at Points of Entry to disseminate information, prevention advice, and advice on when and how to seek healthcare and supporting community-level awareness-raising in close coordination with municipal authorities in border communities. Additionally, IOM will continue training municipal officials and community members on prevention and preparedness measures and on using appropriate medical and physical precautions. Social media outreach will be continued, raising awareness among migrants and populations at large on COVID-19 health precautions and recommendations.

Strategic Objective 2: Scale-up Essential Public Health Measures and Promote Mobility Sensitive Health Systems

Prevent, detect, and respond to COVID-19 and other public health threats in communities and at borders (Specific Objective 2a of SRRP)

IOM will promote safe cross-border mobility by implementing health and border management measures at Points of Entry and migration management facilities in support of relevant counterparts of the Governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Specific activities will include capacity development for frontline border and immigration officials as well as procurement of relevant supplies and protective equipment.

Promote equitable access to vaccines for vulnerable populations (Specific Objective 2b of SRRP)

IOM will work alongside other health partners to implement an advocacy campaign to prioritize the access to vaccination for the population displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and within Azerbaijan and promote eligibility and access to vaccination for migrants in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Activities planned include government advocacy, community dialogues, establishment of feedback mechanisms, production of information materials, and social media campaigns in all three countries.

IOM Armenia supports labour migrants who were not able to resume their jobs abroad due to COVID-19 restrictions in starting a micro-business in their home country. Father and son Fidanyan and Arsen (pictured) received technical equipment from IOM to start a cement-block production business in their community in Amasia municipality in Shirak, one of Armenia's top migrant-sending regions.



Strategic Objective 3: Mitigate the longer-term socioeconomic impacts of COVID 19, contribute to restarting human mobility, and empower societies for self-reliance

Strengthen international cooperation, immigration systems, and border-crossing mechanisms to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on human mobility (Specific Objective 3a of SRRP)

IOM in Georgia will support the improvement of Point of Entry infrastructure and provide necessary equipment for mobility screening. Furthermore, IOM will develop flexible and customizable tools and approaches for management of immigration and labour migration processes, including through bilateral cooperation and labour agreements addressing the basis of gaps revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic with a particular focus on workers in essential sectors. IOM will also work to strengthen inclusion of public health measures within border management and will assist national and local governments in addressing misinformation and vulnerabilities, such as the role of smugglers and traffickers.

Include and empower people on the move to support socioeconomic recovery (Specific Objective 3b of SRRP)

IOM will promote the inclusion of migrants into recovery and development planning; ensure access of migrants, including migrant workers employed in essential sectors and industries, to socioeconomic recovery measures (including integration, social cohesion, and reintegration); provide support for financial and digital inclusion, keep remittances flowing, and connect diasporas with socioeconomic recovery; assist in identification, prevention, and addressing risks of exploitation in business operations; provide financial and technical support to enterprises; and provide skills-matching, education, and livelihoods support to strengthen health and other essential services. Specific emphasis will be placed on supporting reintegration of returning migrants, promoting revitalization of communities of origin in the South Caucasus, and building capacity of relevant national and local authorities in this technical area.

Strategic Objective 4: Inform response and recovery efforts by tracking the impact of COVID-19 on human mobility and people on the move and strengthen evidence-based decision-making through data

Strengthen knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on human mobility (Specific Objective 4b of SRRP)

IOM will continue to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effect of COVID-19 on mobility at the country and cross-border/ interregional level by monitoring, analysing, and reporting on local travel restrictions and changes in immigration and visa procedures, as well as at Points of Entry and in-country locations being imposed by and on countries globally.

Support and inform the medium-and longer-term efforts to address the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 at the national and local levels through data provision and analysis (Specific Objective 4c of SRRP)

IOM will continue to monitor and study the impact of COVID-19 on migrants and vulnerable populations in the South Caucasus both at the country and regional levels. A particular focus will be paid to ensuring synergies and complementarities to enable cross-country comparison and pooling of data. Assessments of policies, laws, and responses will also be conducted to complement data gathering on COVID-19 impact with dedicated needs assessments and recommendations towards improved policy-making and responses. These will be particularly focusing on the evolving policy and socioeconomic development landscape to help governments and partners ensure that their migration management responses are future-oriented and suited for the new normal emerging as a result of the pandemic. IOM will also work on building the capacity of local governments and partners to enhance existing data systems and methodologies. This work will aim at reviewing existing migration-data-gathering systems and approaches and developing a targeted and COVID-19-specific response to ensure continuity of data collection and gathering, enhance analysis, and forecast capacities of governments and other partners.

IOM'S CAPACITY TO RESPOND IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

In 2020, IOM COVID-19 response in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia directly reached over 30,200 migrant beneficiaries and distributed 1.06 million items of PPE to migrants and frontline migration officials. With more than 100 staff members deployed across Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, in main offices in capitals as well as in field offices, IOM is uniquely placed to continue providing support during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

IOM has extensive experience in responding to the mobility aspects of crises and supporting communities in recovery, along with its broad portfolio of migration management. This portfolio includes supporting governments and communities to prevent, detect, and respond to health threats along the mobility continuum while advocating for migrant-inclusive approaches that minimize stigma and discrimination. IOM works with Member States and Governments to identify appropriate border management practices and procedures inclusive of health measures that allow for gradual and safe re-opening of borders.

As a UN Agency, IOM is an active member of the UN Country Teams in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and of the emergency response coordination mechanism related to the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis. As global co-lead on Camp Coordination and Camp Management, a formal partner of WHO, a member of the Strategic Advisory Group of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Global Health Cluster, and more recently, the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network, IOM is increasingly a key player in responding to public health emergencies globally.

IOM will continue building on its long-standing direct cooperation with a network of key interlocutors, including governmental, non-governmental, and international actors in the South Caucasus to provide operational and technical support to the Governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and partners in response and recovery efforts related to the coronavirus pandemic.



IOM Azerbaijan has joined efforts with its partner, the State Migration Service (SMS), to support the Government's response and relief efforts by procurement and supply of kits that include COVID-19-related personal protective equipment (PPE) to vulnerable migrants. The kits, which include information leaflets on COVID-19, hand sanitizer, thermometers, gloves, masks, and antibacterial wipes, were delivered to vulnerable migrants (foreign nationals) temporarily residing in Baku by members of the "Migration Volunteer" Public Union under the SMS.

FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

The estimated amounts in the table represent indicative requirements for the planned interventions for twelve months (January-December 2021) as per the Global COVID-19 Strategic Response and Recovery Plan (SRRP) 2021, aligned to the Strategic and Specific Objectives of the SRRP.

Strategic Objective	Specific Objective	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Georgia ¹⁴
1. Ensure continuation of essential services, mitigate risks, and protect displaced persons, mobile populations, and host communities	1a: Mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on crisis-affected populations	440,250 USD	-	-
	1c: Provide protection and assistance, reduce protection-related risks and vulnerabilities, and combat xenophobia	340,000 USD	930,000 USD	840,000 USD
2. Scale-up Essential Public Health Measures and Promote Mobility Sensitive Health Systems	2a: Prevent, detect, and respond to COVID-19 and other public health threats in communities and at the border Points of Entry	220,000 USD	400,000 USD	340,000 USD
	2b: Promote equitable access to vaccines for vulnerable populations	50,000 USD	40,000 USD	15,000 USD
3. Mitigate the longer-term socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, contribute to restarting human mobility, and empower societies for self-reliance	3a: Mitigate pandemic impact on human mobility	-	-	681,000 USD
	3b: Include and empower people on the move to support socioeconomic recovery	900,000 USD	800,000 USD	1,232,000 USD
4. Inform response and recovery efforts by tracking the impact of COVID-19 on human mobility and strengthen evidence-based decision-making through data	4b: Strengthen knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on human mobility	-	35,000 USD	28,000 USD
	4c: Support and inform the medium- and longer-term efforts to address the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 at the national and local levels through data provision and analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable migrants	375,000 USD	20,000 USD	82,000 USD
	SUM OF NEEDS (per country)	2,325,250 USD	2,225,000 USD	3,218,000 USD
	TOTAL:		7,768,250 USD	

14 The plan and indicative funding requirements are related to the activities in the Tbilisi Administered Territories (TAT) of Georgia.

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