Harutyun Vermishyan

# PEACE THROUGH
# COMMUNICATION

Meghri community's insights
on the reopening of regional
transportation infrastructure

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## Abstract

Focus group discussions were conducted among the residents, civil society organizations, local self-government, and business community to generate local discourse on the reopening of transport routes through Meghri region.

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## Problem statement

Geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus in recent years, particularly in the wake of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, have restarted discussions about reopening regional communications and transportation networks. It is indeed a complicated and multidimensional issue, with global, geopolitical, and local aspects (Chernyavskiy, 2021; Hayrapetyan, 2022; Iskandaryan, 2022; Meister, 2021; Poghosyan, 2023). However, political agenda is not a purely top-down process; it always involves local expectations, local moods, identities, and everyday realities (Suffla et al., 2020; Tilly, 2002). In this respect, Armenia's Meghri community, located at a critical junction bordering Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey, occupies a pivotal position. "Great" interests, deep historical memory, and issues of human survival are focused on this geographical area, with its physical, social, and symbolic dimensions (Lefebvre, 1991; Schmidt & Németh, 2010).

## Research questions

- What are the primary expectations of Meghri community residents regarding the reopening of regional transport and communication routes?
- What's community members' perception of Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey?
- What are the expectations regarding the possible reopening of transportation routes in terms of economic, socio-cultural, and political-security impacts?
- What is the conception of the future and to what extent is Meghri perceived as a regional trade and development hub?

## Methodology

Primary data is collected through focus group discussions with Meghri community representatives, distinguishing the most significant criteria such as sex (male/female), age (under 40, post-Soviet generation, 41 and above, Soviet generation), region (Meghri/Agarak). Also, in terms of local subjectivity, local business representatives, local self-government bodies, and civil society are targeted.

These discussions enabled us to reveal the thoughts, beliefs, and concerns of Meghri community representatives in the context of group dialogue.

Thus, 10 focus group discussions were conducted using the following criteria (see Table 1).

Table 1

| Region | age | sex | No. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Meghri town and surrounding villages | 18-40 | male | 1 |
| | | female | 1 |
| | 41 and above | male | 1 |
| | | female | 1 |
| Agarak town and surrounding villages | 18-40 | male | 1 |
| | | female | 1 |
| | 41 and above | male | 1 |
| | | female | 1 |
| Local business representatives | | | 1 |
| Representatives of local self-government and civil society | | | 1 |

To achieve the research objective and answer the research questions, the following focus group discussion topics were identified:

- Regional context and local concerns
- Expectations for the reopening of transport routes
- Socio-economic impact
- Interpersonal relationships: the Armenian-Azeri context
- Security concerns and cultural influences
- The role of Meghri in the context of regional development

Anonymous survey technique was used during focus group discussions, allowing participants to freely express themselves on sensitive issues (see Appendix 1 for details).

This research provides an opportunity to understand the community's expectations and concerns regarding transport renovation and regional reopening, which is important in terms of state policy development, civic initiatives, and international support.

Research limitations

- In general, discussions on the reopening of regional transport infrastructure were largely a sensitive theme; the discussion awakened traumatic memories. Historically shaped myths and local thematic taboos sometimes hindered free and uninhibited discussions. Nevertheless, the experience of FGD moderators, the work of recruiters trusted by community members, and the opportunity for anonymous feedback on sensitive issues have remedied the situation as much as possible, enabling the emergence of a shared group stance during the discussion.
- Theme-wise, men were more cautious. In particular, representatives of the 41 and above age groups from Meghri town and adjacent villages, and the 18-40 age groups from Agarak town and adjacent villages refused to answer anonymous questions (they anonymously expressed their position only on questions 1 and 10), arguing that such unambiguous and abrupt answers could give rise to interpretations that are detrimental to the community. Nevertheless, constructive heated discussions took place in both groups.

# Main findings

## Regional context and local concerns

### General analysis

Speaking about the effect on the community of the changes and developments in the South Caucasus over the past few years, all focus group discussions revolved around a central theme: the **ongoing uncertainty and psychological tension caused by recent geopolitical events and conflicts**. The 44-day war of 2020 and the deportation from Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 are particularly highlighted, noting that the consequences of these events have instilled widespread fear regarding the **uncertainty of the future, the probability of border changes or the resumption of war**. The narrative of uncertainty is particularly present in the context of long-term planning for the future: residents often express reluctance to renovate homes, invest in local businesses, or engage in agricultural improvement. Migration, especially to Yerevan, appears to be driven by both security concerns and the quest for better economic opportunities or higher standards of living and/or stability.

> "Everyone is afraid that after Artsakh, Meghri will be next... Many families are moving to Yerevan." **(Agarak, female, 18-40)**

> "There was life before 2020, and thereafter, everything has become so mundane, everything has become very monotonous, there is disappointment, and monotony." **(Meghri, female, 18-40)**

The crucial significance of the recent years can be also seen in the anonymous survey results. Thus, 76.2% of FGD participants indicated that these events had a significant impact on them and the community (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. On a scale of 1 to 5, how much have these changes impacted your life and your community?
(1 - No impact, 5 - Very significant impact)

| 1.0 | 2.0 | 3.0 | 4.0 | 5.0 |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 4,8 | 7,1 | 11,9 | 35,7 | 40,5 |
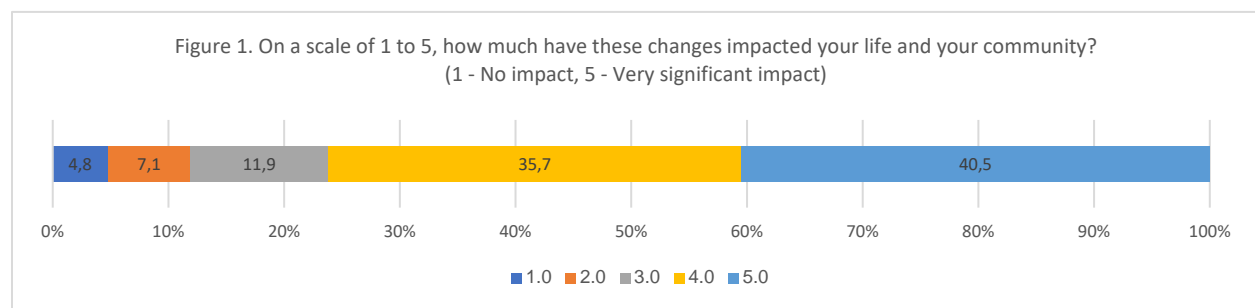
Of course, here one should also consider the uniqueness of the community. Taking into account the unique geographical position and local identity of Meghri community, the residents are distinguished by a high degree of the place attachment, a strong local identity, which, in the case of a well-advised policy, is an opportunity to avoid the observed emigration trends and restore the self-sufficient, normal daily life characteristic of the place.

> "Before the war, I aspired to big cities, to Yerevan, but during the war my husband said, 'I'm taking you to Yerevan, with the children.' At that moment I realized that I didn't want to... I sensed the loss of my birthplace. Until then, I used to say I'd leave." **(Meghri, female, 18-40)**

> "We have always been active in that regard. Syunik Province has a high employment rate. We have a copper-molybdenum combine, a customs house, and we have close trade relations with Iran. We have always been active, nothing has changed in that regard." **(Agarak, male, 18-40)**

> "I can say that the people of Meghri have a special lifestyle, their roots are deep in the ground. We know that there is no future, but we are renovating our house, we are creating, our lifestyle is different. Even if I know that tomorrow will be rotten, I still won't let my tree dry out, I shall water it." **(Meghri, female, 41 and above)**

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### Regional differences

*Residents of Agarak town and surrounding villages* particularly emphasize the community's vulnerability due to its distance from Yerevan. Fear and uncertainty are more pronounced here; concerns are related to the uncertain future of the Russian military base (the majority have a positive attitude towards this issue). The thesis **"Meghri could be next"** causes psychological anxiety and emigration. Moreover, the concerns are mostly caused by the lack of transparency of the RA authorities and political processes on this issue, calling for clear information or assurances.

In the case of the *residents of Meghri and surrounding villages*, the central point is that after 2020 the Region has become a border zone and fears persist, but the residents of this area strongly emphasize that they are trying to maintain decent daily life, taking into account that

tourism and trade continue to develop. Although uncertainty hinders long-term investments, many Meghri residents are showing resilience by staying hopeful, continuing construction, and seeking out economic opportunities. Moods vary: while some are considering leaving for safety reasons, others have rediscovered the emotional significance of their birthplace.

> "People continue to live as usual, they are renovating their houses... I am always optimistic, I always think that in the end it will be okay." **(Meghri, female, 41+)**

### Differences by gender

Women often emphasize the **psychological damage** of uncertainty and stress. They are acutely aware of the impact on family stability and are reluctant to invest in home improvements or new ventures. Security concerns and emotional well-being are central to their narratives. Men acknowledge **uncertainty**, but often contextualize it within broader geopolitical or economic frameworks. Although also concerned about the future, men sometimes mention current business activities or potential investments. They are more likely to discuss structural changes, such as trade, infrastructure projects, or government policies that affect local life.

### Differences by age

Younger participants often express greater anxiety about the future and hesitate to make long-term plans. Conflicts have undermined their aspirations, and some are considering leaving their native region altogether. At the same time, there is a counter-trend, where potential loss strengthens their loyalty to their homeland. More mature and older participants, who have experienced previous socio-political changes (e.g., the Soviet period, post-Soviet transitions), portray the current uncertainty in the historical context. They tend to stay hopeful, continue household or agricultural improvements, and believe in eventual stabilization, even if they are wary.

> "If one does not know how to plan for one's future tomorrow, uncertainty is the worst thing... In Meghri, everyone has that uncertainty. Uncertainty is the worst thing... In Meghri, everyone feels that uncertainty." **(Meghri, male, 41 and above)**

### Perspectives of CSO and local self-government representatives

CSOs and those involved with local self-government highlight both the importance of maintaining economic potential and bridging the logistical and information gaps that hinder community resilience. While acknowledging the challenges, they also point out positive trends, such as improved fruit marketing and a less restrictive business environment. However, these representatives complain about the lack of a centralized, reliable information flow and support systems.

> "Prices have been better for the last five or six years, and Meghri residents are selling their products better". **(CSO and local self-government presentations)**

They also mention infrastructure projects (such as the North-South Highway) that have led to temporary prosperity but have caused problems of land compensation and migration to Yerevan.

Some raise the issue of insufficient civil defense facilities (e.g., lack of shelters).

### Reflections of business representatives

Business representatives acknowledge that the uncertain environment is affecting the behavior of consumers and investors. Although tourism and trade have grown, often giving rise to new hotels or increased opportunities for agricultural exports, fears of political instability, conflict, and potential border changes are undermining long-term investment strategies.

> "If the word Meghri is repeated on the TV for two days, I feel that impact on my trading..." **(Business representative)**

Some entrepreneurs have shown resilience despite the uncertainties, continuing their construction projects and investments. The new projects (such as the North-South Highway and improved trade routes) are seen as a "mixed blessing," offering economic potential but accompanied by the psychological burden of upcoming instability.

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### Summary

On the whole, the communities of Agarak and Meghri, particularly, face the problem of uncertainty, which affects psychological well-being, migration patterns, and economic decisions. Women emphasize family stability and emotional stress, while men often place uncertainty in a larger structural context. Younger respondents are more sensitive to the disruption to their future plans, while older participants rely on historical perspective and overcome trials and tribulations. NGOs, local self-government and business representatives highlight both the positive aspects of economic liberalization, as well as the ongoing restrictions caused by geopolitical risks and insufficient awareness raising.

These insights highlight the complexity of local realities: even as the Region faces instability, segments of the population and some economic actors strive to adapt, invest, and stay hopeful. Here, one can observe simultaneous manifestations of traumatic memory, an anomic environment, but at the same time, a strong local identity, and community solidarity. The ambivalence of "neither war, nor peace" is central (Harutyunyan, 2016), and the issue of purposeful strategy, political decisions, and dialogue is of paramount importance.

## Expectations for the reopening of transport routes

### General analysis

The discussion of reopening transport routes almost always begins with the following question: "What route? North-South?" Mentioning that we are also talking about the connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhijevan, the transport infrastructure operated during the Soviet years, changes the mood. The discussion of this issue is particularly difficult with men.

The reference to the results of the anonymous survey best describes the issue. The question "Are you in favor of reopening regional transport routes via Meghri?" was asked twice: at the outset of the main discussion, participants anonymously expressed their opinion without referring to the survey results, and the same question was asked in the concluding part of the discussion, when all possible scenarios had been discussed, and each had an idea about the opinions of the others. In the second case, we deal with group dynamics, more general community perceptions.

Thus, before the discussion, 33.9% of all ten FGD representatives were in favor of reopening regional transport routes, 46.8% were against, and 17.7% of participants found it difficult to answer this question. Interestingly, when answering the same question after the discussion, while the share of nay-sayers did not change much (increasing to 50.0%), the number of undecided responders increased significantly (to 22.6%) at the expense of those in favor (decreasing to 25.8%) (see Figure 2).

The complexity of the issue, uncertain future, lack of dialogue, predominance of risks over opportunities, and disadvantages over advantages in reopening transport routes contribute to the fact that, firstly, the majority of residents are opposed to these processes, and secondly, in the context of predominant community opinion, even optimistic moods tend to be pessimistic.

Thus, other dimensions of the issue are noteworthy. In particular, it can be noted that:

- Women are more in favor of reopening regional transport routes via Meghri than men, but, after the discussions, in the case of women, uncertainty is even more noticeable.
- The picture in the business representative group is very interesting: when the initial attitude of 1/3 was such that the reopening of transport routes was an opportunity (37.5% in favor before the discussion); however, during the discussion, as a result of

the recognition of political and security risks alongside economic opportunities, 1/4 of the participants found it difficult to answer the question (see Figure 2).

· A somewhat similar, but different picture is seen in the group of CSO and local self-government representatives. Only one of them, ultimately, claimed to be in favor, and the majority of those who found it difficult to answer, 62.5%, voted against this process as a result of the discussion (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Do you support the reopening of regional transportation routes through Meghri?

| | | | Yes | No | Unsure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | After the discussion | | 13,6 | 59,1 | 27,3 |
| | Before the discussion | | 22,7 | 54,5 | 22,7 |
| Female | After the discussion | | 47,8 | 34,8 | 17,4 |
| | Before the discussion | | 52,2 | 43,5 | 4,3 |
| Local self-government and civil society | After the discussion | | 12,5 | 62,5 | 25 |
| | Before the discussion | | 12,5 | 25 | 62,5 |
| Business representatives | After the discussion | | 12,5 | 62,5 | 25 |
| | Before the discussion | | 37,5 | 62,5 | 0 |
| All | After the discussion | | 25,8 | 50,0 | 22,6 |
| | Before the discussion | | 33,9 | 46,8 | 17,7 |

■ Yes  ■ No  ■ Unsure

Yes          No          N/A

On the whole, this picture is also characteristic of qualitative discussions: the focus here is on the profound sense of uncertainty and anxiety regarding the reopening of transport routes connecting Armenia with neighboring countries, including Azerbaijan and Turkey. Although there are quite positive attitudes to economic opportunities such as trade, tourism and faster travel, security concerns and confidence issues dominate the narratives. Moreover, local discourse has clearly outlined notions of dual opportunities. There is general insistence on the priority of Armenia's sovereignty and the security of local residents. Distrust for the ruling authorities and uncertain, insufficient information deepen fears and skepticism.

"Even if there is a tunnel, they [i.e. the Azeris] can go through the tunnel, and do their dirty work right away." **(Agarak, female, 18-40)**

"They'll come, sell the houses to the Turks and we'll become a Batumi. That's how I see being trodden on, because they'll come here." **(Agarak, female, 41 and above)**

"No one explains to us what it means to open. Is there going to be a train, an air route?... they tell us nothing." **(Meghri, male, 18-40)**

The following important observation is relevant here: if historically the almost only possibility for Meghri region to connect with Yerevan and other RA towns was via Nakhijevan, then current processes, in particular the intensive construction of the North-South highway, have created a new expectation.

"The launch of the North-South highway naturally... economy will begin to develop."

In particular, representatives of the town of Agarak and surrounding villages fear that transportation routes could turn their region into a vulnerable corridor.

Many believe that without guaranteed control from Armenia, reopening the routes could undermine local security and encourage further emigration.

"A representative of our country must definitely be at the border. ... I don't like it when a Russian check my passport in my country."

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### Differences by gender

Female participants often emphasize the psychological and social consequences of reopening routes. They worry about the safety of their children, the moral fabric of the community, and the fear of new uncertainties.

"We have baby girls, who knows what sort of people will come tomorrow Meghri has already been dishonored..."

Male participants consider problems more in terms of military interests, economic benefits, and long-term planning. However, they also recognize that without trust, control, and security, potential gains are meaningless.

"If we can provide good service [i.e. road maintenance and control at checkpoints], it will be good for our nation... but if we don't, what's the point?"

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### Differences by age

Younger participants sometimes express a desire for open communication, fewer restrictions, and new routes to possible global integration. However, they are also held back by the uncertainty and fears that stem from recent conflicts.

"As a young man, I understand that I can't live... we need to be neighbors, but it won't work out under coercion."

Older respondents remember the trains of the Soviet era and are skeptical about possibilities. Past traumas: kidnappings, robberies determine the current distrust and fear, without cast-iron guarantees of safety.

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### Perspectives of CSO and local self-government representatives

NGOs and local self-government representatives consider the issue not in terms of just local, but national interests. They acknowledge the potential economic benefits if Armenia can negotiate appropriate terms and receive transit payments, but they are uncertain because of the lack of clear government communication and a reliable security framework. In the absence of state security guarantees, dual expectations (sometimes contradictory) arise, again contrasting benefit and danger:

"The only benefit of the road being opened is for Azerbaijan, so that they can easily reach Nakhijevan. That's it, we have no benefit at all."

"We constantly talk about the past, but back then there were different conditions, we now have the Republic of Armenia... it didn't exist then, it was the USSR, what Armenia? The Republic of Armenia, according to their agreements, as I understand it, intends to allowing it through its territory, now whether they pay for transit, or what, I don't know how; the train passes, can we also pass through, but it pays our state for that. Now, if we see a danger here, don't do it, but if they force us... that's bad, but if

they don't force us, they offer us a deal, they pay us, we say, take your train through our land, pay, go, that's something else."

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### Reflections of business representatives

The attitude of business representatives is identical to those of CSOs and local self-government representatives: they also consider potentially positive economic aspects, such as increase in trade and tourism. However, they are also wary of a process that begins without concrete guarantees. They point out that successful management of the route and control over tariffs could bring revenue and development, but they are concerned that the situation could serve mainly Azeri interests.

> "If we are the ones to make sure that the country will be paid money... everything will be fine, even the transport connection... the security issue."

> "We don't know what form it will take, will it be a train or a car... there is no accurate official, information."

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### Summary

The conversation around reopening transport routes is fraught with tension, mistrust, and competing hopes. While some expect economic growth, improved trade, and better connectivity, fears of infiltration, violence, and loss of sovereignty overshadow the potential benefits. Participants want clarity, strong state oversight, safe conditions, and fair negotiations, conditions under which they can cautiously accept these routes. The absence of these assurances breeds skepticism and resistance, which shows how deep the community's response to security and trust runs. The overall picture is best summarized in Figure 3, according to which the expectations regarding the reopening of transport routes for the majority of FGD participants (36.5%) are "neither positive nor negative."

Figure 3. On a scale of 1 to 5, how positive or negative are your overall expectations for the reopening of the transportation routes? (1 - Very negative, 5 - Very positive)

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 23,1 | 11,5 | 36,5 | 17,3 | 9,6 | 1,9 |

0%  10%  20%  30%  40%  50%  60%  70%  80%  90%  100%

■1 ■2 ■3 ■4 ■5 ■99
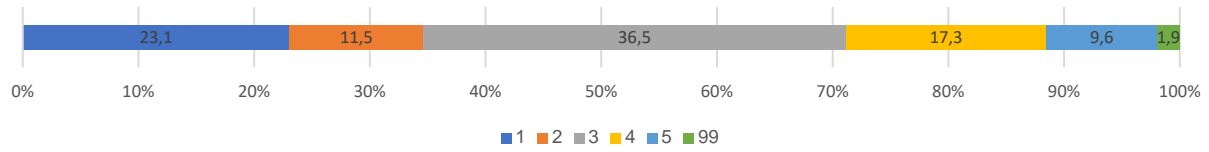
## Socio-economic impact

### General analysis

In focus groups, participants express a range of views on the socio-economic consequences of reopening transportation routes. While some see potential economic benefits—increased trade, cheaper transportation costs, and the development of tourism and hospitality industries—these positive prospects are continually overshadowed by concerns about security, trust, and sovereignty. A key tension is emerging: **economic optimism versus security concerns**. Even those participants who acknowledge that reopening roads could boost local economies, attract new business opportunities, and boost tourism emphasize that these potential gains are meaningless if the population does not feel safe or is at risk of infiltration and cultural dominance by perceived enemies. Moreover, in the security-opportunity dilemma, "security" narrative becomes focal, also due to the development of the local economy (at least at the level of perceptions):

> "The only problem in Meghri is the lack of workers... Meghri is the only city that doesn't have an employment problem." **(Meghri, female, 18-40)**

It is worth mentioning that when considering the greatest benefit of reopening transport routes, FGD participants most often find it difficult to pinpoint the benefit (30.0%, see Figure 4): here too, uncertainty about the possible development of scenarios is of importance. 20.0% of the remaining participants mentioned economic development, 22.0% mentioned increased mobility opportunities, 18.0% mentioned improved regional relations, and 10.0% mentioned improved trade opportunities.



Figure 4. In what ways do you think the reopening of transportation routes will affect Meghri's economy?

| Economic development | Increased mobility | Improved trade opportunities | Improved regional relations | Difficult to answer |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 20,0 | 22,0 | 10,0 | 18,0 | 30,0 |
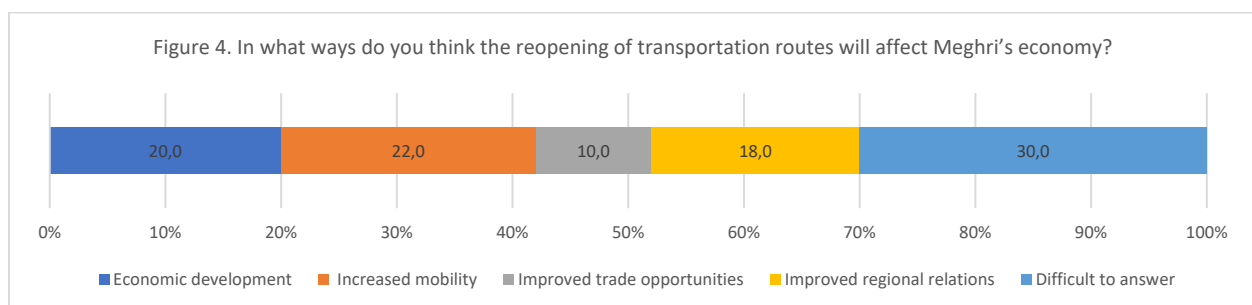
Thus, the expectation that the reopening of the routes will significantly boost Meghri's local economy divides FGD participants into three equal groups: "YES", "NO", and "N/A" (see Figure 5). However, there is another interesting observation: women are more optimistic about stimulating the economy than men. While the majority of women (59.1%) are in favor of this statement, the majority of men (57.3%) are against it or undecided (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Do you expect the reopening of the routes to significantly boost Meghri's local economy?

| | Yes | No | Not sure |
|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 18,2 | 27,3 | 54,5 |
| Female | 59,1 | 22,7 | 18,2 |
| All | 32,7 | 32,7 | 34,7 |
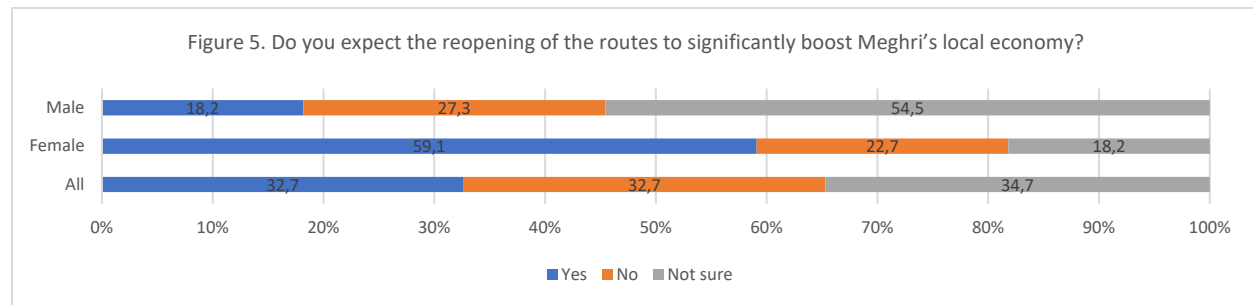
## Regional differences

The statements of the residents of Agarak town and surrounding villages often emphasize skepticism about direct economic gains. They doubt that local products can compete with cheaper or better-quality products from neighboring countries. For them, any economic benefit must be accompanied by a clear state strategy and community involvement in determining what can be produced and marketed.

> "We should not be a weak state that gives in and just gives away territory; we should get something in return." **(Agarak, female, 18-40)**

Residents of Meghri and surrounding villages are more open to the idea that reopening the routes could boost local trade, tourism, hotel business, and even cultural exchanges. However, not everyone is convinced. Some argue that despite these opportunities, residents are still prioritizing security and stability over economic opportunities.

## Differences by gender

Women often emphasize that while economic benefits may arise (e.g., easier sales of local products, development of tourism), the psychological comfort and safety of their families come

first. They emphasize the need for state-level planning and clear communication before any economic engagement.

> "Well, first of all, we need to talk about all this. We also watch the news, we discuss it with each other, but if there is a clear plan and it is going to be done, shouldn't we talk to the public? First of all, it should be done. Through the provincial government, people from Yerevan should come, etc. They should say how it will be opened, where, etc. Without knowing these things, we cannot say whether the region will be revived or not." **(Agarak, female, 18-40)**

Men tend to focus more on macroeconomic aspects: potential reductions in transportation costs, cheaper supplies for local industries (e.g., the copper-molybdenum plant), or improvements in orchard cultivation and fruit exports. They point out that if these routes reduce costs and create markets, wages and local tax revenues could increase, benefiting the community's standard of living. However, the men also reiterate the safety restrictions.

> "If the road is opened, the costs will decrease, profitability will increase, the state's profit tax will increase... salaries will also increase." **(Agarak, male, 41 and above)**

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### Differences by age

Younger participants sometimes show interest in new economic opportunities, such as developing the hospitality sector or attracting investors. However, they also worry that any long-term investment requires stability and peace: without a secure environment and a peace treaty, investments and new ventures seem too risky. More mature and older participants often remember past experiences (e.g., interactions with neighbors prior to conflicts) and become more cautious. They acknowledge that, in theory, improved transportation could bring prosperity and make Meghri a trade hub. But these achievements are overshadowed by memories of past tensions and fears that economic openness could pave the way for demographic and cultural shifts that are detrimental to local populations.

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**Perspectives of CSO and local self-government representatives**

Uncertainties and fears dominate the discussions between NGOs and local self-government representatives. While they recognize the potential for tourism and trade development (e.g., establishing cultural centers, expanding local markets, building new infrastructure), they doubt whether the community is ready to welcome large numbers of tourists or foreign entrepreneurs without a clearly defined regulatory framework and security guarantees.

> "Well, Meghri is not ready... The Meghri people are very hospitable, but without thinking they are encountering."

## Reflections of business representatives

Business representatives acknowledge that cheaper, more direct trade routes can reduce raw material, fuel and transportation costs, potentially increasing local profitability. They mention railways as a cost-effective solution, for example. However, they express strong doubts about security and trust: business growth is not important if people fear infiltration or if the community is devastated due to anxiety.

> "It will have a certain positive impact, if we think about the circulation of goods... but if there will be no security, people will leave Meghri."

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## Summary

The discussion of socio-economic opportunities is multi-layered; it is not simply about social and/or economic practices, it is often a conversation about survivability. On the one hand, participants recognize that the reopening of transportation routes can:

- ensure lower transportation costs,
- increase trade volumes,
- promote tourism, hotel business and cultural exchanges,
- potentially increase wages and tax revenues for the region.

On the other hand, almost all positive economic opportunities are undermined by deep security concerns, lack of trust, and uncertainty. Without a clear peace agreement, stable governance, reliable information, and strong security arrangements, residents are reluctant to embrace the economic promises of reopened routes. As a result, while most see theoretical

economic benefits, practical adoption depends entirely on resolving the underlying geopolitical and security dilemmas.

> "Uncertainty prevents people from investing... if a peace agreement is signed, Meghri will become a very good center." **(Meghri, female,18-40)**

## Interpersonal relationships: the Armenian-Azeri context

### General analysis

The data reveals deep-rooted distrust and fear about the possible restoration of interpersonal relations between Armenians and Azeris. Despite the Soviet experience of coexistence, recent conflicts, especially the 2020 war, have exacerbated distrust and hostility. Participants consistently emphasize security concerns, trauma from past violence, and the current political environment in Azerbaijan as primary obstacles to rebuilding trust.
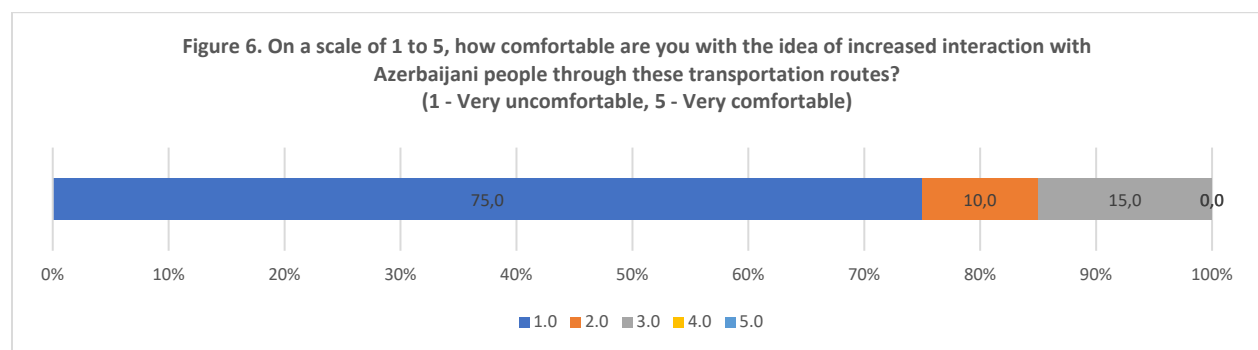
They often distinguish between hypothetical long-term futures—decades away, where generational change and altered political circumstances might allow for rapprochement—and the present moment, which they see as overwhelmingly burdened by hatred, fear, and

> "I believe rapprochement is never possible... after 2020, it's almost impossible." (**Agarak, female, 18-40**)

> "Maybe centuries shall elapse." (**Agarak, female, 41 and above**)

> "There can be even no talk about it." (**Meghri, male, 41 and above**)

These statements are typical evidence of the local sentiment that current conditions are not conducive to interpersonal trust or friendly relations. Indeed, while discussions of socio-economic exchange and infrastructural issues lead to disagreement, contrasting benefits and risks, discussions around interpersonal issues are more focused, and participants are often in agreement. The anonymous survey responses are particularly interesting. According to Figure 6, the vast majority of FGD participants, 75.0%, have a very negative attitude towards the idea of interacting with Azeris through reopened transport routes. Moreover, no participant indicated the option "comfortable/very comfortable".



Figure 6. On a scale of 1 to 5, how comfortable are you with the idea of increased interaction with Azerbaijani people through these transportation routes?
(1 - Very uncomfortable, 5 - Very comfortable)

75,0   10,0   15,0   0,0

■1.0 ■2.0 ■3.0 ■4.0 ■5.0

FGD participants often recall that historically some Azeris lived in the region and even integrated by adopting Armenian surnames or serving in local entities. But recent wars and losses have overshadowed these memories. While some say that future generations can find common ground, most remain pessimistic. The need for changes at the state level, such as the return of prisoners, the return of territories, and a change in Azeri policy, is often cited as a prerequisite for interpersonal reconciliation.

> "I don't know how much time will elapse... if the leadership [referring to the Azeri political authorities] doesn't educate its subjects... no one will change." **(Agarak, female, 41 and above)**

Participants widely believe that cultural vulnerability—the loss of local traditions, the adoption of foreign place names, and weak cultural infrastructure—makes Meghri and surrounding areas susceptible to external influence. They fear that without a strong cultural self-awareness, the opening of routes and contact with neighboring countries could weaken or erode Armenian traditions.

> "We don't know what our patterns look like, Turkish and Azeri costumes are painted on the canvas... our culture is being lost." **(Agarak, female, 41 and above)**

This emphasizes that cultural stability is considered to be limited, and any enhanced regional interaction could accelerate cultural assimilation or loss.

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### Differences by gender

Women manifest strong emotional resistance to renewed Armenian-Azeri contacts. They emphasize trauma from the war, fear of physical harm, and the idea that any interaction could be dangerous or manipulative. Even if some remember historical coexistence, the intensity of recent violence leads them to believe that this is no longer possible.

> "We are more concerned... they kill sleeping people, but the Armenians wouldn't instill such things." **(Agarak, female, 18-40)**

In the case of men, especially those of the older generation, the approaches are very harsh and negative. Despite this, they often cite examples abroad, such as the interaction between Armenians and Azeris in Russia, and consider the theoretical possibility that relations could be normalized over decades and after changes in leadership and policy. They tend to render the issue in geopolitical and historical terms, suggesting that trade or external factors could eventually ease tensions.

> "It's not possible right now, but it might be possible in two generations." **(Agarak, male, 41 and above)**

### Differences by age

Young people who have experienced recent conflicts have been deeply affected, traumatized, and express skepticism that trust can be restored anytime soon. While they acknowledge that younger generations who were not directly affected by the war may have different attitudes, they do not see this happening in their lifetimes.

More mature and older representatives sometimes mention the coexistence in the Soviet era to show that Armenians and Azeris once lived side by side. However, they believe that the scale of recent brutalities, as well as the lack of remorse or political change in Azerbaijan, have eroded any basis for trust. They also predict that only dramatic shifts, similar to the efforts of reconciliation in Germany after World War II, can pave the way for positive change.

**Perspectives of CSO and local self-government representatives**

During the discussion, CSOs and local self-government representatives focused on the need to establish state-level policies and cultural foundations as a prerequisite for building interpersonal trust, or acting around it. They emphasize that without official recognition of past mistakes and concerted efforts to eliminate propaganda of hatered, interpersonal relations are unlikely to improve. They believe that cultural and educational reforms can enable future generations to regard each other not as enemies, but as potential partners.

**Reflections of business representatives**

Business representatives acknowledge that economic exchanges may one day foster limited trust or at least peaceful coexistence in commercial contexts. However, they also insist on stable conditions, legal equality, and the withdrawal of foreign (Azeri) troops from Armenian territories before thinking about truly friendly relations. They emphasize that without a solid, fair framework, any interpersonal contact remains fraught.

> "Since no demarcation has taken place… what relationships we can talk about."

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## Summary

The analysis reveals the complex and multi-layered aspects of Armenian-Azeri interpersonal relations. The overwhelming majority of FGD participants reject the idea of trust and close cooperation, citing *fear, trauma, and hostility*. At the same time, they acknowledge that changes at the state level, generational change, and international guarantees could soften attitudes in the long run. In the current environment, participants prioritize safety and cultural protection. While they view trade and economic exchanges as potentially beneficial to national interests, interpersonal trust and genuine friendship remain elusive ideals that can only be achieved after significant political and cultural transformations on both sides.

> "Societies don't have a problem with each other, this is a question of states... the generation must change." **(Meghri, male, 18-40)**

**General analysis**

The participants' opinions reveal a complex interplay of security fears and concerns about the cultural impact stemming from the potential increase in ties with neighboring countries, including Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran. While economic aspects sometimes receive cautiously optimistic views, issues related to security and cultural integrity continue to be fraught with anxiety and uncertainty.

The following topics are central in this context:

1. **Safety as a primary concern**

Participants often state that the greatest concern regarding the reopening of transportation routes is the *risk of military threat, escalation of conflict, hostage-taking, or hostile infiltration*. Past experiences from the 1990s, such as kidnappings, attacks on train passengers, and violence during travel result in the current distrust.

> "It's better to travel from here for eight hours [meaning the current Meghri-Yerevan road] than to arrive by train in two hours [meaning the train operating through Nakhijevan during the Soviet years]."

> **(Agarak, female, 41 and above)**

**2. The relationship between security and sovereignty**

Participants link security concerns to issues of *self-determination, territorial integrity, and national sovereignty*. Some worry that the reopening of routes could create conditions for demographic changes, with foreign populations gradually dominating in local areas, which could lead to territorial concessions.

> "Our population is decreasing... that's their goal... we must live on." **(Meghri, male, 41 and above)**

3. **Cultural vulnerability and influence**

Although not as pressing as safety, cultural concerns are significant. Participants are concerned about the lack of a strong local cultural infrastructure which could lead to the loss of their cultural identity under the influence of incoming foreign elements. Some participants note

that Meghri culture has historically adopted foreign elements (Russian, Persian) and may further absorb Azeri or Turkish cultural features, if the routes are opened. Others argue that local culture is resilient.

> **Negative:** "Our culture is already lost... we quickly emulate what we see." **(Meghri, male, 18-40)**

> **Neutral/Positive:** "Not necessarily bad; we've always adapted. Maybe we can learn and improve." **(Meghri, female, 18-40)**

### 4. Contradictions and complexity of views

Although participants often emphasize negative security and cultural scenarios, there are also disagreements on this issue: some consider economic or cultural exchange to be potentially beneficial under certain conditions, if security guarantees are strong and if interaction is controlled (e.g. transit routes through tunnels, lack of stops in local communities).

> "We're getting back to this point again, where the details of the road need to be specified..." **(Agarak, woman, 18-40)**
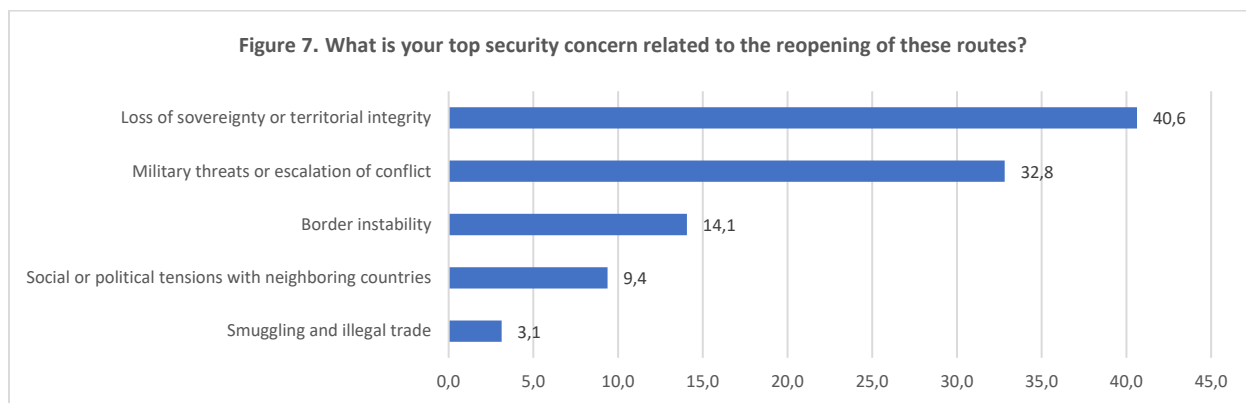
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## Differences by region, gender, and age

Concerns are generally consistent across demographic groups. Although women express strong emotional repulsion towards cultural and marital mixing (e.g. local girls marrying foreigners), both men and women consider safety to be a priority. Elderly participants remember past traumas, while younger ones also feel the impact of recent wars. There is no significant difference in the intensity of security fears by region or age: everyone considers security a priority.

The results of the anonymous survey also highlight that, on the whole, there are similar perceptions across all groups regarding both security concerns and the impact on the cultural environment of Meghri due to the reopening of transportation routes. Specifically, when asked about the biggest security concern due to the reopening of transport routes, the majority of FGD participants mentioned military-political issues: 40.6% emphasized the issue of loss of

sovereignty or territorial integrity, 32.8% highlighted military threats or conflict escalation, and 14.1% highlighted border instability (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7. What is your top security concern related to the reopening of these routes?**

| Concern | Value |
|---|---|
| Loss of sovereignty or territorial integrity | 40,6 |
| Military threats or escalation of conflict | 32,8 |
| Border instability | 14,1 |
| Social or political tensions with neighboring countries | 9,4 |
| Smuggling and illegal trade | 3,1 |

Also interesting are the general observations of FGD participants regarding the impacts on the local cultural environment caused by the reopening of transportation routes. 41.4% have a generally negative attitude, while 36.6% are uncertain, indicating the option "neither positive nor negative." This uncertainty and, often, the coexistence of two contradictory possibilities is another typical description characterizing the FGD participants.

**Figure 8. On a scale of 1 to 5, how positive or negative do you expect the cultural impact of the new transportation routes to be for Meghri?**
**(1 - Very negative, 5 - Very positive)**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 26,8 | 14,6 | 36,6 | 9,8 | 12,2 |
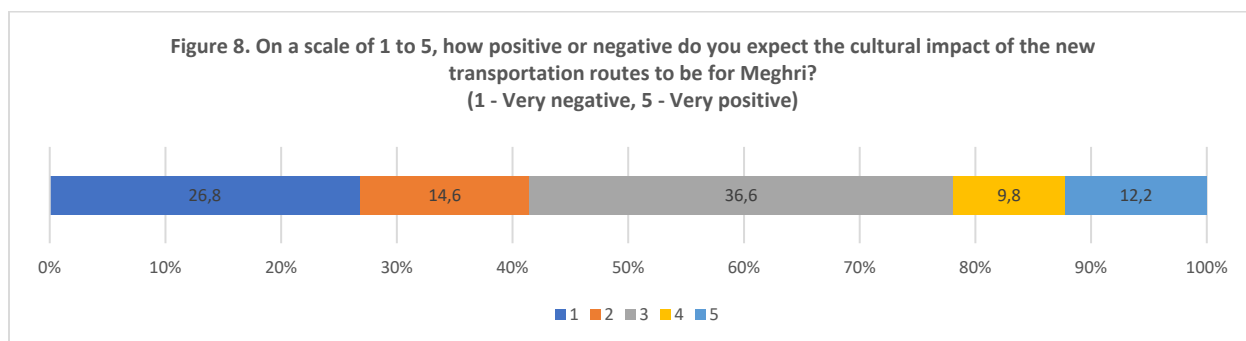
It is worth pointing out here that culturally, women especially emphasize the fear of cultural "contamination" through marriages with foreigners:

> "Our daughters shall not marry their men."

## Perspectives of CSO and local self-government representatives

CSO and local self-government representatives also emphasize uncertainty. They raise the issue of who is going to provide security, how the roads will be controlled, and express distrust in state capabilities. While some do not see a direct connection between the reopening of

routes and the loss of territories, the lack of confidence and clarity contributes to persistent fears.

"I see big risks... who will provide security now?"

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**Reflections of business representatives**

Business stakeholders cite economic hopes, but also fear that cheaper foreign goods could harm local markets if the process is not state-controlled. They point to the need for government support and low-interest loans. However, the security dimension overshadows purely economic considerations.

"If it opens... the local producer will already shut down... you can chop down the trees."

They also realize that no economic development will matter without a stable, secure environment.

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## Summary

Participants' concerns about reopening transportation routes stem from fears about safety and preserving cultural identity. Fears of hostage-taking, violence, and territorial encroachments predominate, overshadowing potential economic or cultural benefits. They demand clear state policies, reliable security mechanisms, and careful management of cross-border interaction.

Cultural influences are viewed suspiciously as participants worry about losing their already weak cultural identity. While some acknowledge that cultures evolve and they can learn from others, the main sentiment is protectionism: keeping foreigners at arm's length, avoiding full cultural integration, and preserving sovereignty and identity.
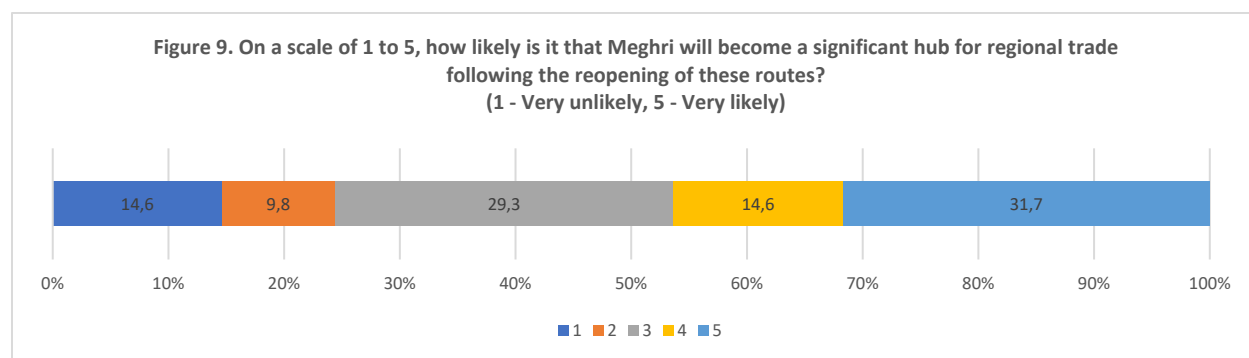
Ultimately, no positive economic or cultural benefits for participants can outweigh the existential fear of security breaches, escalation of conflict, and cultural erasure. If comprehensive security guarantees are provided, they may reconsider the benefits of open routes. In their absence, the fears will persist.

## The role of Meghri in the context of regional development

### General analysis

Participants often discuss whether Meghri, located in the southernmost part of Armenia, could benefit from the reopening of transportation routes and/or become a significant regional trade hub. While there is theoretical potential, given Meghri's strategic location as a "crossroads," widespread security concerns, lack of government support, inadequate infrastructure, and uncertainty about the reopening of routes dominate the discourse. Participants generally agree that Meghri needs clear government-backed initiatives, security guarantees, infrastructure investments, and a strong cultural and educational environment to fully realize its potential in regional development.

FGD participants indicated during the anonymous survey that it is unlikely rather than likely that Meghri will become an important regional trade hub with the reopening of transport routes: while 46.3% of them indicated that it is unlikely, only 20.4% saw such a possibility (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. On a scale of 1 to 5, how likely is it that Meghri will become a significant hub for regional trade following the reopening of these routes?
(1 - Very unlikely, 5 - Very likely)

### Potential as a regional trade hub

Many participants acknowledge that Meghri already functions as a local trade hub. References are made to the region's history as a route for goods (e.g. the Silk Road), its current role in cross-border trade with Iran, and the possibility that it could serve as a gateway to connect larger markets (Europe, Russia, etc.).

"This situation should be used properly, yes, if it opens up, it should use its good parts..."
(**Agarak, female, 41 and above**)

However, participants also emphasize that simply being on the route is not enough to transform Meghri into a prosperous regional center. They argue that strategic planning, local product branding, infrastructure improvements, and security are prerequisites for exploiting its geographical advantages.

FGD participants identify the following as necessary conditions for development:

1. **Security and sovereignty**

As in previous discussions, security remains a top priority. Participants are unwilling to accept the reopening of routes without cast-iron security guarantees. Confidence in the future depends on Meghri residents' feeling of safety and willing to stay, rather than migrating to Yerevan or abroad.

2. **State support and policy framework**

Participants often mention the lack of state support and the need for policies that promote local production, protect local markets, and invest in infrastructure. They offer tax exemptions, affordable loans, subsidies, and regulatory measures to protect local producers from cheaper foreign imports (e.g., Iranian olive oil, Turkish products).

> "State support is needed in every field." **(Business representative)**

3. **Infrastructure and cultural-educational investments**

Improved roads, cultural centers, schools, playgrounds, and healthcare facilities are essential to making Meghri an attractive place to live and invest. Without improvements in the quality of life, local talent and youth will continue to leave, eroding the human capital needed for regional development.

> "There is a lack of cultural centers. We don't remember the last time there was a concert." **(Agarak, male, 41 and above)**

> "Without village schools and kindergartens, communities will be emptied." **(Meghri, female, 41 and above)**

4. **Branding and product diversification**

Participants note that Meghri can offer the regional market a variety of high-quality fruits, dried fruits, Meghri wines, and horticultural products (e.g. kiwi, pomegranate, walnuts). To

stand out in a competitive environment, some suggest that Meghri should create a strong brand identity, highlight its unique flavors, and possibly impose state-level controls on imports to protect local producers.

> "Meghri should have its own coat of arms... Meghri could have done that..." (**Business representative**)

> "Do you know how many tons of dried fruits are exported to Russia?" (**Meghri, female, 41 and above**)

While there is enthusiasm about the agricultural potential, participants are also concerned about external competition and a lack of regulatory support. For example, cheaper foreign products could flood local markets, undermining Meghri's products.

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### Conflicting views and conditions

While some participants acknowledge that reopening the routes could increase trade and create business opportunities, they also fear security risks and cultural dilution. Many are opposed to the reopening of the routes due to this insecurity. Some participants are adopting a wait-and-see attitude: otherwise they would have left Meghri sooner.

> "We don't want it to be opened..." (**Meghri, female, 18-40**)

Others believe that if there were a peaceful settlement and appropriate guarantees, Meghri could develop as a transit route and an economic hub.

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### Desirable changes and future prospects

Participants want to see:

- **Infrastructure improvements:** better roads, functional cultural and sports centers, improved schools and kindergartens to keep families and workers in Meghri.

- **Government policies and incentives:** affordable loans, subsidies, and strong regulations to protect local industries from foreign competition.

- **Innovation and entrepreneurship:** encouraging product diversification (nuts, berries, honey), improved branding, marketing campaigns to highlight Meghri's unique offerings.

If these conditions are met, participants believe that Meghri could become an important hub for regional trade and possibly expand its cultural and social fabric, leading to long-term sustainable development.

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## Summary

Participants see Meghri's role in regional development as theoretically promising but practically uncertain. While Meghri has geographical and agricultural potential, its opening requires more than just open borders: it requires security guarantees, state-led policies, infrastructure improvements, cultural investment, and an entrepreneurial mindset. Without these foundations, the community fears that Meghri could simply become a passive transit point or, worse, lose its population and autonomy.

In essence, Meghri's future as a driver of regional development depends on strategic planning, strong governance, and the ability to transform local assets into a competitive, secure, and vibrant center of trade and culture.

## Final reflections

In their closing remarks, participants consistently emphasize security as the overriding priority. Any potential benefits from reopening transportation routes are considered secondary to ensuring security and sovereignty. Many participants are opposed to the opening of the routes, citing distrust of both domestic authorities and potential foreign guarantors. There is a clear call for clarity, reliable information, and security guarantees before supporting the reopening of roads.

> "Even the opening of communications should first ensure security." **(Agarak, female, 41 and above)**

## The message of Meghri residents to policymakers

When asked what advice they would give to decision-makers, participants almost unanimously emphasize security considerations. They do not offer broad policy proposals: "not to open" or "to ensure security." Some point out that any agreement should be based on equal terms and not on weakness. Another participant refers to raising educational standards in order to improve the quality of and trust in leadership in the long term.

> "The only thing I'm saying is to fight together so that there is neither corridor, nor road." **(Meghri, female, 18-40)**

> "I propose considering diplomatic channels to ensure security." **(Meghri, male, 41 and above)**

## Persistent distrust and information gaps

Participants express deep distrust of official information channels and authorities. One offers more comprehensive information to help people make the right judgments, but others respond that they have been misled before (e.g., during war) and see no reason to trust again.

> "And why should I say «yes» to something I don't know about... When during the entire war they were saying it was alright... and then we learned that everything was bad?" **(Meghri, female, 18-40)**

This distrust makes transparent communication from authorities crucial, but not sufficient. Participants need not only clarity, but also trust in the authority and integrity of the state.

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## Summary

The final summary reveals the hardened position that if there is no trust, clarity, or security, there WILL be NO community support. The participants are opposed to approving the reopening of transportation routes under current conditions. They demand guaranteed security, transparent programs, and credible oversight, preferably by Armenian forces or a trusted third party, before approval is granted. They also emphasize the importance of the educational and cultural sectors to build trust in the long term.

Ultimately, the participants' final message to policymakers is as follows: either do not open the routes at all, or open them provided there's real and reliable security. Economic benefits, cultural exchanges, or regional development potential remain dubious unless fundamental security and sovereignty issues are finally resolved.

The Meghri community, located at an historical and strategic crossroads, has found itself caught in a web of geopolitical turbulence, economic potential, and deep-rooted security concerns. The consequences of the conflicts of 2020 and 2023 have left an indelible imprint on local perceptions: uncertainty is ubiquitous, psychological tension is tangible, and decision-making processes, both at the family and community levels, are deeply determined by the fear of future instability.

## Insecurity as a major subject

Throughout all discussions, participants have prioritized security and sovereignty over any other aspects. They remember past traumas: kidnappings, violence during travel (also during Soviet years), shifting territorial borders, and sudden geopolitical changes, and these memories shape current attitudes. The possibility of reopening transport routes connecting Armenia with neighboring countries (Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran) evokes a complex emotional response. Although some accept the hypothetical economic benefits—improved trade, cheaper transportation, new investments—few are willing to take advantage of such opportunities without unconditional security guarantees. Past experiences have undermined trust not only in external actors but also in domestic authorities, whose communication is seen as inadequate and unreliable.

## Multidimensional uncertainty and psychological pressure

The unwillingness of communities to invest in long-term projects – home renovations, agricultural expansion, or business ventures – reflects a general feeling of insecurity. Younger participants feel this disruption most acutely: their aspirations have been limited by the lingering probability of renewed conflict. Meanwhile, older members of the community, having witnessed numerous socio-political transitions, place current challenges within a broader historical context, staying hopeful and maintaining continuity while remaining vigilant.

Women often emphasize psychological burdens, family-based concerns, and an unwillingness to take economic risks in an unstable environment. Men often frame the same issues in macro-structural contexts, discussing the role of trade policy, infrastructure projects, and state-level

decisions. However, both men and women tend to believe that without security, economic or cultural achievements remain questionable.

## Socio-economic complexity and cultural vulnerability

The data shows a paradox: even as communities recognize the potential economic benefits of boosting tourism, improving market access, and attracting investment, they fear that opening up routes could also provoke infiltration, demographic shifts, and cultural erosion. Meghri, with its fertile orchards, high-quality dried fruits, honey, and unique products, could theoretically become a trade center. However, participants are concerned about competition from cheaper imports without appropriate regulatory mechanisms. They demand government policies that will protect local markets, provide subsidies, and create branding opportunities to differentiate Meghri products.

Cultural sustainability is also in question. While some participants argue that local traditions can adapt and perhaps even flourish through controlled cultural exchange, many fears the erosion of identity the cultural backbone of a community, already historically shaped by foreign influence, may not have the strength to withstand another wave of external pressures, especially if it is coupled with security threats and forced changes in local life.

## Interpersonal relationships and future prospects

When discussing interpersonal relations, especially between Armenians and Azeris, participants almost unanimously reject any possibility of trust or friendship in the current environment, viewing it in the long-term perspective, in the context of generational change, changed political conditions, and external mediation. However, currently, hostility and fear dominate. The participants do not blame the societies per se, recognizing that these antagonisms are shaped by political orders, hate propaganda, and unresolved grievances. However, the main point is that peace, if achieved at all, will depend on substantial political reforms, educational improvements, cultural foundations, and international guarantees.

## NGO, local self-government and business prospects

Representatives of NGOs, local self-government bodies, and the business community offer more nuanced views, acknowledging both the potential benefits and the actual limitations. They see opportunities in improved infrastructure, such as the North-South Highway or

additional trade routes. However, these "mega-projects" are always overshadowed by psychological stress, migration concerns, and security imperatives. Business representatives claim that no investor or entrepreneur will make a full commitment in the face of constant doubts and risks. At the same time, NGOs and local self-government officials emphasize insufficient information flows, weak civil protection structures, and the lack of effective policy frameworks that could turn opportunities into tangible improvements for local residents.

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## Conclusions

These findings, when integrated, lead to a simple conclusion:

Security, trust, and reliable governance are prerequisites for any positive development scenario. The long-term goal of building economic opportunities, cultural exchanges, and even stable, good-neighborly relations depends on establishing a safe and transparent environment.

The main means are:

1. Security
2. Trust in authorities and information transparency
3. Political measures and state support
4. Cultural identity and adaptation
5. Long-term prospects and generational change

In essence, the stance of communities involves a deeply human response to instability: protect what you have, ensure security and continuity, and only then carefully and transparently consider new opportunities. The message for policymakers and planners is clear: no development strategy, no corridor, no trade route can prosper without first addressing the existential fears and uncertainties that haunt the region's residents.

## Suggestions

To the state:

1. **Increase security measures:**

- Establish robust security protocols for reopening transportation routes, ensuring physical security and sovereignty.
- Develop and implement advanced border control systems to prevent illegal activities and build confidence among residents.

2. **Improve communication and transparency:**

- Provide clear, timely and transparent information on the planning, implementation and potential impacts of the route reopening.
- Involve local communities in decision-making processes to restore trust in government institutions.

3. **Support local economies:**

- Introduce subsidies, tax exemption, and low-interest loans for local businesses to prepare them for increased competition.
- When branding and marketing Meghri's unique agricultural products (e.g. honey, dried fruits), make ensure they remain competitive in wider markets.

4. **Infrastructure development:**

- Improve local infrastructure, including roads, schools, health facilities, and cultural centers, to support regional development and improve the quality of life.
- Accelerate projects such as the North-South Highway to strengthen regional connectivity.

To civil society organizations:

1. **Community advocacy and engagement:**

- Conduct community forums to address local concerns and disseminate factual information regarding the reopening of the route and its implications.
- Implement educational campaigns to increase public understanding of cultural preservation and economic opportunities.

2. **Capacity building:**

- Train local businesses and community members in marketing, product diversification, and the dynamics of cross-border trade.
- Support women and youth through targeted programs that address their specific economic and psychological concerns.

3. **Promote intercultural dialogue:**

- Organize workshops and events that promote cross-border understanding and trust-building between communities, focusing on shared economic and cultural benefits.

To international organizations:

1. **Mediation and confidence building:**

- Act as neutral mediators in discussions between Armenia and its neighboring countries to ensure fair agreements on route operations and border management.
- Foundation's initiatives that promote inter-regional dialogue and reconciliation.

2. **Financial and technical support:**

- Provide grants and technical assistance to local businesses to enhance their readiness to integrate into larger markets.
- Support infrastructure projects.

3. **Monitoring and control:**

- Create mechanisms to monitor the security, economic and social impacts of the reopening of routes, ensuring transparency and fairness of its implementation.

To local authorities:

1. **Community-centered planning:**

- Align local development plans with residents' priorities and concerns, ensuring inclusiveness in policymaking.
- Address immediate community needs, such as building cultural centers and improving public services to retain local talent and workforce.

2. **Enhance local economy:**

- Promote local tourism by utilizing Meghri's cultural and natural resources.

- Facilitate public-private partnerships to attract investment to the region.

3. **Emergency preparedness:**

- Improve civil defense infrastructure, such as bomb shelters, to alleviate residents' fear of potential conflict.

To business:

1. **Strategic diversification:**

- Invest in product diversification to increase resilience against external competition.
- Develop unique branding strategies highlighting Meghri's local identity and high-quality products.

2. **Joint Efforts:**

- Form cooperatives or alliances to strengthen collective bargaining power and market presence.
- Collaborate with regional and international organizations to access broader trade networks.

3. **Sustainability initiatives:**

- Incorporate sustainable practices into production and trade to attract environmentally conscious markets.
- Leverage the strengths of local agriculture, such as organic farming, to gain competitive advantages.

These Suggestions aim to address the intertwined concerns of security, economic development, cultural preservation, and confidence-building, creating a sustainable basis for Meghri's integration into regional development.

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## Appendix 1. Focus group discussion guide

1. Welcome and Introduction (10 minutes)

- **Moderator's Introduction**:

    o Briefly explain the purpose of the study, emphasizing the importance of understanding the Meghri community's views on the reopening of regional routes.

    o Provide an overview of the process: duration, participation, and confidentiality, including the use of anonymous polls and voting during the session.

    o Note: The results of the polls and voting will be generated in real-time and discussed collectively to guide the discussion and explore different perspectives.

- **Participant Introduction**:

    o Ask each participant to introduce themselves (name, occupation, role in the community).

- **Ground Rules**:

    o Ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak.

    o Encourage respectful listening and sharing.

    o Reiterate that the discussion is confidential, and that polls will allow for anonymous feedback.

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2. Warm-Up Discussion (10 minutes)

- **Anonymous Poll:**

  - Do you support the reopening of regional transportation routes through Meghri?

    - *(Yes, No, Unsure)*

- **General Perceptions of Recent Geopolitical Shifts:**

  - How have you or your community been affected by recent changes and developments in the South Caucasus over the past few years?

  - **Anonymous Poll:**

    - On a scale of 1 to 5, how much have these changes impacted your life and your community?
      *(1 - No impact, 5 - Very significant impact)*

  - **Note:** *NO discussion*

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3. Key Discussion Areas

A. Expectations for the reopening of transport routes (20 minutes)

- What are your primary expectations for the reopening of transportation routes through Meghri?

- How do you think this will impact the community in terms of mobility, trade, and access to neighboring countries?

- **Anonymous Poll:**

  - On a scale of 1 to 5, how positive or negative are your overall expectations for the reopening of the transportation routes?

    - *(1 - Very negative, 5 - Very positive)*

- The results of the poll will now be generated and shared with the group for discussion.

- **Anonymous Voting**:

  - What do you think the greatest benefit of reopening the transportation routes will be?

    - *(Economic development, Increased mobility, Improved trade opportunities, Better regional relations)*

  - We will now view the voting results and discuss any emerging themes.

- **Follow-up Discussion:**

  - Are there other potential benefits that were not mentioned in the list?

  - Let's discuss any additional ideas or options that you think could be relevant for Meghri.

## B. Socio-economic impact (20 minutes)

- In what ways do you think the reopening of transportation routes will affect Meghri's economy?

  - Probes: Economic development; Increased mobility; Improved trade opportunities & Improved regional relations.

- **Anonymous Poll**:

  - Do you expect the reopening of the routes to significantly boost Meghri's local economy?

    - *(Yes, No, Not sure)*

  - Let's review the results of the poll and discuss any key takeaways.

- How do you anticipate social life in Meghri will change if there is increased connectivity with Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey?

  - Probes: Changes in community dynamics, cultural exchanges, or shifts in traditional practices.

## C. Interpersonal relationships: the Armenian-Azeri context (20 minutes)

- How do you feel about the prospect of increased contact with Azerbaijani people through the reopening of transportation routes?

  - Probes: Concerns about trust, challenges in rebuilding relationships, potential for dialogue and cooperation.

- Anonymous Poll:

  - On a scale of 1 to 5, how comfortable are you with the idea of increased interaction with Azerbaijani people through these transportation routes?

    - (1 - Very uncomfortable, 5 - Very comfortable)

  - The results will be generated and discussed to explore different viewpoints.

- What potential opportunities or challenges do you foresee in building people-to-people connections between Armenians and Azerbaijanis?

  - Probes: Cross-cultural communication, rebuilding trust, concerns about past conflicts.

## D. Security concerns and cultural influences (20 minutes)

- What are your main concerns about the security implications of these new transportation links?

  - Probes: Border security, community safety.

- **Anonymous Voting:**

- What is your top security concern related to the reopening of these routes?

  - *(Border instability, Smuggling and illegal trade, Military threats or escalation, Loss of sovereignty or territorial integrity, Social or political tensions with neighboring countries, None)*

  - The voting results will now be presented and discussed with the group.

- **Follow-up Discussion:**

  - Are there other concerns that were not mentioned in the list?

  - Let's discuss any additional ideas or options that you think could be relevant.

- How do you feel increased connectivity might affect the cultural landscape of Meghri?

  - Probes: Influence of neighboring cultures, changes in local customs or traditions.

- **Anonymous Poll**:

  - On a scale of 1 to 5, how positive or negative do you expect the cultural impact of the new transportation routes to be for Meghri?

    - *(1 - Very negative, 5 - Very positive)*

  - Let's now review and discuss the poll results as a group.

### E. The role of Meghri in the context of regional development (15 minutes)

- How do you think Meghri's strategic location might shape its role in regional trade and development?

  - Probes: Potential to become a trade hub, effects on local businesses.

- **Anonymous Voting**:

- On a scale of 1 to 5, how likely is it that Meghri will become a significant hub for regional trade following the reopening of these routes?
  - *(1 - Very unlikely, 5 - Very likely)*
- The voting results will be presented and discussed with participants.

- What changes would you like to see in the development of Meghri as a result of renewed regional connectivity?
  - Probes: Infrastructure, investment opportunities, regional partnerships.

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4. Closing Discussion (10 minutes)

- What final thoughts or concerns do you have regarding the potential reopening of transportation and communication routes through Meghri?

- **Anonymous Poll**:
  - Overall, do you support the reopening of regional transportation routes through Meghri?
    - *(Yes, No, Unsure)*
  - The final poll results will be shared and discussed with the group.

- If you could recommend one thing to decision-makers about this issue, what would it be?

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5. Thank You and Wrap-Up (5 minutes)

- Thank participants for their time and contributions.

- Reiterate how their input will help shape the research and highlight next steps (e.g., analysis and reporting).

## Appendix 2. Distribution of FGD participants by groups

Table 2

| Region | age | sex | FGD No. | No. of participants |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Meghri town and surrounding villages | 18-40 | male | 1 | 5 |
| | | female | 1 | 6 |
| | 41 and above | male | 1 | 6 |
| | | female | 1 | 6 |
| Agarak town and surrounding villages | 18-40 | male | 1 | 6 |
| | | female | 1 | 6 |
| | 41 and above | male | 1 | 6 |
| | | female | 1 | 5 |
| Local business representatives | | | 1 | 8 |
| Representatives of local self-government and civil society | | | 1 | 8 |
| Total | | | 10 | 62 |