

Fighting the flames

Evaluation report: Institutionalising
a Volunteer First Responder Service
in Armenia (VolFiRe)



Acronyms

AC	Armenian Caritas
ADA	Austrian Development Agency
ARCS	Armenian Red Crescent Society
AutRC	Austrian Red Cross
BA	Breathing apparatus
CA	Caritas Austria
CMC	Crisis Management Centre
CMSA	Crisis Management State Academy
DIGA	Disability inclusion gender analysis
DM	Disaster management
FA	First Aid
FGD	Focus group discussion
FRIM	Fire rescue instruction manual
IEC	Information, education and communication
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
KII	Key informant interview
MES	Ministry of Emergency Situations
MIA	Ministry of Internal Affairs
MTAI	Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure
PWD	People with disabilities
RS	Rescue Services
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
SRW	Staff reflection workshop
ToR	Terms of reference
ToT	Training of trainers
VFRG	Volunteer Fire Rescue Group

Fighting the flames.

Evaluation report: Institutionalising a Volunteer First Responder Service in Armenia (VolFiRe)

Austrian Red Cross, July 2026

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Executive summary

Forming new fire & rescue services is technically complex and strategically challenging. Yet, as the evaluation report demonstrates, the VolFiRe project (Institutionalising a Volunteer First Responder Service in Armenia) succeeded in the development of a volunteer-based service that is aligned with and complements staff-based fire stations. The new Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups (VFRGs) now respond to incidents in rural areas, improving the incident outcomes through shorter response times.

Implemented between 2022 and 2026, VolFiRe developed key training and operational resources underpinning the new service, and linked the new groups with critical stakeholders. The consortium led by Austrian Red Cross navigated challenges with sound adaptive management.

At the same time, further efforts are required to render the service more effective. The report recommends to extend programming, with the view to elevate the model to a legally framed system, to enhance current services, and to expand coverage to new stations.

This evaluation is based on research carried out in Armenia in May 2026. It included key informant interviews, visits to 10 of the 13 VFRGs and related partners, workshops, and a survey among firefighter volunteers and staff.

Relevance

The VolFiRe project was highly relevant to Armenia's emergency management needs. Many rural communities faced prolonged response times from professional fire and rescue services due to geography, limited infrastructure, and resource constraints.

The expected increase in wildfire risk also highlights the need for additional local response capacity.

The project aligned with national priorities and responded directly to local needs by establishing volunteer groups in areas with hitherto limited emergency service coverage. Through extensive consultation with government agencies and local authorities, the project was designed to address operational gaps, complementing existing emergency response structures.

Effectiveness

Out of the 16 logframe indicators and specific targets, seven have been achieved (or were on track of being achieved). Six targets were partially achieved, one was not achieved, and two lacked robust data. The project was very successful in forming, training, and supporting the 13 VFRGs. In 2025, these groups responded to 120 incidents, and annual turnouts are expected to increase. The development of the technical manual and operational guidelines is a key achievement underpinning operations.

The project developed strong collaboration with the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Rescue Service (MIA-RS), community administrations, and other stakeholders. But while great progress was achieved, the legal and institutional framing will need to be further strengthened.

The project team excelled at the combination of technical diligence and strategic vision, and managed to adjust approaches in the wake of key challenges encountered during implementation.

Efficiency

The project was delivered in a highly efficient manner, utilising structural leverage through co-funding arrangements while paying close consideration to financial efficiency during procurements. Direct material costs attributable to the formation of

VFRGs amounted to just under EUR 31,400 per group, while training costs per volunteer amounted to EUR 523.50.

Impact

Although the evaluation was not able to quantify the overall impact due to lack of data, it is evident that the VFRGs have already contributed to reduced damages and losses from incidents, partly due to much shorter response times (by an estimated 33.5 minutes). Many success stories were noted from deployments, and the full impact in this regard is yet to materialise in years to come.

The project furthermore contributed to critical surge capacity for disasters across Armenia, and helped shifting mindsets on gender and disability inclusion.

Sustainability

The sustainability of project results is rated as rather high. The **willingness** of local actors to continue engagement is very high, with motivated and supported volunteers being a key factor.

Capacity of local actors is seen as rather high: the groups have skills, structures, and funding, but there are issues with fire trucks and the training of new volunteers.

The main issue concerns the **enabling environment**, which is found to be rather low. Although the model is broadly endorsed and aligned with Armenia's vision, it still needs to be elevated through legally binding frameworks and policy.

Lessons learnt

Several important lessons emerged from the project. Strong stakeholder engagement was critical to success, particularly

collaboration between communities, local governments, and national emergency management agencies. Local ownership and community participation significantly enhanced effectiveness and sustainability.

The project also demonstrated that volunteer firefighting systems require more than equipment and training. Effective governance arrangements, leadership development, operational procedures, and ongoing support are equally important.

Another key lesson was the importance of adapting international volunteer firefighting models to local conditions. Approaches that reflect Armenia's social, institutional, and geographic realities proved more successful than attempting to replicate foreign systems without modification.

Recommendations

This report groups recommendations under four blocks to further institutionalise and improve the new volunteer-based services:

- A. **Extend** support to the system of VFRGs through a new project phase so that it can be further institutionalised.
- B. **Enhance**: address direct issues in the short run and provide support to system-aligned improvements later on.
- C. **Elevate** the model to a national system through a co-facilitated process that defines a national vision and then canvasses the vision into a legal framework.
- D. **Expand** carefully to new locations and in line with national vision/framework.

The VolFiRe project developed volunteer-based fire and rescue services as a viable model that now stands a good opportunity (given the current legal context) of being elevated to a national and legally embedded system.

Introduction

Every fire starts small. The time between ignition and suppression is one of many factors influencing how large and damaging it becomes. Thus, the faster fire services arrive, the greater are the chances that damages and losses can be contained. **Response time matters.**

This truth lies at the basis of the way most fire services around the world are structured: they are decentralised, typically featuring a mix of paid firefighters in urban centres and volunteer firefighters in rural areas.

Armenia stands in the context of emergency response structures that have their origin in the Soviet Union: conventionally, fire and rescue services in Armenia and other post-Soviet states are based on paid staff under the Ministry for Emergency Situations (MES). Since it would be prohibitively expensive to have paid firefighters across every community, this comes with the downside that fire services tend to be rather centralised.

Especially in the case of rural incidents far away from the fire stations in regional cities, the response times for crews to reach incident locations can be long. This is critical time that goes by while fires continue to burn.

The idea of exploring systematic linkages between community volunteer groups and MES stations in Armenia first emerged in 2018 as part of a project evaluation. Austrian Red Cross (AutRC) took this idea further, implementing the **StrengthVol project** from 2020 to 2022. Co-funded by DG ECHO and the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), the project led to the development of a comprehensive model for civil protection volunteering in Armenia. Under that project, the first four Volunteer Fire Rescue

Groups (VFRG) were established. The current VolFiRe project (which is the subject of this evaluation) was launched in late 2022 and is set to conclude in July 2026. It expanded the geographical scope from 4 to 13 municipalities while working to further institutionalise the model in Armenia's civil protection system.

Transforming systems is never easy. This evaluation report analyses the process and the outcomes, before distilling lessons and recommendations for future expansion and consolidation.

These are relevant beyond Armenia: after all, with growing risk of wildfires that we witness in the context of climate change, there are many countries that seek to develop new firefighting capacities beyond existing (and often limited) resources. The realm of relevance includes primarily other post-Soviet countries as well as other states with centralised systems and increasing wildfire risk.

This report is structured in three sections.

Section A covers the project background and the approach of this evaluation. **Section B** contains the main findings, presented along the lines of OECD/DAC evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. **Section C** presents lessons learnt as well as recommendations for future programming. The **appendix** contains more detailed research results (such as survey analysis and location-specific qualitative findings).

The authors thank the project team, volunteer firefighters and the staff at the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) Rescue Services for their support throughout the evaluation process. As the following pages will show, the VolFiRe project has been a commendable start towards a transformed system. At the same time, the road towards consolidation remains to be travelled.

Part A | Background

Yervandashat in Armenia's western province of Armavir is one of the 13 locations that now have a Volunteer Fire and Rescue Group (VFRG).

Photo: P. Bolte

1. Background and context analysis

Before we can move to the findings of the evaluation, in this chapter let us understand the context of the VolFiRe project (*part 1.1*) and get a picture of its overall architecture (*part 1.2*).

1.1 Project context

Home to nearly three million people, Armenia is a land-locked country in the Southern Caucasus. In comparison to European countries, it comes closest to Belgium in size, to Austria in population density, and to Albania in per capita income.

High mountains are a defining feature, shaping water flows, local climates, vegetation, and culture. Most of the country is classified as grasslands, with forests primarily in the north. Agriculture is the main **livelihood** outside the capital (making up 48.7% of the workforce here) and includes livestock production, vineyards, and the cultivation of figs, olives, and apricots. Most VFRG members have backgrounds in farming.

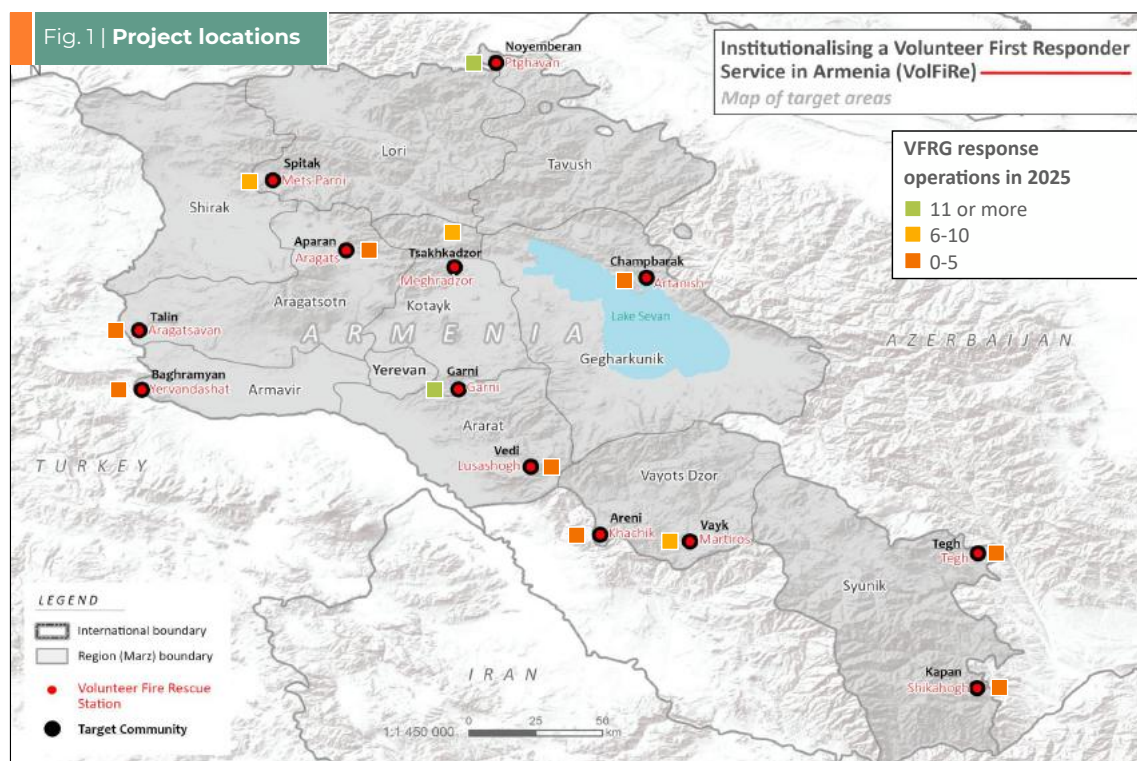
In administrative terms, Armenia is a unitary (rather than federal) state. It is divided into ten regions (*marz*), while Yerevan has a special administrative status as the capital. At the local level are self-governing communities, which consist of one or more settlements. The administrative architecture is being reformed under efforts of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (MTAI), which progressively seeks to merge communities into so-called ‘consolidated communities’.¹

In terms of **hazards**, Armenia is classified as having high risk to floods, earthquakes, landslides, mudflows, and wildfires.² The Spitak earthquake of 1988 that killed an estimated 38,000 people highlighted the risk from below and remains in the national memory. More recently, large wildfires in 2017 and

2025 recalled the need of robust fire-fighting capacity. Climate projections point to warmer local climates and greater drought risk, thereby making wildfires more likely and more difficult to contain.³ *Inform Risk* classifies Armenia as low overall risk but points to strong sub-national variations.⁴

Regarding the **policy and institutional context** for disaster risk management, Armenia has been undergoing several reforms, generally moving from a traditional approach centred on emergency response towards a more risk-based approach that also includes risk mitigation, efforts to raise community resilience, and improved early warning. Current frameworks include the Disaster Risk Management Strategy 2023–2030

1. Out of the project locations, this reform has thus far been implemented only in Mets Parni (which was subsumed under the Spitak consolidated community).
2. See *Think Hazard* page for Armenia.
3. See *Climate Change Knowledge Portal*.
4. The sub-national data of *Inform Index* (2024) show the following risk levels:
 - ▶ **very high**: Syunik
 - ▶ **high**: Lori
 - ▶ **medium**: Ararat, Tavush, Vayots Dzor
 - ▶ **low**: Armavir, Gegharkunik, Shirak
 - ▶ **very low**: Yerevan, Kotayk, Aragatsotn



as well as the 2025 Law on Disaster Risk Management and Population Protection (effective from 2027), which establishes a modern legal framework that replaces the 1998 emergency protection law.

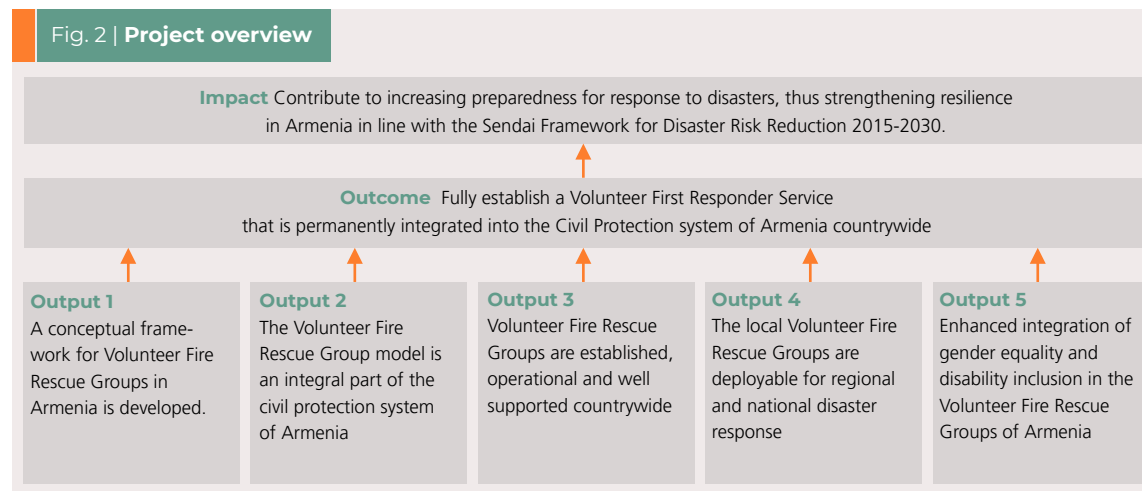
In April 2023, the Ministry for Emergency Situations (MES) was subsumed under the Ministry of Internal Affairs as Rescue Services (MIA-RS). Key units now under MIA are the Rescue Service, the Educational Complex, the Operational Management Centre, and the Strategic Planning & Policy-making department.

Firefighting in Armenia has traditionally been the realm of professional staff, and MIA-RS maintains 60 fire stations across the country. Although there were no provisions for volunteer firefighters, farmers in rural areas often do what they can to fight fires — knowing that many assets may be lost by the time MIA-RS crews would arrive. Without adequate training and equipment, such efforts not only put their safety at risk but also tend to be of limited efficacy.

Coming from a background of limited formal **volunteerism** (i.e., in organisations), the role of volunteers in Armenia has become more prominent over the past two decades. A new Law on Volunteer Work was adopted in 2023 that has basic provisions for volunteers — however, it does not create a separate “volunteer rescuer” status that would define rules on training, command and operations.⁵

1.2 Project overview

The VolFiRe project was launched in late 2022 and is set to conclude in July 2026. With an overall budget of EUR 1,579,000 and funding from the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), it aimed to expand, advance, and institutionalise a system of volunteer-based fire and rescue services that had been initiated under the StrengthVol project on a smaller scale.



Implemented by a consortium of Austrian Red Cross (AutRC), Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS), Caritas Austria (CA) and Armenian Caritas (AC), the project is structured around five outputs (see fig. 2).

Output 1 is the foundation of the new system; activities included the development of a detailed 195-page VFRG handbook (with operational doctrines, standard operating procedures (SOP), position descriptions and more), the creation of a 456-page Fire Rescue Instruction Manual (FRIM) with detailed guidance on firefighting, rescue and First Aid techniques, as well as the establishment of comprehensive training packages, equipment standards, and specifications on VFRG rescue stations.

Under **output 2**, cooperation agreements were signed between ARCS, MIA-RS, and regional (*marz*) administrations. These were based on the ‘three-party model’, which stipulated that ARCS would be in charge of insuring volunteers, MIA-RS of training them, and community administrations (under each *marz*) of covering ongoing funding for fuel and supplies. Further activities included advocacy towards broader adoption of the system (towards the development of a legal framework for volunteer-

5. The law stipulates that volunteer work can support civil defence, emergency and population protection, disaster prevention and response, rescue operations, help to victims and DRM-related work. It also helps with basic issues such as the volunteer contract, rights and duties, safe conditions, tools, reimbursement of necessary expenses, and possible compensation.

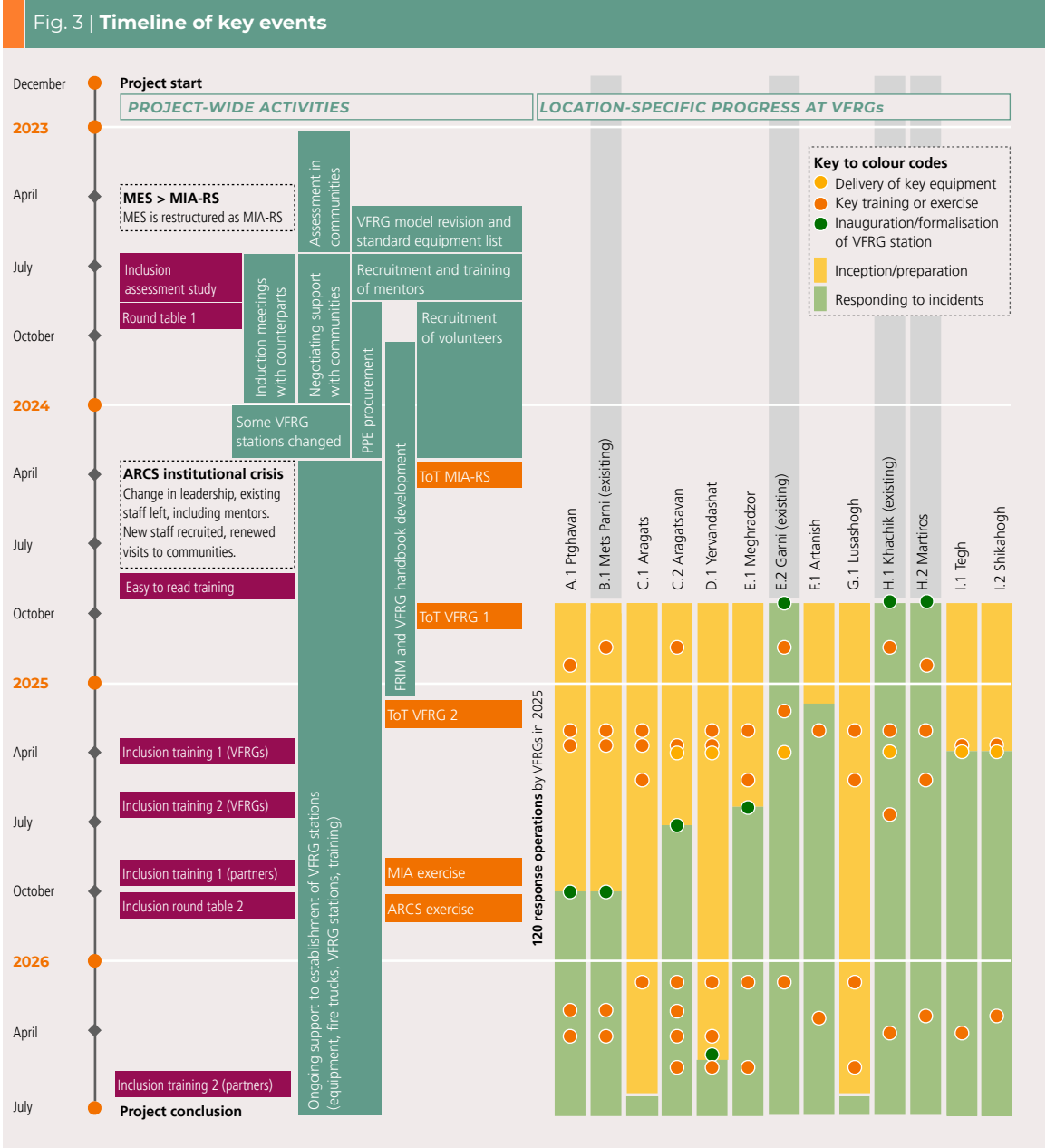
based services) as well as a communication and marketing campaign directed at the public (ARCS social media posts related to the VolFiRe project had a total of 1.43 million views).

Activities under **output 3** focussed on the actual establishment of VFRGs. These included local-level cooperation agreements, the procurement of personal protective (PPE), firefighting and rescue equipment, the refurbishment of fire trucks (older generations of MIA-RS trucks were fitted with new standardised equipment), the construction of rescue stations or adaptation of existing buildings, the recruitment and training of volunteers, and support to initial operations of newly established groups.

Under **output 4**, the project aimed to expand the reach of VFRGs to wider areas beyond individual response zones, seeking clear procedures in case of disaster-related deployments across Armenia. In 2025, this included two large-scale simulation exercises by ARCS and MIA-RS. Volunteers were also involved in the response to a large wildfire in Tavush.

Finally, **output 5** was geared to promote greater gender equality and disability inclusion around the new VFRGs as a joint effort by Armenian Caritas and ARCS. Activities included a gender and disability assessment, workshops, round tables, community awareness sessions, collaboration with disabled persons organisations and women’s organisations, and production of easy-to-read resources. Importantly, these gender equality and disability inclusion actions are cross-cutting topics, therefore influencing the other outputs as well.

While the project encountered several challenges — most notably an ARCS institutional crisis in April 2024 in which key staff members resigned overnight — the VolFiRe project achieved tremendous progress in just 3.5 years (see *fig. 3*). While detailed evaluation findings will be presented in part B of this report, it can be revealed that the project team was tenacious and committed to turn a vision into reality. It has provided a proof-of concept that can now be elevated to a higher level, as will be argued in part C of this report.



2. Evaluation purpose & approach

This evaluation was carried out between March and July 2026 by two external consultants, Armen Chilingaryan and Patrick Bolte. In-country research included visits to 10 of the 13 project locations as well as key informant interviews and workshops at the national level.⁶

2.1 Evaluation objectives

The purpose of this evaluation was to capture background information, derive lessons learned, and generate recommendations for future engagement in the thematic area of institutionalised fire services (which may also be relevant to many other country contexts, given increasing wildfire risk associated with climate change).

In particular, the evaluation sought to assess the overall performance of the project against its planned outputs, identifying key achievements, challenges, and areas for improvement. The terms of reference (ToR) specified that the OECD/DAC criteria of **effectiveness**, **efficiency**, and **sustainability** should be focussed on. It also had to assess how **gender equality** and **social inclusion** (in particular disability inclusion) have been addressed. Beyond the criteria listed in the ToR, the consultants suggested to furthermore include the aspects of **relevance** and **impact** (where feasible).

2.2 Evaluation approach

The evaluation process included a **preparation** phase (review of project documents and inception report, tool development and translation, as well as administrative and logistical arrangements, as well as an online survey), **in-country research** from May 4 to 19, 2026, and the **synthesis** phase (data analysis and report writing).

A sequential mixed-method approach was selected for this evaluation. This included an online survey as well as the review of key documents. Equipped with the knowledge of broad patterns, the consultants embarked to ‘dig deeper’ through qualitative tools during the in-country research. The overall approach is summarised in the evaluation matrix in *fig. 4 (next page)* and described in more detail in the inception report.

The following tools were applied for this evaluation:

- ▶ **Tool A - document review:** this covered project documents (logframe, budget, annual reports), manuals and procedures, as well as background and relevant policy documents;
- ▶ **Tool B - online survey:** this was sent to all VFRG members as well as of MIA-RS staff from nearby rescue stations. Overall, 54 of 195 VFRG members responded to the survey (27.7%) — as well as 29 MIA-RS staff. For VFRG members, the survey covered motivation, satisfaction with training and operational aspects, and feedback in view of possible improvements. For MIA-RS staff, it covered feedback on volunteer performance during training and actual response operations.⁷
- ▶ **Tool C — staff reflection workshop:** at the outset of the research phase, team members gathered to reflect on achievements, challenges, lessons learnt, and to provide input to the evaluation process.
- ▶ **Tool D - regional visits:** travelling across Armenia, the consultants visited 10 of the 13 project locations. Each regional visit included meetings with the VFRG, the community administration, and with the team of the nearest MIA-RS fire station. In Martiros and Ptghavan, VFRG members also took part in ad-hoc skills demonstrations (with scenarios defined by consultants).⁸
- ▶ **Tool E - response data review:** the purpose of this tool was to explore response times and avoided damages and losses from fire incidents. While several cases highlighted that

6. For additional information on the evaluation approach, see the evaluation schedule in appendix C, the inception report in appendix G, and the Terms of Reference in appendix H.

Elmar Göbl-Arias of Austrian Red Cross, who is also a volunteer firefighter in Austria, joined the evaluation between May 5 and 10, 2026.

7. All VFRG members were invited to take part in the survey. 46 men (27.5% of male firefighters) and 8 women (28.6% of female firefighters) responded. Gender-disaggregated survey results are available in appendix E.3.

8. Six members of the project team took part in the workshop - 4 men and 2 women.

9. For VFRG visits, 67 VFRG members took part in focus group discussions — including 61 men (36.5%) and 6 women (21.4%). All visited MIA-RS stations had only male firefighters.

VFRGs arrived on scene much faster than the MIA-RS teams could, and that damages were indeed contained as a result, consistent quantitative data were unavailable to run a robust analysis.

- **Tool F - key informant interviews at the national level:** several key members of the MIA Rescue Service, Armenian Red Cross Society and Austrian Red Cross were also interviewed for this study (*see details in appendix C*).

Initial evaluation findings were presented in Yerevan at a validation workshop on May 18th.

2.3 Limitations

The evaluation progressed without major limitations — however, three minor challenges should be mentioned: **first**, the online survey yielded limited responses, and responses were unevenly distributed amongst VFRGs (*see appendix A*). **Second**, skills demonstrations that had been planned for all VFRGs could only be conducted in two locations, as other visited VFRGs either had no truck available (some trucks were yet to be delivered, others were undergoing repairs) or only few firefighters attending. **Third**, as mentioned, response data analysis could not be pursued yet. Nevertheless, these challenges do not pose serious limitations on the accuracy of evaluation findings — for instance, team skills have been demonstrated in many well-documented exercises or simulations.

Fig. 4 Evaluation matrix		Evaluation tools				Primary tool —●— Secondary tool ○			
Criteria/questions (aspects in red are in addition to those listed in the terms of reference)	A. Document review	B. Online survey	C. Staff reflection workshop	D. Regional visits				E. Review of data on response	F. KIIs at national level
				D.1 FGD community	D.2 FGD volunteers	D.3 Skills demos	D.4 KIIs CRC, MIA		
1. Relevance									
1.1 In how far are the project objectives relevant to Armenia's risk and policy context?	●		○	○	●		●		●
2. Effectiveness									
2.1 To what extent is the developed Volunteer Fire Rescue System (VFRS) considered functional and to what extent is the performance of the VFRGs successful based on actual deployments and capabilities?	○	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	●
2.2 How did the achievement of Output 3 and Output 5 differ by communities? What were the reasons for the differences in the communities? Which lessons learnt can be drawn and what enabling and hindering factors influenced the achievement of Output 3, and 5?	○		●	○	●		●		○
2.3 How and to what extent was Output 2 achieved? What difference does the intervention make for the civil protection system in Armenia? What difference does the intervention make for strengthening the operational capacities of the MIA Rescue Service fire brigades?	○		●		○		●		●
2.4 To what extent did the project management decisions influence the results, considering the challenges and uncertainties encountered during project implementation?	○		●		●		●		●
2.5 To what extent were the project resources used for the direct benefit of the population?	○		○	●	●		○		○
3. Efficiency									
3.1 What have been facilitating and hindering factors for an efficient project implementation and how have they affected results delivery and what are important lessons learned in this context?	○	○	●	○	●		●		●
4. Impact									
4.1 What has been the actual impact in terms of emergency response and avoided losses?	○		○	○			●	●	○
5. Sustainability									
5.1 How and to what extent is the functionality of the Volunteer Fire Rescue System (VFRS) ensured beyond the project period? What are hindering and facilitating factors in this context?	○	●	●	○	●		●		●
6. Lessons and replicability									
6.1 What steps can be taken to improve the performance and sustainability of VFRGs?			●	○	●	○	●		●
6.2 What should be considered when upscaling VFRG reach within Armenia?			●	○	●	○	●		●
6.3 What other lessons can be learned from the project experience?			●	○	●	○	●		●
6.4 What should be considered when replicating the approach in other countries?			●	○	●	○	●		●

Part B | Findings

In Ptghavan (Tavush province), VFRG members carry an injured person during a skills test that involved a traffic accident and a small fire (which the crew had extinguished just 4.5 minutes after leaving its station).

Photo: P. Bolte

3. Relevance

In how far are the VolFiRe project objectives relevant to Armenia’s risk and policy context? The question of an intervention’s relevance is more important than often acknowledged, given that relevance is interlinked with effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. Fig. 5 shows how these aspects are related to each other. For instance, an activity that is based on needs of local actors stands a higher chance of being effective and sustainable (and thus to generate impact) than one that is not.

Let us assess the extent to which the VolFiRe project was relevant by answering three questions: a) were activities needs-based, b) stakeholders meaningfully engaged in planning, implementation and monitoring, and c) were activities aligned with priorities of community administrations and national agencies?

3.1 Needs-based interventions

[3.1] To assess the extent to which the new fire service is based on needs, it is prudent to begin with caseloads: how many fires and other incidents occur in the response zones of the newly established VFRGs? Staff of the ten visited MIA-RS stations reported an annual caseload of 6,300 incidents, with 5% of them (315) originating from the response zone of the ten VFRGs.¹⁰ Extrapolating this figure to all 13 VFRGs, there are **around 400 potential VFRG responses per year**, once all groups are fully functional (in 2025, VFRGs attended 120 incidents).¹¹

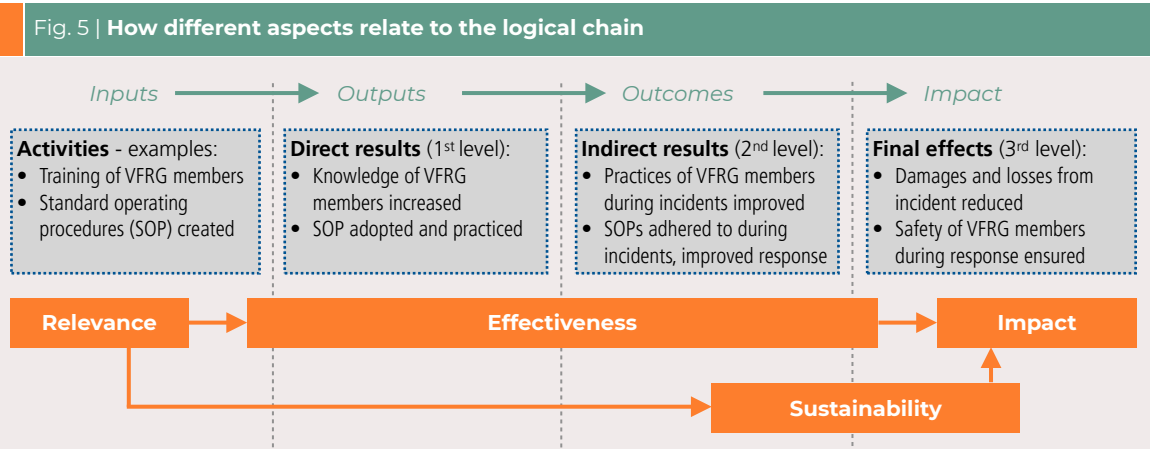
[3.2] Crucially, the VFRGs are much closer to these rural incidents than MIA-RS crews. On average, VFRG crews are estimated to be 33.5 minutes faster on scene than their staff-based colleagues.¹² During winter, response times to some high-altitude locations (such as Lusashogh and Khachik) can be substantially longer, as roads need to be cleared from snow.

Faster response tends to translate to fires being contained more quickly, thus leading to comparatively lower damages and losses. Thus, forming the VFRGs in remote rural areas is seen as highly relevant. In fact, the case for volunteer-based fire stations had already been made in a 2014 concept by the former head of the Ministry for Emergency Situations (interview MIA-RS).

Two further aspects add to the relevance of the new fire service. [3.3] **First**, they add resources to Armenia’s **disaster response capacity**. This may be particularly beneficial in terms of earthquakes, a key hazard for Armenia. Typically, urban areas are at greatest risk of earthquakes; the rural VFRGs could thus be drawn in to complement staff-based rescue services.

[3.4] **Second**, the anticipated increase of **wildfires** linked to the accelerating onset of climate change calls for improved fire-fighting capacity across the country. Data of the Global Wildfire Information System (GWIS) show that an area equivalent to 75% of Yerevan’s land area is burned in wildfires (16,550 ha) each year¹³ — and although there is no discernible increase in frequency or expanse yet, climate projections point to warmer climates and greater drought risk — thereby leading to increased wildfire risk in future decades.¹⁴

- 10. The number of annual incidents varies greatly between rescue stations — from 1,500 in Tsakhkadzor to just 100 in Baghramyan.
- 11. The fact that just 30% of incidents in the VFRG response zones were attended by VFRGs in 2025 is due to the fact that some VFRGs were not yet operational (or became operational mid-year). Some VFRGs also had their trucks offline to get them repaired.
- 12. The listed difference in response times is based on interview results rather than recorded data. It varies between locations, ranging from 15 minutes (Aragats) to one hour (Yervandashat)
- 13. Annual average number of hectares burnt, based on GWIS data for the period 2012-2025.
- 14. Under SSP 2-4.5, the ‘middle of the road’ climate change scenario, an increase of 2.0°C in annual temperature and worsening drought conditions are projected (-0.8 on the Standardized Precipitation Evapotranspiration Index (SPEI)), especially in southern Armenia.



Large wildfires in 2017 (south-eastern Armenia) and in 2025 (in the country's north) have highlighted the need for augmented firefighting capacity. This need is especially pronounced in northern Armenia around Tavush, which contains much of the country's forest cover.¹⁵

3.2 Process ownership

[3.5] The overall development of the VFRGs stands in the context of the previous StrengthVol project (2020-2022). Throughout implementation, the project team took care to ensure that key stakeholders were involved — notably Armenian Red Cross, Caritas Armenia, MES/MIA-RS¹⁶, and community administrations. This included early explorations of target locations with MES, initial 'baseline' assessments with community administrations, and close engagement of new volunteers. Importantly, the Fire Rescue Instruction Manual (FRIM), standard operating procedures and guidelines were endorsed by MIA-RS (with senior MIA-RS staff co-developing the FRIM).

[3.6] The project team encountered some challenges with regard to process ownership: the ARCS institutional crisis meant that for several months, there were no direct ARCS counterparts. Swift and bold action by AutRC prevented the project from falling apart — with new staff members being swiftly recruited.

[3.7] The especially hard work of the team during this time is recognised. However, the crisis meant that a sense of ownership amongst ARCS has only just recovered. Conversely, the level of integration of VFRG members in ARCS structures is rather marginal (although they are ARCS volunteers and insured by ARCS). Linkages between VFRGs and nearby ARCS branches are rudimentary.

[3.8] Meanwhile, the collaboration with MIA's Educational Complex (Armenia's formal training body for firefighters) on the development of training resources and guidelines as well as the

provision of training courses was strong. The Fire Rescue Instruction Manual (FRIM) and the VFRG handbook were broadly appreciated, with MIA-RS requesting re-prints for broader dissemination.¹⁷

[3.9] On the ground, the visited community administrations and the teams of MIA rescue stations strongly endorsed the VFRG model and provided tangible support: in line with the system, community administrations cover fuel and maintenance expenses.¹⁸ While levels of ongoing funding vary, all communities but one provide reasonable funding. Spitak (the community that includes Mets Parni VFRG) is the outlier, with the mayor of the newly consolidated community rejecting reasonable funding levels.¹⁹

[3.10] Teams at MIA rescue stations meanwhile provide regular training, and their feedback on VFRGs was consistently positive (both in interviews and in survey results). Crucially, the VFRG members themselves were found to be motivated and engaged, with many being committed to further improvements to the young service.

3.3 Aligned actions

[3.11] The VolFiRe project is aligned with the vision originally put forth by the former head of MES. Key project outputs have been officially endorsed, and upon successful training, VFRG members are issued official 'rescuer passports'.

[3.12] But while the project team was inclusive and engaging with stakeholders, the VFRG system is not yet formally aligned with official policy. Rather than supporting the implementation of existing policies, the project developed an effective proof-of-concept based on international good practice that can now inform policy. In *chapter 9*, we will offer detailed guidance in this context, with a view to strengthen the enabling environment that will make a highly relevant service more sustainable.

15. Most of Armenia (77.4%) is classified as grasslands, which come with relatively low fuel loads but the risk of fast-moving fires. The country's forest cover (7.1%) is concentrated in the northern provinces of Tavush and Lori, often in steep terrain that poses significant challenges for firefighters.

16. In April 2023, the Ministry for Emergency Situations (MES) was dissolved and integrated as Rescue Services under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA-RS).

17. While the project had not budgeted for such re-prints of the FRIM, AutRC encouraged MIA-RS to run such re-prints with its own funds. The request illustrates the value that is attached to the new manual.

18. All visited communities cover fuel (limited to 20 litres per month in Mets Parni) as well as other ongoing expenses. Some also cover salaries (see discussion in chapter 8). In addition, some communities also cover planned upgrades or investments.

19. The VFRG in Mets Parni had been formed in 2020 under the previous StrengthVol project. At that time, Mets Parni was an independent community, with its mayor being very supportive. In the process of administrative reform, Mets Parni was then amalgamated with other neighbouring villages to form Spitak community. The mayor of the new entity has consistently rejecting support — although Spitak now covers 20 l of fuel per month (enough for 50km per month), the VFRG lacks essentials such as power and water supply.

4. Effectiveness

To what extent has the VolFiRe project been effective in reaching its objectives? Let us first assess the project in terms of its indicator targets (4.1) and then discuss outputs and related key questions posited in the terms of reference (4.2). The chapter concludes with a review of the project management (4.3).

4.1 Indicator tracking

[4.1] The project logframe contains **16** indicators and specific targets. As illustrated in *fig. 6* on the following page, **seven** of these targets have been achieved (or were on track of being achieved). **Six** targets were partially achieved, **one** was not achieved, and **two** lacked robust data.

While this overall result pattern suggests an ostensibly mixed level of achievement, it is prudent to add some qualified perspective. In essence, the VolFiRe project was highly successful at creating an effective and technically sound model for volunteer-based fire and rescue services that serves as a ‘proof-of-concept’ for further upscaling and formalisation through future policy arrangements. With 120 actual VFRG responses in 2025, the project has begun to make a real difference to damages and losses (*see chapter 6 for details*).

[4.2] The project team managed to tackle some serious challenges, most notably the ARCS institutional crisis of 2024. Commendably, the team paid great attention to technical details (e.g., training and equipment standards) while keeping the wider picture (such as long-term viability) in mind. The VFRG handbook and the Fire & Rescue Instruction Manual (FRIM) are extremely valuable resources not only for current VFRGs, but also for future upscaling. The immense effort in creating these resources and in training crews in many complex firefighting and rescue techniques is recognised.

Targets that were not or partially achieved fall into two categories. [4.3] **First**, there is the aspect of legal and procedural arrangements: the VFRGs are not properly covered by relevant legislation that needs to be formulated in line with the new Law on DRM and Population Protection; regional cooperation agreements remain pending signing by MIA-RS (OP2a), and procedures for VFRG deployments outside their usual response zone still require endorsement (OP4b). Nevertheless, much progress was made towards institutional embedding on the ground, as can be seen in the strong collaboration of VFRGs with nearby MIA-RS teams and with community administrations.

[4.4] The **second** aspect concerns volunteers: collectively, the VFRGs have fewer volunteers than originally targeted (OP3b) and have a smaller share of female members than aimed for (OP5a). But while bigger and even more gender-equitable teams would have been desirable, the non-achievement of these indicators does not pose direct constraints on the teams’ effectiveness.²⁰

20. The original target number of volunteers had been based on the pilot model developed in the StrengthVOL project, assuming that volunteers would be deployed directly from their homes to an incident. However, the model was changed early in the VolFiRe project, with volunteers responding from stations.

This change resulted in considerably lower volunteer numbers required and recruited than had been initially proposed.

■ **Aragatsavan, May 2026**
The VFRG crew is getting ready to extinguish a structure fire during an exercise. Photo: ARCS



Fig. 6 | Indicator overview

Logic	Indicator	Baseline	Target	Actual	Level of achievement
Outcome: A volunteer first responder service is fully established and permanently integrated into the civil protection system of Armenia countrywide and disaster response in targeted communities improved	OC1 # of VFRGs that are activated by MIA	4 in 10 regions	12 in 10 regions	13 in 9 regions	Achieved. All 13 VFRG stations have been activated. With the exception of Shirak, all regions now have one or two VFRGs.
	OC2 # of people benefitting from improved services	28,700	114,764	87,247	Partially achieved. With some of the VFRG locations changed from original concept, the number of residents in the 13 response zones is lower than planned.
	OC3 # of VFRGs included in the Disaster Risk Management National Strategy and Action Plan	none	all	all	Not achieved. The Strategy and Action Plan precedes the project and has not been updated by the Government of Armenia. The development of volunteer-based rescue services is envisaged, but VFRGs are not specifically included.
Output 1: A conceptual framework for Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups in Armenia is developed	OP1a # of VFRG regulation documents developed and adopted	0	1	1	Achieved. The VFRG handbook is a high-quality document that contains SOPs, equipment standards, and other key aspects, endorsed by the MIA-RS.
	OP1b Training package for VFRGs developed and ready for use	0	1	1	Achieved. With the 456-page Fire & Rescue Instruction Manual as a basis, both general and specialist training courses have been developed together with MIA-RS.
Output 2: The Volunteer Fire Rescue Group model is an integral part of the civil protection system of Armenia	OP2a Cooperation agreements signed between ARCS, MIA, and regional administrations	0	10	8	Partially achieved. With the re-allocation of VFRG locations, only 9 regions are included. Eight have cooperation agreements (pending signing by MIA), the one for Syunik was in progress.
	OP2b Roadmap developed for rolling out VFRG model	0	1	1	Partially achieved. The process to develop the roadmap is effective and ongoing; this will need to be continued.
	OP2c % of Armenian population reached by visibility campaign	0%	20%	no robust data	No robust data. 20% would be 600,000. There were 1.43 million cumulative views and media reported on the new VFRGs (newspapers, TV stations).
Output 3: Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups are established, operational and well supported countrywide	OP3a # of VFR stations refurbished	4	12	10 (ongoing)	On track to be achieved. By May 2026, 10 stations had been constructed or renovated. 3 further stations are being constructed, to be completed by July 2026.
	OP3b # of volunteers recruited and trained	115	240	195	Partially achieved. On average, VFRGs have 15 members. Actual VFRG sizes range from 6 (Aragatsavan) to 36 (Khachik). See also footnote 17.
	OP3c # of VFRG response operations per year	tbd	100	120	Achieved. Overall, the VFRGs were involved in 120 response operations in the year 2025. This number is likely to increase as more groups become fully functional.
	OP3d # of trainings conducted	0	132	181	Achieved. By May 2026, 181 trainings and simulation exercises have been conducted.
Output 4: The local Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups are deployable for regional and national disaster response	OP4a Feasibility assessment on VFRG deployments outside of municipalities conducted	0	1	1	Achieved. An assessment with regions and communities confirmed the feasibility, and some VFRGs have already been deployed in responses outside their zone.
	OP4b Procedure for cross-regional VFRG deployments adopted	0	1	ongoing process	Partially achieved. The VFRG Operational Doctrine includes a procedure, which is yet to be endorsed by MIA-RS. Procedures will also be included in ARCS guidance.
Output 5: Enhanced integration of gender equality and disability inclusion in the Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups of Armenia	OP5a % of female volunteers in VFRGs	15.0% (17)	20.0%	14.4% (28)	Partially achieved. At the end of 2025, there were 28 women amongst 195 firefighters across the 13 VFRGs — most of whom belong to core groups of VFRGs.
	OP5b # of PWD informed about volunteer opportunities	0	100	no robust data	No robust data. Specific data for this indicator were not available. However, 38 days of inclusion-related training were provided, with a total of 462 participants.

4.2 Output analysis

Having reviewed indicator targets, let us now discuss the project outputs in greater detail — directly responding to the questions posited in the ToR.²¹

A. To what extent is the developed Volunteer Fire Rescue System (VFRS) considered functional?

[4.5] At the time of the regional visits in May 2026, five of the ten visited VFRGs were found to be fully functional (Ptghavan, Aragatsavan, Yervandashat, Meghradzor, and Martiros). Two VFRGs had their fire trucks under repair but were otherwise functional (Garni, Khachik), while two others (Aragat, Lusa-shogh) had yet to receive their fire trucks. It is expected that 9 of the 10 visited VFRGs will be fully functional by end of the project. Remaining construction works of the VFRG stations (Aragat, Lusashogh, and Martiros) are on track to be completed by the end of the project. The case of Mets Parni is discussed under question C below. The six criteria in fig. 7 are used to assess the functionality of VFRGs:

- ▶ [4.6] **Trained volunteers:** all VFRGs had at least the minimum number of trained volunteers (six). Highly motivated, they also expressed satisfaction with initial and ongoing training (see survey results in appendix A). Many VFRGs have started to conduct self-initiated training, in addition to sessions and exercises led by MIA-RS and the project team. 61.1% of survey respondents say they take part in trainings at least once per month.
- ▶ [4.7] **Equipment in good order:** all visited VFRGs had PPE, fire and rescue equipment neatly stored in stations and fire trucks. There were no reports of broken or missing items.
- ▶ [4.8] **Fire truck operational:** with the exception of Aragats and Lusashogh, all VFRGs had received fire trucks by the time of the evaluation. Formerly in service with MIA-RS, these Soviet-era Zil 130 were overhauled and fitted out with new standard equipment. However, the trucks came with several issues. **First**, four of those initially delivered were beyond repairs and

were replaced (the original trucks serve as a source for spare parts). **Second**, most of the other trucks are also prone to technical issues. In the survey, only 35.2% of respondents said their trucks were in a good condition. In Khachik and Garni, the evaluation team learnt that their trucks had been out of service for several months for repairs. VFRG members in Garni reported that EUR 6,500 had already been spent on truck repairs.²² **Third**, the trucks are slow and have difficulty in accessing steep terrains — especially when roads are covered with snow or ice.

- ▶ [4.9] **Station available:** all VFRGs have stations ready or under construction. Most stations are existing buildings that were upgraded to specifications with project support. All have basic amenities with storage, toilets and washrooms.²³

- 21. Note that questions or question parts that are related to lessons learnt are discussed in chapter 8.
- 22. The mechanical ingenuity of some VFRG members helps keeping most trucks on the road — however, they tend to be unreliable. In at least one instance, a truck failed when the crew was en route to an emergency.
- 23. Due to the lack of support from the community administration however, water and power were found to be turned off in Mets Parni.

Fig. 7 | Overview of visited VFRGs (as of May 18, 2026)

VFRG	1. Trained volunteers	2. Equipment in good order	3. Fire truck operational	4. Station available	5. Adequate support from community	6. Good links with Rescue Service
A.1 Ptghavan Tavush region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
B.1 Mets Parni Lori region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
C.1 Aragats Aragatsotn region	Yes	Yes	Not yet delivered	Under construction	Yes	Yes
C.2 Aragatsavan Aragatsotn region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
D.1 Yervandashat Armavir region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
E.1 Meghradzor Kotayk region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
E.2 Garni Kotayk region	Yes	Yes	Under repair	Yes	Yes	Yes
G.1 Lusashogh Ararat region	Yes	Yes	Not yet delivered	Under construction	Yes	Yes
H.1 Khachik Vayots Dzor region	Yes	Yes	Under repair	Yes	Yes	Yes
H.2 Martiros Vayots Dzor region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Under construction	Yes	Yes

Beyond these basics, amenities vary: the station in Meghradzor (funded by the Japanese Embassy) has a meeting room and sleeping quarters; in Ptghavan, there is also a crew room with computer and sofas that is a good space for the crew to gather. Aragatsavan has ample space but thus far lacks a similar setting. The office walls showed mould, as a result of water damage from a leak (to be fixed by the community).

- ▶ **[4.10] Adequate community support:** all communities (except Spitak/Mets Parni) cover expenses for fuel, electricity, water, and basic equipment maintenance. Some provide additional support or are planning to do so. In Ptghavan, a proposal was submitted to the Japanese Embassy, requesting a new quick-response vehicle. In Garni, the community now pays salaries of AMD 120,000 (EUR 280) per month for core crew. In Meghradzor, the community plans for a paid 24/7 stand-by service and is in the process of procuring a quick-response vehicle (*on community support, also see chapter 8*).
- ▶ **[4.11] Effective links with local MIA-RS teams:** the links between MIA-RS teams and VFRGs are strong in all visited locations. Volunteers and MIA staff know each other well from initial and regular trainings, and there was consistently positive feedback from both sides. Both the dispatch processes and collaboration during responses were reported to be smooth.²⁴ Related survey results (*see appendix A - figures A.11, A.14, and A.15*) were in line with interview findings.

B. To what extent is the performance of the VFRGs successful based on actual deployments and capabilities?

[4.12] Throughout 2025, the 13 VFRGs collectively responded to 120 fires and other emergencies. This represents around 30% of estimated incidents in response zones (*see part 3.1*). Especially when considering that some VFRGs only became operational mid-year, this caseload is a commendable start. VFRGs have also demonstrated their capabilities during emergency simulations and during deployments to large wildfires in the summer of 2025. The evaluators witnessed skills demonstrations in

Martiros and Ptghavan — in both cases, crews managed to complete their tasks quickly.²⁵ During future training, crews should however aim for more consistent adherence to SOPs and safety standards.²⁶

C. How did the achievement of Output 3 and Output 5 differ by communities? What were the reasons for the differences in the communities?

[4.13] Every community is different in terms of geographical and socio-economic setting, social cohesion and age groups — and volunteers always reflect the community they are from. Some VFRGs consist of mainly old or middle-aged men while others are young and dynamic. Nine of the 13 VFRGs include women, and although the overall share of female members is 14.4%

- 24.** Most of the MIA-RS stations now have a new dispatch system (others were to receive it in the near future). Officers alert VFRG coordinators, who then alert the VFRG (in most cases via Whatsapp groups). See further details in chapters 8 and 9.
- 25.** Crews in Martiros managed to extinguish the 'flame' in 10.5 minutes. In Ptghavan, crews only took 4.5 minutes
- 26.** Aspects include proper wearing of full PPE, including the use of visors when on branches. Crews should also be reminded not to enter into burning buildings, as highlighted in the FRIM.



VFRG crew members in Khachik, Yayots Dzor. Photo: ARCS

instead of the targeted 20%, this stands in the context of a) a socially conservative society, especially in rural areas, and b) of fire services being a predominantly male domain — not just in Armenia but indeed around the world.²⁶

To explore the success factors behind VFRGs, it is sensible to think of two phases — the *formation* and the *ongoing functioning* of the groups. The formation is about who joins; it also sets the tone for initial dynamics. Ongoing functioning is about longer-term cohesion, organisational resilience, group dynamics, as well as motivation and compliance with standards.

[4.14] Committed and charismatic leadership of the community administrator was identified as the key success factor for both phases: this includes the drive to recruit members (*formation*) as well as ongoing support (*functioning*). In some VFRGs, community administrators themselves joined the group — these are the top performing groups. VFRGs typically consist of members who were friends before joining: 92.6% of survey respondents said they joined together with friends.

With the leadership of the community administrator being a key success factor, there can be grave consequences when there is no such leadership: the VFRG in **Mets Parni** thus far remains unified and committed despite the lack of support from the Spitak community administrator. But without reasonable coverage of fuel costs and charges for electricity and water, members expressed their frustration. An intermediate measure (as well as a longer-term solution) will need to be urgently identified so not to risk this group becoming dysfunctional (*see details in chapter 9*).

[4.15] Several other factors contributed to group success — in particular **group dynamics** where members motivate and inspire each other, the level of **support from MIA-RS and community administrations**, and **recognition by residents** (94.5% of survey respondents say they feel their work is appreciated).

The composition of skills and backgrounds of members is another factor: some groups could take on new initiatives or maintain their trucks with the skills of their members.²⁷

[4.16] In terms of **gender** aspects, it was noted that generational mindsets appeared to play a role: groups with mainly old members have no or very few women, while those with younger median ages have more women in the ranks. Conversely, younger women were noted to be more outspoken and engaged.²⁸

D. How and to what extent was Output 2 achieved?

Output 2 aimed for the VFRG model becoming an integral part of Armenia's civil protection system — and the answer to this question comes in two parts.

[4.17] *On the ground*, there is a high level of integration. VFRGs and MIA-RS teams work together well — both in terms of training and actual responses.²⁹

[4.18] *On paper* though, this integration is not yet fully reflected in frameworks. There is considerable progress (the FRIM and VFRG handbook are broadly appreciated, VFRGs members were recognised with rescuer passports, regional collaboration agreements and out-of-area deployment procedures have been crafted). However, the steps towards full institutionalisation are missing thus far.³⁰

Counterintuitively for an effort in the emergency services sector, the case of the VolFiRe project is a bottom-up initiative, with **practice preceding policy**. Although such sequencing comes with innate risks, the fact that the VFRG model already enjoys broad support amongst government and agency representatives means that a viable proof-of-concept has been developed. As will be discussed in *chapter 9*, VolFiRe now has a window of opportunity to elevate and embed the concept into institutional arrangements over the next phase.

26. For instance, female firefighters make up for 8.9% of firefighters in *Australia* and 10.1% in *Austria*. Amongst MIA-RS, there are virtually none (no female firefighters were met in the 10 visited MIA-RS stations).

27. The success factors were identified based on group discussions with VFRGs and MIA-RS staff, survey results, and interviews with project staff.

28. See the box on p 19 for further details.

29. Both the survey results (separate responses from VFRG members and MIA-RS staff) and group discussion results highlighted consistently good collaboration between VFRGs and MIA-RS crews.

30. This aspect was highlighted in many regional visits (MIA-RS, VFRGs, communities) and in several interviews at the national level.

E. What difference does the intervention make for the civil protection system in Armenia?

[4.19] The new VFRGs provide valued capacity that complements the resources of MIA-RS and other civil protection agencies. In addition to representing volunteer-based extensions to staff-based systems (and providing faster responses in rural areas), the VFRGs also provide surge capacity for large-scale emergencies and disasters. This has been successfully tested in two major exercises by MIA-RS and ARCS. First deployments to large wildfires in the summer of 2025 have demonstrated the real-world potential. With VFRG capabilities including fire-fighting, rescue and First Aid, these groups may prove very valuable in the case of urban earthquakes, floods, and other disasters.

MIA-RS aims for a network to 32 groups, complementing the 60 staff-based stations. As mentioned above, there is interest and strong potential to enhance, elevate, and expand the system over coming years (*see chapters 8 and 9*).³¹

F. What difference does the intervention make for strengthening the operational capacities of the MIA Rescue Service fire brigades?

[4.20] While the VolFiRe project focussed on the establishment of the VFRGs, some benefits for the capacities of MIA-RS teams were identified. The most important aspect lies in the fact that incidents in some of the most remote locations can now be responded to faster than before, with initial arrival being 33.5 minutes faster than previously. The teams at MIA-RS stations also benefited from frequent training and many exercises. Staff enjoyed the technical discussions with the fire rescue expert who served as a project consultant, and were able to sharpen their own skills. The rescue teams also appreciated the FRIM. The head of the Vedi rescue station also expressed hope for the development of regulations that will allow simplified recruitment of new MIA-RS firefighters from the pool of VFRG members that have already passed the certification process.

4.3 Project management

G. To what extent did the project management decisions influence the results, considering the challenges and uncertainties encountered during project implementation?

[4.21] The project team excelled at adaptive management — making changes en route without losing sight of the destination. When the ARCS institutional crisis threatened the viability of the project, the team showed tenacity in making it work with a new modus: the idea of local mentors was dropped, with team members filling the role.³²

[4.22] The team was also quick to respond to other challenges — replacing some planned VFRG locations when support from community administrations appeared insufficient, and organising replacement fire trucks when it emerged that four of the initially delivered trucks were beyond repair.

[4.23] The project team had to manage technically complex aspects as well as important strategic aspects — its strong performance on both fronts is seen as an overarching success factor behind the VolFiRe project. Collaboration between Caritas and Red Cross was smooth and effective, with numerous workshops and trainings on diversity and inclusion seamlessly integrated into the overall project portfolio. Caritas helped change perceptions on women's roles in firefighting, strengthening disability inclusion awareness, and creating entry points for more inclusive VFRGs. As the project coordinator highlights, the efforts “changed minds—showing that women can be also be firefighters.”

[4.24] The team was also found to have a good overview of remaining challenges. “I like to understand the gaps in the system first-hand so we can address them”, says the project coordinator. For instance, the role of ARCS branches in the system was weak following the crisis — the team now works to strengthen these links through regional hubs and better ongoing engagement.

31. This point was raised in three separate interviews with MIA-RS staff at the national level.

32. Twelve mentors had originally been recruited and trained to help with initial group formation. Eight mentors resigned overnight in the wake of the ARCS institutional crisis, while the other four were kept with the project until April/June 2025. The loss of mentors was compensated through more frequent visits by other project team.

5. Efficiency

In how far was the delivery of project results efficient? The fact that 13 VFRGs have been established or upgraded with a budget of EUR 1,579,000 suggests a highly efficient use of resources. Let us explore this aspect in greater detail.

[5.1] *Structurally*, it is noted that the project succeeded in leveraging additional and/or ongoing funding: fire trucks were supplied from the existing stock of MIA-RS vehicles, while costs for refurbishments were moderate. Similarly, MIA-RS were engaged in training processes, thereby reducing project costs.

Based on the underpinning trilateral arrangements, community administrations meanwhile contributed costs for fuel, water, electricity and consumables (and are continuing to do so). Importantly, they also provided buildings for most VFRG stations, thereby limiting the project expenditures to costs for construction of stations.³³

[5.2] Beyond harnessing structural leverage, the project also yielded high efficiency in *financial* terms. Examples include the costs for the fire & rescue expert, who served as trainer and co-author of FRIM and VFRG handbook at a very competitive daily rate (his engagement and commitment was greatly appreciated by VFRG members and MIA-RS staff), as well as costs for six international instructors for ToTs (30 days in total) at very reasonable daily rates. The project also procured professional helmets from a world-leading Austrian provider of firefighting equipment at very competitive prices, and was careful in ensuring good value for the construction contracts of fire stations.³⁴

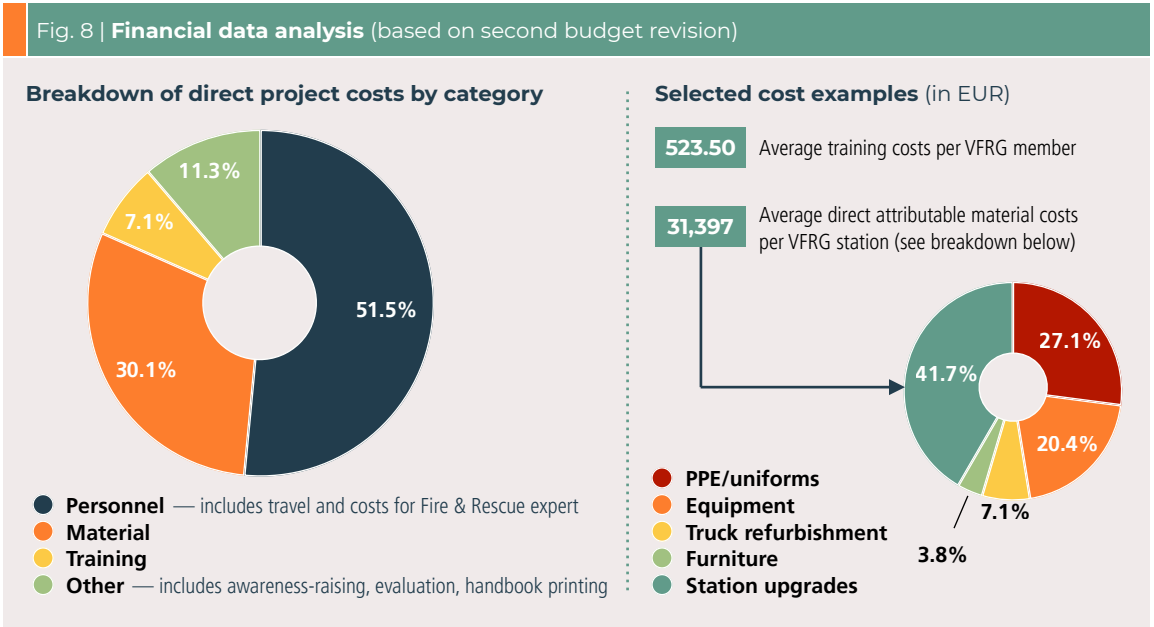
[5.3] As shown in *fig.8*, just over half of direct project expenditures were incurred by personnel and travel costs. Although this share of 51.5% may appear high at first sight, it is noted that

relatively high shares for personnel would be expected for projects that feature the development of new systems. Notably, personnel costs include the fire & rescue expert. The relatively low share of material costs (30.1%) is tribute to the several cost-saving measures listed above. On average, the material costs amounted to EUR 31,397 per VFRG station — covering PPE and uniforms, fire and rescue equipment, truck refurbishment, as well as furniture and upgrades or construction of stations.

[5.4] Total costs for training came in at EUR 523.50 per each of the 195 volunteers, which is seen as a very reasonable cost level.

Overall, the project delivery was found to be highly efficient. In terms of fire and rescue equipment, it was noted that the project team decided on a solid set of basic items. However, some additional items should be arranged for in the next project phase, thereby further enhancing the capacity of teams (*see chapter 9*).

33. Only 3 of the 13 VFRG locations required project-supported construction of new stations (Aragats, Lusashogh, Martiros). Another 3 stations were refurbished with project funds (Ptghavan, Mets Parni, Yervandashat). The newly constructed station in Meghradzor was funded by the Japanese Embassy. In Ptghavan, the community used part of a new building that had been funded by UNDP.
34. VFRG members contributed to the construction of stations in Lusashogh, Aragats, and Martiros.



6. Impact

With the VFRGs now established, what is the impact of the VolFiRe project? Several types of impact have been identified — however, due to lack of data these could not be quantified as had been originally planned.

Avoided damages and losses

[6.1] With VFRGs now serving as rural extensions to MIA-RS fire stations, it is evident that the response times to incidents within VFRG response zones has been reduced — by as much as an estimated 33.5 minutes on average. This time would have previously passed without qualified fire suppression — meaning that fires would have continued to burn and threatening adjacent assets. With VFRGs now in place, the extent of damages can be contained and reduced. For instance, in the case of a haystack fire in September 2025, the Yervandashat VFRG arrived quickly and was able to prevent the spread to a nearby house and fields, and rescue cattle that were at threat.

[6.2] Throughout 2025, VFRGs responded to 120 incidents — and the number of responses is expected to increase as more VFRGs will have been operational for the entire calendar year (around 400 MIA-RS callouts originate from VFRG response zones). In most of these cases, it is reasonable to assume that some damages and losses would be avoided thanks to faster responses.

Unfortunately, neither detailed data on response times nor damage and loss data were available. Enhanced recording and analysis by MIA-RS would be desirable to highlight the value of their service.³⁵

Improved surge capacity

[6.3] In the summer of 2025, VFRGs were for the first time deployed to incidents outside their response zone. Helping to



fight the large wildfires in Tavush, they provided surge capacity, working hand in hand with MIA-RS teams. There is significant potential future impact from such surge deployments to earthquakes, floods, and other hazard events.³⁶

Inclusion advanced

[6.4] Armenian Caritas drove many activities that led not only to the inclusion of women as firefighters, but also challenged conservative norms.³⁷ It helped mainstream gender equality and disability inclusion within the VFRG model through awareness raising (for VFRG members, community administrations, and MIA-RS), capacity building, easy-to-read materials, cooperation with DPOs, and work with communities and stakeholders.

Long-term trajectory

The full impact of the VolFiRe project is yet to emerge and goes beyond increased responses/avoided losses. The model and the lessons from this project can inform further upscaling and institutionalisation — an aspect that should be focused on during a next project phase (*see chapter 9 for details*).

Tavush: Ptghavan VFRG responding to one of several wildfires August 2025.

Photo: ARCS

^{35.} With the new MIA-RS dispatch system that is being rolled out across the country, it should be generally feasible to analyse response times. In terms of loss analysis, MIA-RS may wish to seek a unit that can provide this capacity.

^{36.} This aspect was highlighted in two separate interviews with MIA-RS staff.

^{37.} In the survey, 91.6% of VFRG members said that women and men enjoyed the same opportunities in their group.

Inclusion: how VolFiRe changed mindsets

Inclusion goes beyond women and persons with disabilities: it means that all people who are excluded or under-represented for any reason have equal opportunities to participate. Within VFRGs, barriers may affect women, persons with disabilities (PWD), and other community members.

[I.1] Emergency services are particularly difficult for promoting inclusion — even more so in rural areas, where traditional gender roles tend to be strong. When VolFiRe started, there had been virtually no women or persons with disabilities in Armenia's emergency services. Stereotypes that 'rescue work is not for women' and that physical strength represented a barrier had been commonplace, as an initial analysis by Armenian Caritas had highlighted. In the first round of workshops, participants were initially reluctant towards the topic of inclusion; even the term 'gender' was met with resistance.

[I.2] The project integrated efforts towards disability inclusion and gender equality early on, aiming to change mindsets. It deliberately promoted both women and persons with disabilities to join VFRGs to break self-reinforcing mechanisms of the stereotypes: seeing other women or persons with disabilities in VFRGs reduced the fear of joining — e.g., the presence of female volunteers made it easier to attract more women.

[I.3] In roundtable discussions, the VolFiRe team revealed some of the hindering factors for women and persons with disabilities. In addition to the stereotypes above, they included:

- **Fear of being the only woman/PWD:** the first woman or first PWD in a group faces the biggest challenges.
- **Internalised doubts:** women and PWD may themselves believe stereotypes about their abilities.
- **Time burdens and family resistance:** women often carry household responsibilities in addition to volunteering. Some family members also had concerns about safety.



- **Lack of suitable infrastructure:** no separate changing rooms or toilets, and lack of accessible facilities for PWD.
- **Attitude and mentality:** limited understanding that VFRGs offer many roles beyond heavy physical tasks, pointing to the need for broad mindset change at the community level.

[I.4] The project team thus embarked to address some of the barriers above. It aimed for the recruitment of multiple women to the groups at once (six VFRGs have multiple

women in their ranks). 'Family volunteering' was encouraged (husband-wife, siblings, mother-daughter) and proved effective to address family resistance. In Lusashogh, for example, a volunteer's wife joined the training and later became responsible for inclusion activities.

[I.5] Female VFRG members were furthermore encouraged to take on leadership roles — in fact, most female fire-fighters are now part of core groups of most active responders.

Inclusion: how VolFiRe changed mindsets (continued)

[I.6] Collaboration with MIA's Educational Complex proved effective: its staff showed a high level of commitment and openness towards disability inclusion and gender equality.

[I.7] Armenian Caritas piloted, validated, and refined a training curriculum for disability inclusion and gender equality that was applied in workshops with VFRGs, communities, and other stakeholders. This is not only a direct output of the project; it can also be used for future trainings (it was deliberately designed for all types of volunteer groups).

[I.8] The participants of inclusion trainings promoted greater inclusion within their VFRGs and became inclusion focal points. "Women can be rescuers, and they can also be team leaders", stressed one training participant. Another highlighted that her experience in training and VFRG operations had helped her overcome initial doubts: "I learned that I can do things I thought I couldn't."

[I.9] A peer-to-peer approach was inherent in the design of the curriculum: it guides participants to reflect with their VFRGs on the Armenian context, to discuss challenges in their own communities, and to identify practical ways to improve inclusion.

[I.10] The training addressed inclusion in its broadest sense, extending beyond women and persons with disabilities to all groups at risk of exclusion (e.g. older people, foreigners and other marginalised groups), promoting inclusive rather than target-group-specific approaches.

[I.11] VFRG members commented that a critical aspect towards greater inclusion was good communication. Following social media training, Facebook posts were designed to specifically welcome women and persons with disabilities to join their groups.

[I.12] The project team designed VFRG structures and role descriptions in such a way that anybody could join, even if they were not able to serve as firefighters: the VFRG structure explicitly stipulates that one does not have to be a rescue volunteer to take on the roles of alert coordinator, administrator, head of logistics, and head of First Aid (Organisational manual, p.9).

[I.13] In terms of reaching out to persons with disabilities, the project team used a sensitive approach, as some people were reluctant to disclose disabilities due to stigma or concerns. Nuances were highlighted to illustrate various

types of (dis-)abilities. Easy-to-read manuals were produced for those with limited reading skills.

[I.14] Three persons with disabilities joined VFRGs (in Martiros and Artanish). "When a person with disabilities joins, it changes the attitude of others, said one VFRG member. "At first, people thought including PWD was absurd because they only imagined the heavy work but there are so many other responsibilities."

Another volunteer added: "If organised properly, people with disabilities can make real contributions. I have seen it myself. We need volunteers who believe in the system and who help build and sustain volunteer groups, not only people who do the heavy firefighting work."

Changing mindsets takes time — especially in settings with strong preconceptions such as those typically found in emergency services. But as the VolFiRe experience highlights, such changes can be facilitated through consolidated approaches that makes engagement in VFRGs more accessible and inclusive.

7. Sustainability

The sustainability of an intervention's outcomes largely depends on a strong sense of local ownership — local actors' **willingness** and **capacity** to continue running or maintaining them. Neither willingness nor capacity is a fixed given (*see fig. 9*).

Local actors' **willingness** is a function of

- perceived relevance (did an activity address a local concern?);
- the perceived benefit-cost ratio (did an activity generate tangible benefits, how much input is needed to maintain these, and do the benefits justify the costs?); and
- process ownership (did local actors invent, steer, participate, accept or reject the underlying process?).

Similarly, local actors' **capacity** can be broken down into the following aspects:

- funds & inputs (do actors have the time and money to sustain the outcome?);
- skills & capabilities (do they have required technical skills?);
- structure & routines (do organisational structures underpin the groups, so they can cope with shocks?).

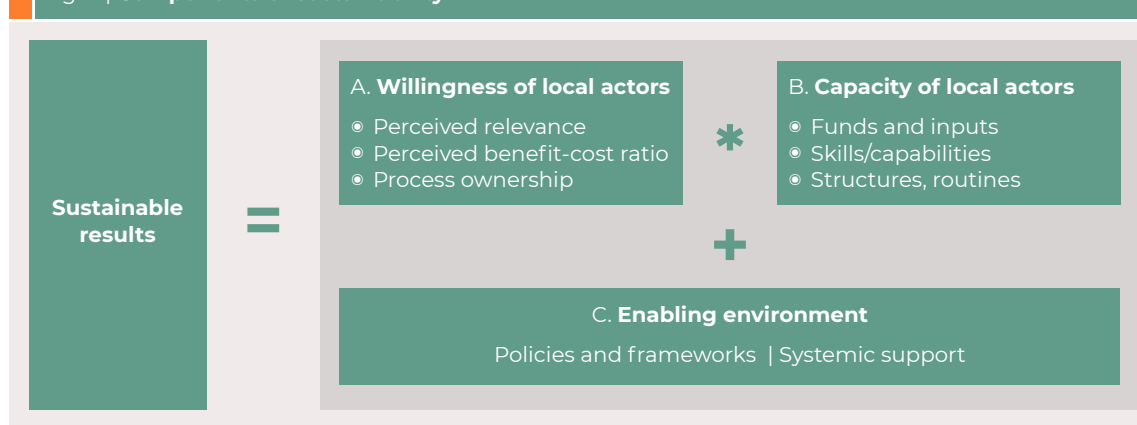
In addition to willingness and capacity, the strength of an **enabling environment** (next-tier government support, frameworks) also plays a role.

Applying this analytical frame and using categories of **very high**, **rather high**, **rather low** and **very low**, how did VolFiRe fare?³⁸

7.1 Willingness [very high]

[7.1] VFRG members are highly motivated to continue their role in the group and in future learning. This became palpable during community visits and was also evident from the survey.

Fig. 9 | Components of sustainability



Some 92.5% say feel that their role is recognised by the wider community (*see figure A.13 in appendix A*). The service is also recognised as being highly relevant by the teams of MIA-RS rescue stations and almost all community administrations. However, some VFRG members have flagged the idea of financial compensation or other benefits.³⁹

[7.2] The level of process ownership varies: *locally*, community administrations and MIA-RS teams have been involved in several design aspects, and showed strong incentive throughout trainings and service development.

[7.3] At the *national* level, the quality of engagement was mixed: the collaboration with MIA-RS was strong —yet, this solid foundation has yet to lead to full institutionalisation. And in the wake of its institutional crisis, the inclusion of formal ARCS structures (including branches) was severely limited. Notwithstanding these challenges, both MIA-RS and ARCS are in strong overall support. As highlighted by the head of MIA-RS Strategic Planning Unit, the further deployment and upscaling of VFRGs is in line with the overall vision for emergency services.

38. Willingness, capacity, and enabling environment are rated by triangulating data from all available information (group discussions, interviews, document review, staff reflection workshop) and then juxtaposing this information against the aspects listed in the model of sustainability.

39. See the box 'Paying volunteers?' on page 26 for a discussion of this aspect.

7.2 Capacity [rather high]

[7.4] The VFRGs have high-quality personal protective equipment (PPE) as well as good sets of basic fire-fighting and rescue **equipment**. All VFRGs also have (or will have) reasonable space to store trucks and equipment. However, the old Soviet fire trucks that are prone to mechanical faults pose a major problem. Although some VFRGs have technical ingenuity for fixes, and while such costs are mostly covered by community administrations, this challenge is unlikely to go away: solutions need to be found for more durable replacements that should also enable better access to steep terrain.⁴⁰

[7.5] In terms of long-term **funding**, community administrations (except Mets Parni/Spitak) cover fuel, repairs, consumables and utilities — some of them even more.

[7.6] Concerning **skills**, VFRG members now possess a robust set of skills; most groups also have started to run self-initiated training sessions. Meanwhile, MIA-RS showed themselves committed to continue trainings with and of their VFRG counterparts. At the same time, there is a gap when it comes to training new volunteers: although volunteer motivation is high, some attrition is inevitable. Therefore, a system to recruit and train new volunteers will have to be established. During interviews with firefighters, many expressed the need for a modular system that should be compatible with professional MIA-RS pathways.⁴¹

[7.7] Regarding **structures**, the groups have robust formal internal structures and clear systems on the coordination with MIA-RS crews. To varying degrees, nascent routines were also evident. Having reflective debrief sessions after incidents, regular training, and community-oriented activities are part of this. In terms of organisational resilience, all groups are cohesive and unified by a joint mission. However, some have mainly older members, with the need for new members being pressing.⁴²

7.3 Enabling environment [rather low]

[7.8] At the national level, there is strong interest to institutionalise the VFRG model as a means to advance civil protection. FRIM and VFRG handbook have been recognised, and new volunteers are issued MIA-RS rescuer passports. However, more systemic advances are missing. So far, the model is not yet captured in official policy or legislation. Without further action, this limits the long-term sustainability of the VFRG model.⁴³

[7.9] Fortunately, there are opportunities to integrate the model under the new Law on Disaster Risk Management and Population Protection, which becomes effective from January 2027. As will be explained in *chapter 9*, aspects that deserve particular attention include rules and regulations for volunteers in rescue services, as well as volunteer training pathways that align with those of professional firefighters.

[7.10] While the current model includes agreements with provincial governments and community administrations, it was noted that the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (MTAI) is not included yet. Since community administrations are governed by MTAI, this Ministry should issue clear guidance on how VFRGs should be supported.⁴⁴

[7.11] A final point concerns ARCS: the link between VFRGs and formal ARCS structures is currently weak. ARCS has now recovered from its institutional crisis, and efforts are underway to strengthen links between VFRGs and ARCS branches. Over time, these could further strengthen the environment of VFRGs.

Overall, the sustainability of the VFRGs under current settings is ‘rather high’. Under a second phase, there is a strong potential of raising sustainability further.

40. In Ptghavan, the community administration already lodged a proposal to the Japanese Embassy, requesting a quick-response vehicle (QRV). Meanwhile, the Fire & Rescue expert is exploring the possibility of procuring donated second-hand fire trucks from France.

41. This would include a course on basic skills as well as a range of specialisation courses. Such integration would enable volunteer firefighters apply for MIA-RS staff positions and also further enhance inter-operability.

42. This aspect was highlighted by group members in Yervandashat and Martiros.

43. The inclusion of MTAI is expected to provide a solution to problems as they occurred in Mets Parni/Spitak, as community administrations would be bound by MTAI regulations. MTAI should regulate the levels of support, thereby addressing the issue of variable support (e.g., some communities cover salaries, others do not).

44. This aspect was highlighted in two separate interviews with MIA-RS staff. See figure 11 on a proposed organisational structure.

Part C | Moving forward



8. Conclusion

Establishing new fire and rescue services is no easy feat. They are complex in nature, and it is crucial to get the fundamentals right. Technical gaps or systemic flaws may not only render a new service ineffective and/or unsustainable but also put the lives of new firefighters at risk.

The VolFiRe project got these fundamentals right. It had technical expertise in its team, was guided by a sound vision, and enjoyed crucial buy-in from stakeholders. Over the course of just 3.5 years, the VolFiRe project has achieved critical progress towards improved response capacity in rural parts of Armenia. The VFRGs it helped to form now respond to rural incidents — providing faster responses and better outcomes for local communities. Having responded to 120 incidents in 2025, this number is set to increase, making an even greater difference. [→6.2]

With fundamental resources developed, strong levels of cooperation established, and VFRGs trained and equipped, the project demonstrated a viable proof-of-concept that is broadly endorsed and supported by MIA-RS nationally and through its local teams.

Many lessons can be learnt from the project experience. These are primarily relevant to the Armenian context, where the model is set to be further advanced, expanded, and institutionalised. The lessons furthermore offer some guidance to other countries — especially those that are affected by increasing wildfire risk and that have institutional arrangements similar to Armenia's.

A. The success of a system-oriented project like VolFiRe depends considerably on external influencing factors that must be thoroughly assessed and managed.

The effectiveness of most project interventions depends to some extent on external factors that cannot be controlled directly.

In the case of projects that seek to create or transform systems, external factors play a particularly strong role. Those engaged in and managing systems must be convinced that the proposed system changes will yield benefits strong enough to justify them.

In practical terms, this requires project teams a) to have a strong understanding of the systems at stake, b) to win ambassadors within key organisations, c) to understand the perspectives, interests and constraints of local actors, and d) to embed actors into the overall implementation process. [→3.5, 3.8-3.12]

The VolFiRe project did very well in this regard. Building on networks and insights from the previous StrengthVol project, the team invested a good amount of time to nurture networks, assess conditions, develop a joint understanding of the vision, and to prepare agreements at regional and local levels.⁴⁵

Crucially, the 'three-party-model' defined roles of ARCS, MIA-RS, and community administrations early on. The team thus made sure that fundamentals were in place before starting with the actual formation of VFRGs (see figure 3, page 5).

45. During the staff reflection workshop, team members remarked that initial assessments could have been stronger and that local cooperation agreements should have defined clauses for non-compliance — this may have provided a means to deal with the unsupportive community administration in Mets Parni. But although robust assessments are important, the early inclusion of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (MTAI) may have been even more important in this regard (see chapter 7).

■ **Mets Parni:** VFRG members, MIA-RS staff, and members of the project team gather after an exercise. Photo: ARCS



B. Establishing a volunteer-based fire service is a hugely complex undertaking that requires strong technical and management expertise.

Establishing a new fire service is akin to juggling many balls in windy surrounds. In addition to establishing the fundamentals outlined above, the project team developed equipment standards, procured PPE as well as fire and rescue equipment, refurbished fire trucks, upgraded or constructed VFRG stations, and liaised with MIA-RS, community administrations and other stakeholders in an ongoing manner. [→3.5, 3.8-10, 4.11-12, 4.23]

Notably, it developed the FRIM and the VFRG handbook — 648 pages of detailed technical and structural guidance that then formed the basis of training and VFRGs. The FRIM represents a high-quality product with modules on firefighting, rescue techniques, and First Aid. The VFRG handbook contains operational doctrine, organisational manual, rules and regulations, insurance provisions, a volunteer management guideline, standard operating procedures, position descriptions, and detailed equipment standards.⁴⁶

Commendably, the VFRG model does not envisage advanced firefighting aspects, such as the use of a breathing apparatus (BA) to enter burning structures.⁴⁷ Great care was taken to not put volunteers at risk, while insurance is provided by ARCS.

From late 2024 onwards, the project invested heavily in training — running three training or trainer (ToT) courses (30 days in total) as well as numerous trainings or simulation exercises with MIA-RS (151 days). Overall, the project team was effective in delivering many strong aspects over a relatively short time.

C. The project succeeded in facilitating effective volunteer teams that are beginning to make a difference to incident outcomes.

The results of this hard work have begun to materialise, but the full impact is yet to emerge (*see chapter 6*). With consistently



strong collaboration between VFRGs and nearby MIA-RS teams as well as support from most community administrations, the new volunteers have taken up their work with passion. Amongst the 120 deployments of 2025, there are many success stories that show what difference the new service can make.

[→4.11-12, 6.1-2, 7.1-2]

D. Variability in local effectiveness is largely attributed to human factors.

As highlighted in *part 4.2 (question C)*, the variability in effectiveness between groups is attributed largely to human factors — notably the dedication of community administrators as well as the composition of VFRGs and their team spirit. Diversity within teams (age, gender, skills backgrounds) appears conducive to dynamic and effective groups. A high frequency of responses, successful results, and recognition by wider communities are additional motivating factors. [→4.13 - 4.16, 7.1]

The Fire & Rescue Instruction Manual (FRIM) contains detailed technical guidance on firefighting, rescue, and First Aid techniques.

Photo: ARCS

⁴⁶ The easy-to-read versions of operational and organisational manuals that were prepared by Armenian Caritas are recognised as a strong move towards accessibility, practical use, and disability-inclusive preparedness information.

⁴⁷ The use of BAs requires stringent safety protocols and advanced training to ensure firefighter safety. This role is reserved for MIA-RS firefighters. No VFRG member must ever enter a burning structure, even if this may pose a moral dilemma for volunteers (i.e., not rescuing persons from a burning building).

E. The organisational status and links of VFRGs require consolidation.

While VolFiRe successfully created the VFRGs, the groups' legal status is weak. Although FRIM and VFRG handbook have been broadly appreciated, there is currently no specific legal provision on their role and functions. They fall into the triangle between MIA-RS (training), ARCS (insurance), and community administrations (funding). As highlighted in *chapter 7*, there are thus gaps in terms of their institutionalisation. Ongoing efforts to revitalise links with ARCS branches should be continued.

[→3.12, 4.18, 7.9-12]

F. Incident profiles vary between groups and should be reflected on in equipment and training provisions.

With the 13 VFRGs spread across all corners of Armenia, geographic conditions and some incident profiles vary (beyond structure fires, which occur in all areas):

- ▶ **Wildfires** are common in all areas of the country and often occur along steep slopes that are not easily accessible. Most of the country (77.4%) is classified as grasslands — typically with fuel loads of 4.0t/ha or less. Wildfires in these areas can evolve quickly but are usually more easily contained. By contrast, the forest areas in Tavush (**Ptghavan VFRG**) and Syunik (**Tegh, Shikahogh VFRGs**) have much higher fuel loads (25t/ha or more); fires in these settings are typically more ferocious and more difficult to contain.⁴⁸ [→3.4]
- ▶ **Road accidents** are common incidents for VFRGs that are close to major highways. This applies especially to **Ptghavan** and **Aparan**.
- ▶ Incidents requiring **mountain rescue** responses are most likely in touristic highland areas, especially around the VFRGs of **Aparan** and **Meghradzor**.

During the regional visits, most VFRGs reported both common technical issues with their trucks as well as difficulties to drive these trucks in mountainous terrain (many groups use their own vehicles in such cases). [→4.8]

Efforts to procure more reliable fire trucks or small but versatile QRVs that can access steep terrain should be pursued to render response capacity more effective. In addition, it would be prudent to seek additional equipment relevant to local needs, and add specific training on the use of these tools. These may include carry-on mobile pumps (for wildfires), equipment for mountain rescue operations, and hydraulic rescue tools ('jaws of life') for road accidents.

G. The nature of volunteerism in the context of rescue services requires specification.

Against the background of historically limited formal volunteerism in Armenia, the fact that a volunteer-based fire and rescue service has been formed is reason to celebrate — especially given the strong motivation and dynamism among the groups.

At the same time, it is crucial to keep up the momentum. Some guidance on effective volunteer management is provided in the VFRG handbook. Beyond the basics, external motivators should be facilitated — for instance through the creation of awards and the facilitation of competitions or exchanged between groups.

48. These two provinces account for more than half of the area burned by wildfires, according to *GWIS data* for the period 2002-2024, with Syunik accounting for 40.3% and Tavush for 11.5% of burned areas.



Several other points were raised during regional visits:

- ▶ **Benefit schemes:** in many VFRGs, the issue of benefits was raised. The word had spread that Garni community pays salaries to ‘core’ members of the VFRG, and members in other groups argued that they too should either receive salaries or other benefits (reduced land tax and life insurance were often mentioned). This issue falls outside the project scope but should be looked at when specifying national regulations for fire and rescue volunteers (*see box: paying volunteers?*).
- ▶ **Training new volunteers:** as mentioned in part 7.2, there is currently no standardised mechanism to train new volunteers.
- ▶ **Professional progression pathways:** both many volunteers and some MIA-RS staff suggested an integrated pathways for volunteers through which they can up-skill progressively (and join as MIA-RS staff in addition to their volunteer role).
- ▶ **Roles of volunteers in ARCS:** while VFRG members strongly identify as ‘VolFiRe’ crews, their identification with ARCS is less pronounced — suggesting that more involvement in other ARCS activities of branches may be useful.
- ▶ **Volunteers in the community:** An addition to their response role, VFRGs could engage in fire risk awareness-raising and the promotion of preparedness measures and resilience.

[→4.6 - 4.12]

H. The population protection architecture in Armenia would benefit from an overarching vision for professionalisation and volunteer integration.

The VFRG system is a powerful proof-of-concept, and MIA-RS personnel agreed that further integration of volunteers bears strong potential. To this end, a national clear vision should be defined and then canvassed in regulations (*see chapter 9*).

Armenia’s overall architecture for population protection would benefit from a plan of new VFRG locations (overall, 32 VFRGs are envisaged across Armenia), including selection criteria and rollout plan. The status, training pathways, and benefit schemes should be defined in the process. [→4.17 - 4.20, 7.9-7.12]

Paying volunteers?

Making regular monthly payments to VFRG members (as is now practiced in Garni) should be avoided, for three reasons. **First**, such payments quickly accumulate to significant burdens on community coffers. **Second**, the increased operational costs negate one of the benefit of volunteer-based services: compared to staff-based fire stations, VFRGs are less costly to run — a key aspect that enables decentralised networks with many stations in rural areas. Being rural, VFRGs have typically low incident numbers (that would not warrant for staff-based stations). **Third**, volunteering is defined as “work undertaken of free will, for the common good,

and without expectation of financial gain” (United Nations) — making regular payments runs counter to this definition. Around the world, most volunteers do not receive payments at all (exceptions are expense reimbursements or modest allowances at specific triggers, such as partial compensation of lost income in prolonged deployments).

Creating award schemes to recognise the work of volunteer firefighters are encouraged instead of financial rewards. Any tax or life insurance benefits, as was proposed by some VFRGs, would have to be regulated nationally.

For MIA-RS, it may also be prudent to review the capacities, structures and standards of its stations.⁴⁹ Two points were noted that may deserve further exploration.

First, it appears that MIA-RS stations currently do not have fire trucks that are specifically designed to combat wildfires, especially those in forested areas that are more difficult to fight. Trucks with open crew decks, jet monitors, and an independent pump that can be operated while the fire truck is on the move, as well as QRVs and bulk water carriers may be well suited to drastically increase the capacity for combating wildfires.

Second, it was noted that annual incident numbers vary greatly between stations — ranging from 1,500 (4 per day) to just 100 (1 incident per 3 days). Although advanced firefighting capacity (e.g., BA operators) must be maintained across all towns, it may be useful to explore whether the current system is the most effective and efficient.

During interviews, the idea of **hybrid stations** (with staff and volunteers) was raised, which could be piloted in MIA-RS stations with low caseloads. This may reduce staffing costs at

49. MIA-RS has 60 stations across Armenia, located in Yerevan (13) and major towns. The ten stations closest to VFRGs were visited as part of this evaluation. In all ten, staff reported of good collaboration with VFRGs during training and incidents (“often, they have finished the job when we arrive”).

The stations vary in team size and fleet; most have 2-5 fire trucks that are typically designed as urban appliances. Models include Russian trucks — some old Zil 130 trucks (same as those used by VFRGs), new large six-wheelers (Zil 131), and Kazan urban pumpers — as well as a mix of new Isuzu and DongFeng trucks and some older European models (Magirus, Renault).

these stations, while enabling the reallocation of some officers to support the development of further VFRG/hybrid stations. These savings and/or staff reallocations may prove useful in the further expansion of VFRGs across Armenia.

A detailed national vision could then be canvassed into a sub-legislative normative act on volunteer rescue, aligned with the new Law on Disaster Risk Management and Population Protection that will take effect in January 2027.

Creating a comprehensive framework would be a critical milestone to firmly anchor volunteer-based services in Armenia's emergency services. The VolFiRe project achieved much progress through bottom-up approaches. But while this proved effective, a successor 'VolFiRe 2.0' project must first and foremost elevate the model to a national system. With a national vision and legal framework established, efforts should then be pursued to facilitate enhancements and expansion to other areas. [→7.9-7.12]

I. While the context for promoting inclusion represented twin challenges, VolFiRe succeeded in changing mindsets in the Armenian emergency services sector.

The project faced twin challenges for inclusion: not only do traditional values and norms shape lives in Armenia's rural communities. Emergency services are also the most male-dominated domains in Armenia and much of the world. [→I.1]

Yet, based on careful analysis and a sensitive approach, VolFiRe succeeded in rendering VFRGs more inclusive, and in changing mindsets. Female firefighters leading response operations in Armenia would have been unlikely without the deliberate actions of the project. [→I.5] The impact goes beyond numbers: with capacity strengthening that Armenian Caritas provided to MIA-RS, community ad-ministrations and VFRGs, the role of women as well as persons with disabilities in fire and rescue services may yet advance beyond the immediate context of project-supported VFRG. The inclusion training curriculum is ready to applied more broadly. [→I.7-8]

9. Recommendations

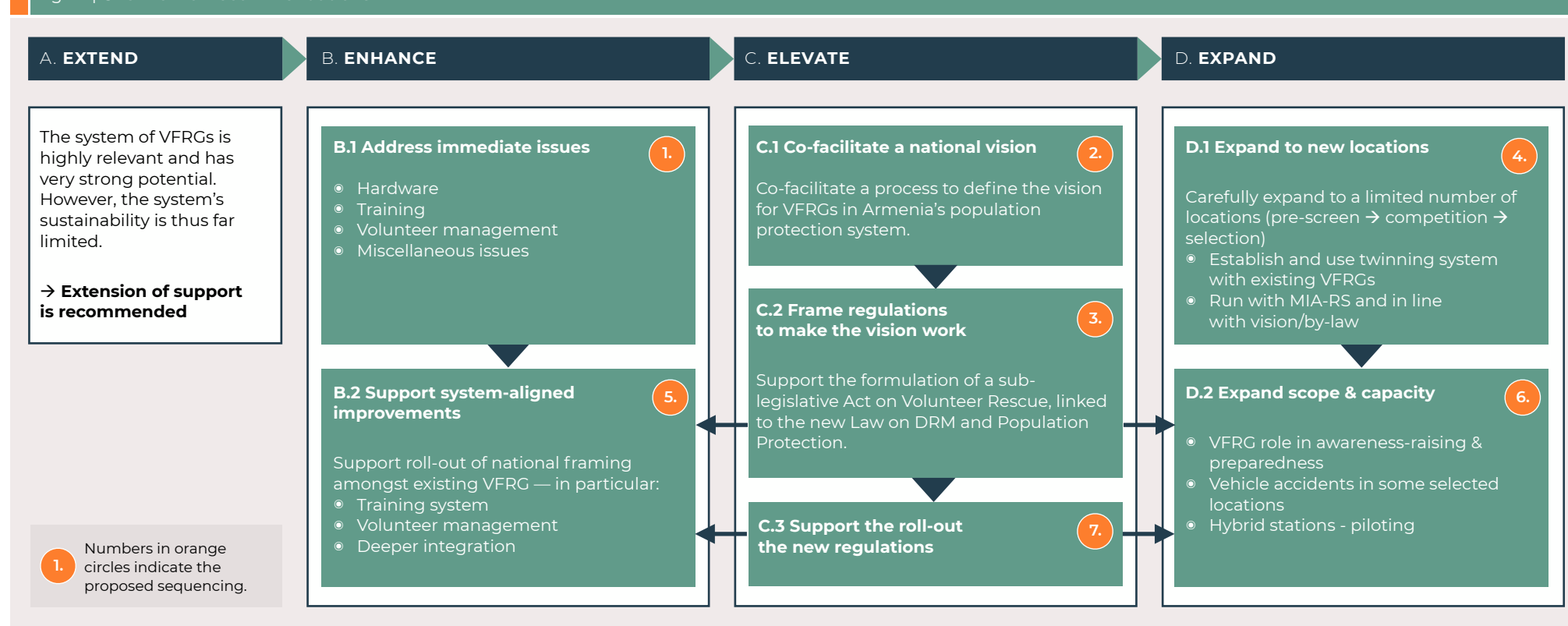
Based on the findings and insights, this report includes a range of recommendations that are summarised in *fig. 10 below*. These are categorised in blocks that encapsulate four strategic directions (extend, enhance, elevate, expand).

The first recommendation is to **extend** project support. The VFRGs have begun to make a difference, and there is very strong

potential of embedding these groups under a legal umbrella. Although expansion to new groups is desirable, the new project phase must focus on institutionalisation ('elevate') in particular, while also seeking to enhance capabilities of existing groups.

In *fig. 10*, all other recommendations are grouped under blocks B-D, with numbers in orange circles indicating the suggested sequencing throughout the new phase. In this chapter, we will present recommendations in order of these numbers, while referencing the related block.

Fig. 10 | Overview of recommendations



1. Address immediate issues. [B.1 - Enhance]

Several issues were identified that deserve swift attention in order to keep groups functional. Proposed measures include:

- ▶ **In Mets Parni, temporarily cover funding** of fuel, water and electricity so that the VFRG can continue to respond to emergencies, without members having to contribute their own funds. The overall volume of these costs is minor but can make a major difference. This support should be time-limited until long-term funding by the community administration is secured. [→4.14]
- ▶ **During training, focus on safety:** stress the importance of the proper use of PPE (in line with guidance). While VFRG members were found to generally wear PPE properly, some limited cases were noted where this was not the case. Also continue highlighting the rule that VFRG members must never enter burning structures — under no circumstances.
- ▶ **Provide P2/N95 disposable masks** and ensure their proper use by firefighters. These masks filter out the hazardous fine particles (PM2.5) found in wildfire or structural fire smoke. Highlight that these do not filter out toxic gases.
- ▶ **Continue efforts to link VFRGs** with the nearest ARCS branches to foster stronger identification and support. [→7.12]
- ▶ Across all VFRGs, **promote proper documentation of incidents** and reporting. Consider simplified report formats.
- ▶ **Explore early on the procurement of suitable second-hand fire trucks** so that existing fire trucks of VFRGs can be progressively replaced. This procurement may not fall under the project budget directly but will rather rely on donations or external funds. As this process may take considerable time, efforts should be launched early on. [→4.8]

2. Co-facilitate a national vision. [C.1 - Elevate]

As highlighted throughout this report, the VFRG system is broadly endorsed but currently lacks a detailed national vision. Following the completion of the current project and documentation of lessons learnt, and given the current legal context,

there is now a clear window of opportunity for framing a national vision for integrated volunteer-based fire and rescue services. [→4.18, 7.9-11]

The new **Law on Disaster Risk Management and Population Protection** enters into force on 1 January 2027 and forms a sound anchor for a national vision to align with. The new law requires the adoption of the necessary sub-legislative normative acts before 1 January 2027 — thus offering a unique opportunity a) to prepare a detailed national vision and b) to then adopt a unified act on volunteer-based fire and rescue services before the new system becomes operational.

Early on in the new project phase, the project should support a series of workshops to develop a detailed vision. These workshops should review lessons learnt, the current legal background (*see box on page 31*), as well as the insights and priorities of MIA-RS, MTAI, and other stakeholders.

Specific aspects that will need to be decided upon include:

- ▶ **VFRG numbers and locations:** selection criteria⁵⁰, sequencing, overall process management and funding;
- ▶ **Training:** professional progression pathways for volunteers, availability of regular training courses for new volunteers, certification, refresher courses, quality control, review of training material and development of new courses;
- ▶ **Volunteer insurance and benefits:** how will volunteers be insured and by whom?⁵¹ In how far should volunteers receive other benefits (and through which mechanisms)? What non-monetary incentives should be provided (e.g., awards)?
- ▶ **Institutionalised cooperation** between MIA-RS crews and VFRGs: what are the specific roles and protocols, including for the deployment of volunteers in disasters?⁵²
- ▶ **Equipment standards:** what should be the mandatory and optional standards for fire trucks as well as for fire and rescue

50. See considerations for the selection process under item D.1 (page 30).

51. While members of the current VFRGs are insured by ARCS, this question of future insurance arrangements needs to be regulated — considering that some future VFRGs may be established with support of other organisations (or without external support).

52. This cooperation is currently regulated by individual agreements and, for volunteers, by the VFRG handbook. Procedures for out-of area deployments have been crafted but still await signing by MIA-RS.

Legal framework analysis: volunteer-based rescue in Armenia

Armenia already has several regulations and legal acts that can support the establishment of volunteer rescue system. However, these regulations are spread across different laws and decisions. The main gap is not the permission to create volunteer rescue capacity; it is the absence of one operational framework that defines how volunteer rescuers are formed, trained, activated, commanded, insured, registered and held accountable.

The current legal framework

The Law on Rescue Forces and the Status of Rescuers is one of the main sectoral bases — however, it does not fully regulate volunteer rescuers. It allows for the formation of volunteer-based rescue teams under the rules for public organisations. It also sets general rules that matter for all rescuers: that rescue work requires special preparedness and equipment, that it should only be pursued by trained and qualified persons, and that rescue work is based on centralised management. These rules can support the further development of volunteer rescue system.

However, the law does not clearly regulate the volunteer rescuer's recruitment, daily functions, activation procedure, insurance, SOPs or detailed command rules. Thus, it is a legal basis but not a complete system.

The Law on Protection of Population in Emergency Situations gives a broader emergency-response basis. It allows citizens to be involved in eliminating the consequences of an emergency, taking into account their professional and personal qualities. It also includes public training, protection of life and health, early warning, evacuation, emergency preparedness, search and rescue and other works.

This law supports public involvement, but does not create a separate and detailed system for volunteer rescuers.

The new Law on Disaster Risk Management and Population Protection, which enters into force on 1 January 2027, gives a stronger future basis. It mentions volunteers in the DRM and population protection system, provides that volunteers involved in this field are trained by the authorised body's educational institution, and gives individuals the right to join volunteer response forces and know the safety rules for emergencies.

It also requires the adoption of the necessary sub-legislative normative acts before 1 January 2027. This creates a clear legal window to adopt a unified act on volunteer rescue before the new system becomes fully operational.

The Law on Volunteer Work is also important, but it does not create a separate "volunteer rescuer" status. It gives the general legal status of a volunteer. It says that volunteer work can support civil defence, emergency population protection, disaster prevention and response, rescue operations, help to victims and DRM-related work. It also helps with basic issues such as the volunteer contract, rights and duties, safe conditions, tools, reimbursement of necessary expenses, and possible compensation.

These rules can be used as a foundation, but they cannot replace sector-specific rescue rules on training, command and operations.

The DRM Strategy and Action Plan for 2023-2030 also supports this direction. It speaks about developing the legal and operational basis for rescue volunteering and creating community-based volunteer rescue capacity.

In simple terms, the strategy shows that Armenia intends to move from separate volunteer initiatives to a more organised national and community system.

Existing secondary Acts and resources

Government Decision No. 1391-N on the qualification of rescue formations and rescuers is a binding normative act. It is useful because it regulates readiness checks, training, equipment and qualification, and it allows the authority to permit or prohibit a formation from carrying out rescue work. It is consistent with the Rescue Forces Law. But it regulates only qualification; it does not regulate the full volunteer rescue cycle, such as recruitment, activation, command, SOPs, insurance and demobilisation.

Ministerial Order No. 620-N on the register of rescue formations is also legally relevant. It includes voluntary rescue formations in the register and records information about the founder, location, personnel, equipment, qualification and permitted rescue activities. This is important for knowing who exists and what they are allowed to do. However, it is only a registration tool. It cannot replace the full procedure for managing volunteer rescue.

Government Decision No. 186-N, which previously regulated compensation for a volunteer rescuer deployed to an emergency site for up to 15 working days in a year, is no longer in force. Therefore, it cannot now be used as a working legal basis for wage compensation or leave-related guarantees. This leaves a practical gap that should be fixed in the new act.

The 2014 concept on the public or voluntary rescue movement is useful as background. It discussed ideas such as training, equipment and volunteer rescue capacity. However, as a concept/protocol decision, it is not enough to create binding operational rights and obligations unless its content is transformed into a current normative legal act.

equipment? In how far and based on what criteria do specific, locally relevant equipment need to be supplemented?

- **Creation of an overarching model** with clearly defined responsibilities. The illustration in *fig. 11* provides a basic sketch; additional stakeholders may need to be added.

As this catalogue of aspects illustrates, there is considerable need for discussion. Yet, with a plethora of resources and lessons from the VolFiRe project as well as general commitment of key actors to the integration of volunteer-based groups, it is deemed feasible that a detailed national vision can be created over a co-facilitated series of workshops, with technical groups preparing inputs/technical concepts between meetings.⁵³

Once drafted, the national vision should then be advanced to the framing of regulations (C.2). Meanwhile, the vision can already inform other aspects, including expansion to new locations (D.1) and system-aligned improvements (B.2).

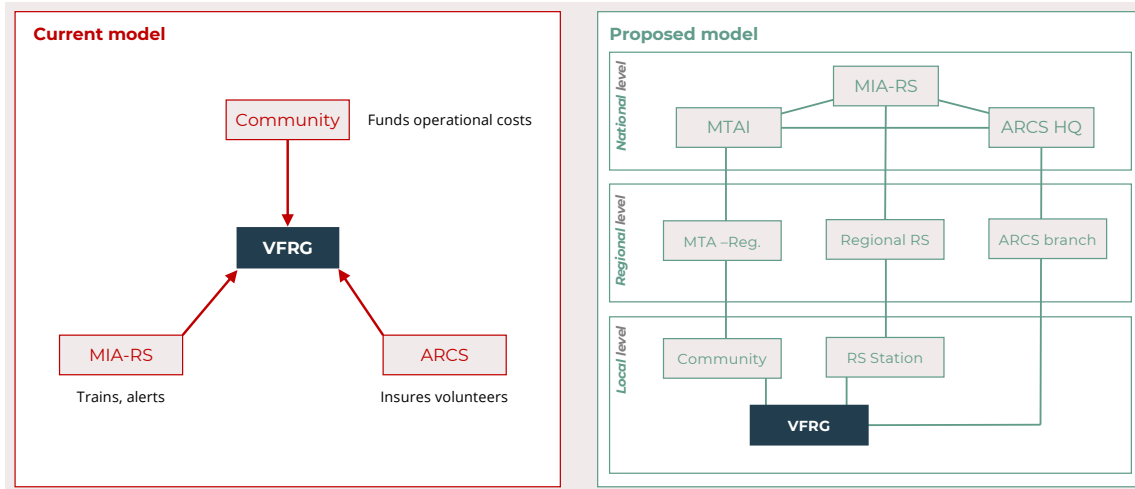
3. Frame regulations to make the vision work. [C.2 - Elevate]

As shown in the background box, a set of legal frameworks already exist that can inform the framing of regulations. [→7.3, 7.10]

It is recommended that Armenia adopts a sub-legislative Normative Act on volunteer rescue, preferably a Government Decision. A Government Decision is the preferred option because its realm spreads across ministries. It should involve MIA-RS, MTAI, communities, NGOs, training bodies, employers and actors who may supply funding. Through a ministerial order, technical documents can be approved later on (such as technical annexes, forms, training curricula and SOPs).

The Act should be a practical rulebook. It should explain who can create volunteer rescue units; how community, inter-community, NGO-based and organisation-based units are formed; who can become a volunteer rescuer; what training and

Fig. 11 | Adjusting the model



qualifications are required; how the national register works; when and how volunteers are activated; who commands them at the emergency site; what tasks they may and may not perform; how SOPs are used; what equipment and PPE are required; how insurance, reimbursement, compensation and employer notification work; how reporting, after-action review, data protection, suspension and removal from the register are handled; and how the system is financed.

This act would harmonise the Rescue Forces Law, the Volunteer Work Law, Emergency population-protection legislation, the new DRM and Population Protection Law and the DRM Strategy. It would turn volunteer rescue from a legally possible but fragmented activity into a predictable, safe and command-integrated system. With one clear by-law, communities, NGOs, the rescue service and volunteers would know their roles in advance. Volunteers would know what they are allowed to do and what protections they have. The rescue service and commanders would know how to safely include them in emergency operations as an integral part of the entire system.

⁵³ The National Platform on DRR would be a suitable body to support this process.

4. Expand to new locations. [D.1 - Expand]

With the national vision drafted, the new project phase would stand on solid ground when it comes to the formation of new VFRGs. However, this expansion must be pursued carefully and should be in line with the criteria and rollout plan of the new national vision.

Two aspects should be highlighted in this context.

First, the expansion is a desirable aspect but not as critical as the points listed under blocks B (Enhance) and C (Elevate): the further institutionalisation and enhancement of existing VFRGs should be prioritised over and precede any expansion. For this reason, it may be prudent to reduce the number of new VFRGs that is listed in the project proposal for a second phase from eight to just three or four. This would allow the project to better focus on blocks B and C. Resources that would be freed up could be re-allocated to critical activities under these blocks.

Second, the selection process for any new VFRG locations must be planned carefully (this also applies to defining selection criteria as part of the national vision). While MIA-RS originally focussed on rudimentary data, such as distance from nearest MIA-RS stations and population density, interview partners noted that selection should be based on a broader set of criteria — in particular, the willingness and expected level of support from community administrations (a key success factor). [→7.1-2]

Therefore, the following process is suggested:

- screen for potential locations** based on quantitative data that should include distances to fire stations, incident numbers and types. Create a list of all potential locations and rank them by weighted data.
- from the group of highest-ranking locations, **invite community administrators to submit proposals for VFRGs** in their communities. Proposals should include data from local assess-

ments and commitments to initial and ongoing support to the VFRGs. Process and templates may best be explained at a workshop, which also highlights that only the highest-ranking proposals (e.g., the best 3-4) will be selected through a competitive and transparent process. All proposals should be assessed and verified.

This two-stage selection process would a) ensure that locations are selected based on quantitative needs while b) adding the element of competition, which is associated with ownership. Both relevance and willingness would thus form the basis of selection. The process may be useful not only in the context of VolFiRe 2.0, but also for the general expansion by MIA-RS that lies beyond the scope of the project.

In terms of the actual development, it may be worth establishing a twinning system between existing and future VFRGs. Further-

Martiros: VFRG members in front of their fire truck, following a successful skills demonstration as part of this evaluation.

Photo: Armen Chilingaryan



more, the training of prospective firefighters from new VFRGs offers the opportunity to also include new volunteers in existing groups (for whom there is currently no clear training pathway).

5. Support system-aligned improvements. [B.2 - Enhance]

Once the national vision has been established (C.1) and is in the process of being framed into law and regulations (C.2), the longer-term and deeper issues at existing VFRGs should be revisited.

This may include the roll-out of professional progression pathways and benefit schemes for volunteers, improved volunteer management (recognition, awards, competitions), and deeper formal integration between VFRGs and MIA-RS stations (MIA-RS raised the possibility of volunteer internships at MIA-RS stations).

The exact ‘catalogue of improvements’ must be based on the national vision (system-aligned). While defined actors (MIA-RS, MTAI) will be in charge of this process, VolFiRe 2.0 could provide critical support for this roll-out.

6. Expand scope and capacity. [D.2 - Expand]

Three areas for expanded scope and capacity have been identified through this evaluation. Depending on the eventual scope of the national vision and regulations (C.1/C.2), the VolFiRe 2.0 project could support this expansion.

First, VFRGs could be involved in or spearhead community engagement to promote fire safety, disaster preparedness, and other measures to enhance community resilience. This would:

- a) be aligned with the aims of the DRM Strategy and Action Plan and was also highlighted by the MIA-RS head of the Strategic Planning Unit (linking response with preparedness and prevention);
- b) offer a concrete opportunity for closer links with ARCS branches and their portfolios; and
- c) provide an avenue for broader promotion of inclusion.⁵⁴

Second, it would be useful to explore additional training and equipment for locally relevant incident types — in particular for road accidents and mountain rescue (*as described under lesson F in chapter 8*).

Third, and pending on the national vision, the concept of hybrid stations could be piloted in MIA-RS locations with low caseloads (*see lesson H in chapter 8*).

7. Support the roll-out of the new regulations. [C.3 - Elevate]

This aspect refers to the roll-out and continued support of aspects B.2 and D.2: whereas some items can be addressed based on the national vision and *while* the legal framing takes place, other aspects can only be implemented once new regulations are actually in place (e.g., benefit schemes for volunteers).

54. As Armenia seeks to link response, preparedness and prevention, there is scope for ARCS branches and VFRGs to promote greater risk awareness and preparedness in communities.

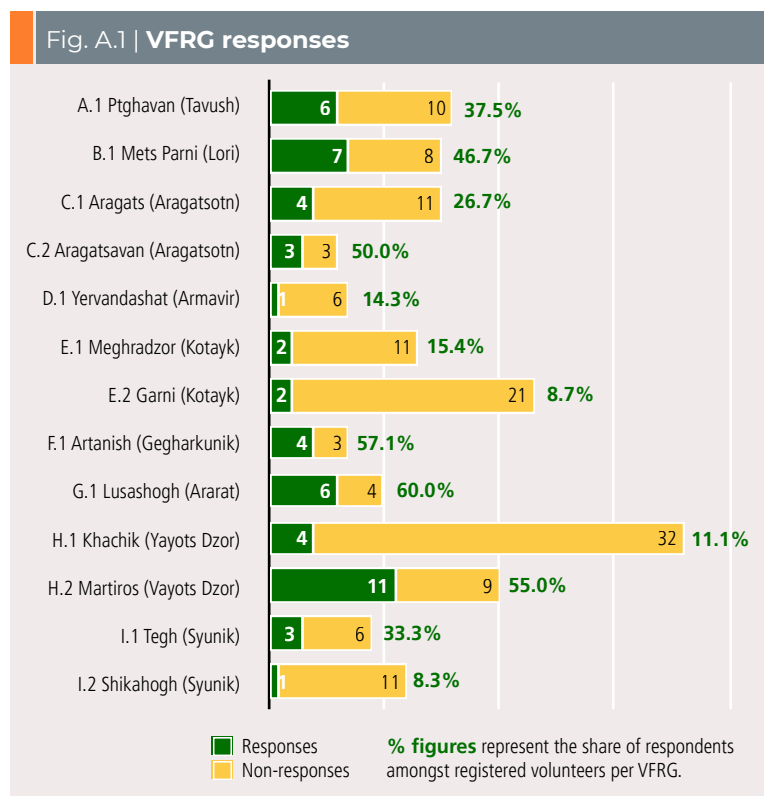
This may offer three potential areas related to inclusion. First, the VFRGs could be expanded with more support volunteers who would be tasked with communication. Second, the communication material could be should be inclusive and accessible (easy-to-read material and multiple channels). Third, disaster risk management itself must be inclusive, identifying and addressing the specific needs of various population groups.



Appendix

Appendix A: Survey data analysis

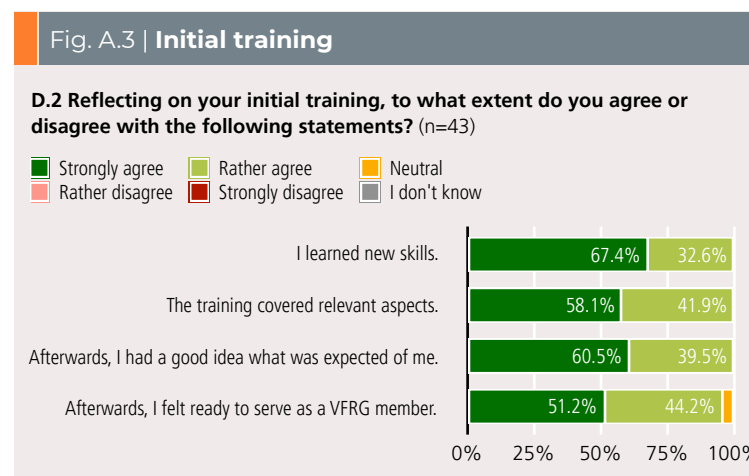
Prior to the field research, an online survey was conducted in early April 2026 amongst VFRG members and staff at nearby MIA-RS stations. Some 83 responses were recorded — 54 from VFRG members and 29 from MIA staff. The results are presented below. The questionnaire, raw data and data analyses sheet (with gender disaggregation) have been provided to the project.



Overall, 54 of 195 VFRG members responded to the survey (27.7%). In terms of gender, 85.2% of respondents were male

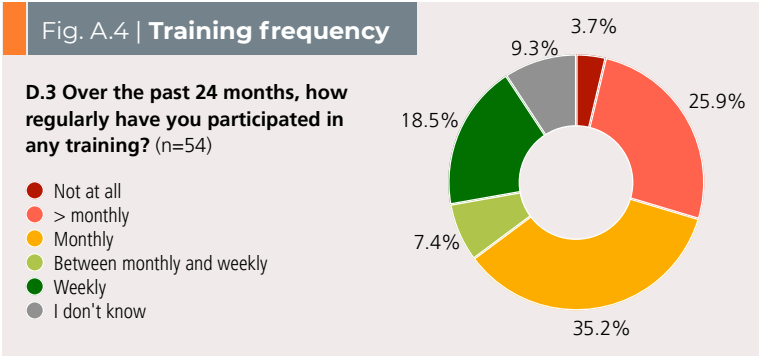
and 14.8% female. Almost half (48.1%) of the respondents were between 26 and 40 years of age. Considering the small sample, survey results are not disaggregated by gender or VFRG, unless this is deemed specifically relevant for some questions.

We first asked about the **volunteer motivations** for joining, probing for different aspects (*see fig. A.2*). Social aspects played a strong role, and most respondents (92.6%) joined together with some friends.



The survey then moved to a review of **training**-related aspects. Most (but not all) respondents say they were trained when they first joined their VFRG (79.6%). The responses in *fig. A.3 (previous page)* show a high level of satisfaction with this training.

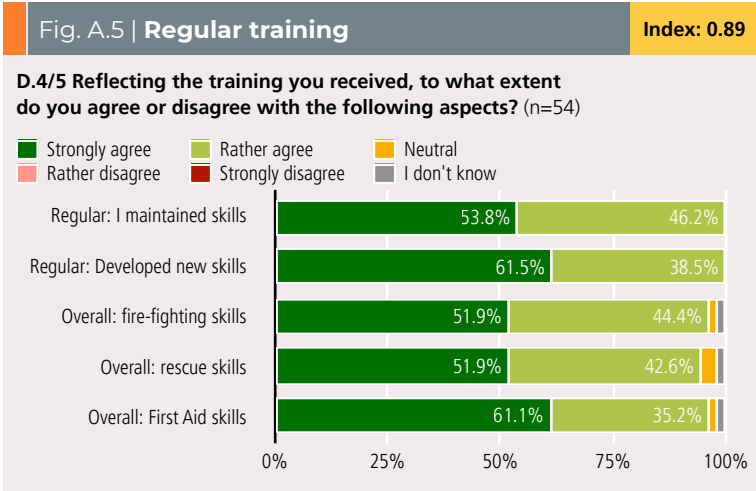
In addition to the initial training, we covered the regular training that is essential to keep up skills of VFRG members. Around two-thirds (67.3%) say that they participate in training at least monthly (*see details in fig. A.4*).



Most respondents were satisfied with the training they have received, giving them confidence in applying firefighting, rescue, and First Aid skills (*see fig. A.5*).

Two-thirds of respondents (68.5%) say that their VFRGs organise most training sessions themselves, while 25.9% say that their VFRGs organise some sessions but get most training from MIA-RS.

In terms of **feedback on training**, 98.1% say that nothing is missing in the training curriculum. However, 37.0% say that the quality and/or frequency of the training could be further improved.

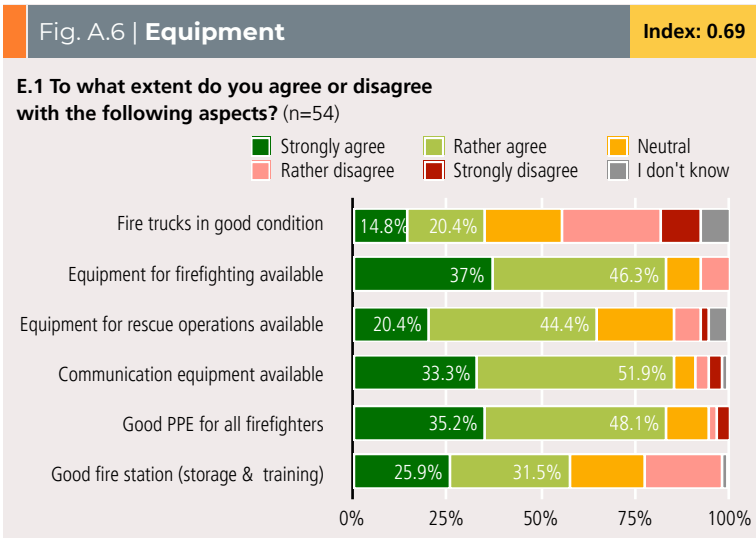


What's this index?
Some question blocks are based on Likert scales ('to what extent do you agree?'). To make the results more comparable, the responses to underlying questions have been aggregated with the use of ascriptors. The result for each response is multiplied by the ascriptor, and all results are added up to an index for each question.

The index shown here is the average of all related question indices.

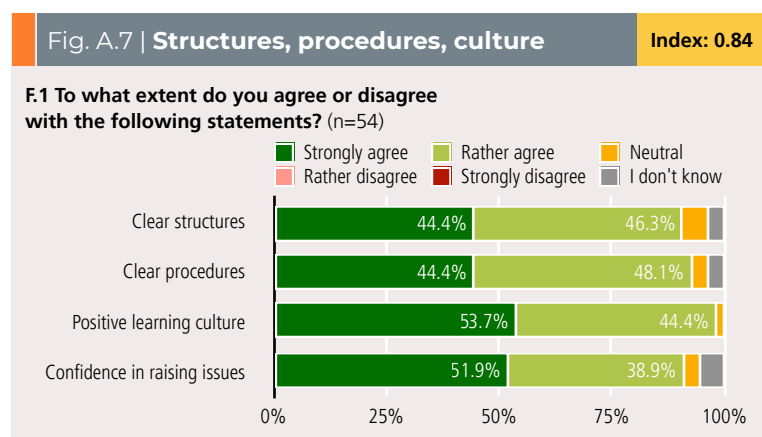
The ascriptors are as follows:
1.00 Strongly agree
0.75 Rather agree
0.50 Neither agree nor disagree
0.25 Rather disagree
0.00 Strongly disagree

Regarding **equipment**, there is less satisfaction: notably, only one-third (35.2%) say that their fire trucks are in good and safe conditions (*see fig. A.6*). Every second respondent says that some equipment is missing or needs to be improved. In narrative responses, many highlight the need for better fire trucks.

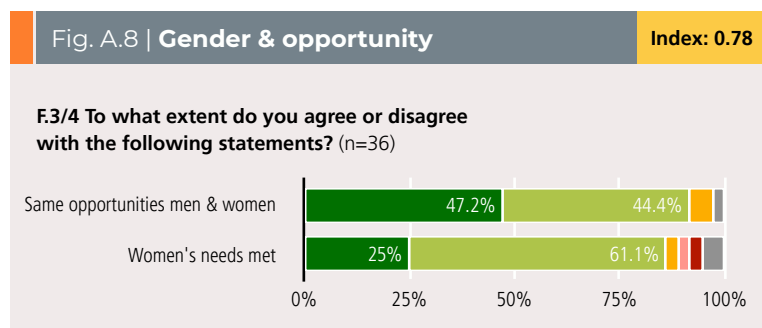


Additional items include a) quick-response vehicles (SUV)s that are smaller than fire trucks and that can be used to access difficult terrain, b) carry-on water pumps, c) hydraulic equipment (jaws of life), and d) oxygen sets.

The subsequent survey block covered **structures, procedures, and culture**. The responses suggest that structures and procedures are clear and well-understood, and that VFRGs have a rather positive learning culture (*see fig. A.7*).

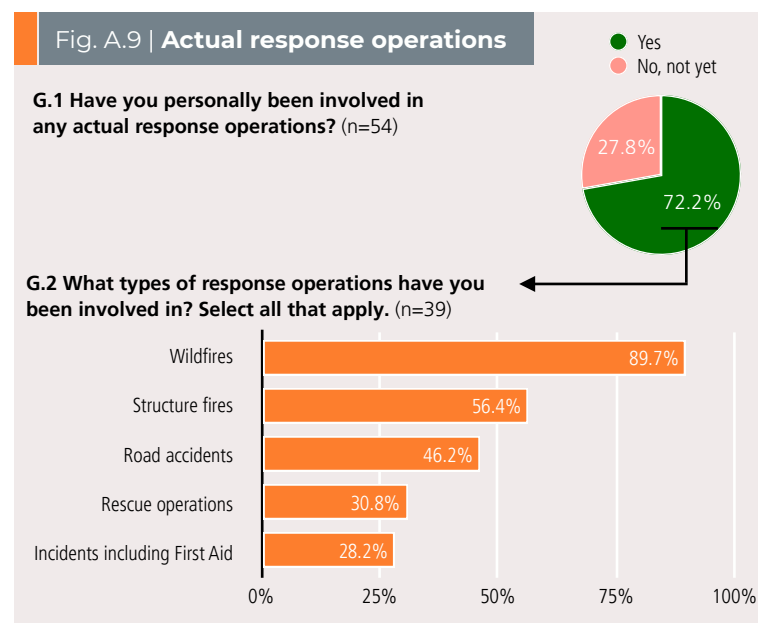


The survey then explored whether male and female firefighters had the same opportunities, and whether any specific needs of women were met (*see fig. A.8*). Most largely agreed — and this



is true both for male and female respondents (the disaggregation shows no significant difference in response patterns).

In terms of **actual response operations**, 72.2% of respondents have been involved in incidents while 27.8% haven't yet. Wildfires have been the most common incident nature (*see fig. A.9*).

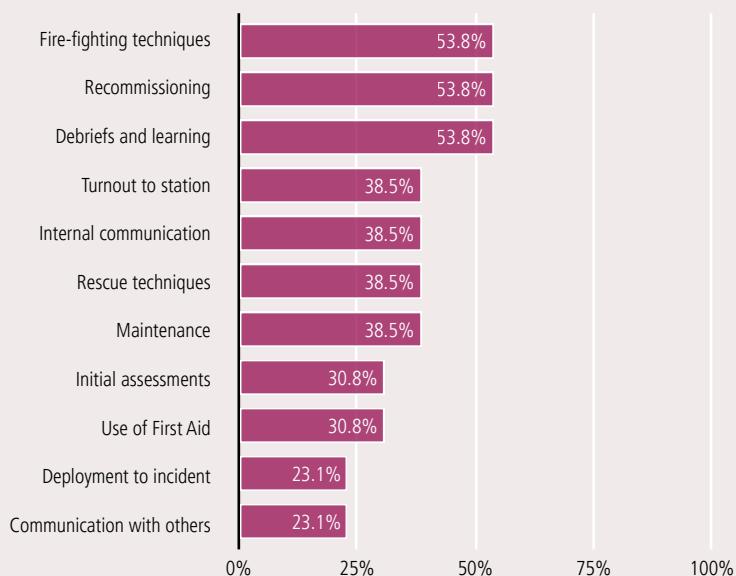


Learning from actual responses can be extremely effective — and most VFRG members (79.5%) report that they consistently run **post-incident debriefs** (20.5% say these are done sometimes).

One-third of respondents (33.3%) say that their VFRGs could **improve their performance**. *Fig. A.10 overleaf* illustrates what aspects the suggested improvements relate to. Getting better at fire-fighting techniques, more consistent re-commissioning of fire trucks and more consistent post-incident debriefs are at the top of the list.

Fig. A.10 | Operations: areas for improvement

G.5 Which aspects do you think the VFRG should improve when it is alerted and deployed on a response operation? Select all that apply. (n=13)



In terms of **collaboration with the MIA rescue services**, VFRG respondents mostly see a good overall relation (*see fig. A.11*). Some respondents suggested more frequent visits, joint trainings and exercises, and exchanges between crews.

Concerning **community support and recognition**, most respondents say that the work of the VFRGs is generally appreciated by local communities. Notably, this includes acceptance by most employers if their staff have to attend response operations (*see fig. A.12*).

Despite the general recognition by communities, survey results suggest that few VFRGs have tried to **raise donations** (only 7.4% of respondents say such efforts had been made).

Fig. A.11 | Collaboration with MIA-RS

Index: 0.78

H.1 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=54)

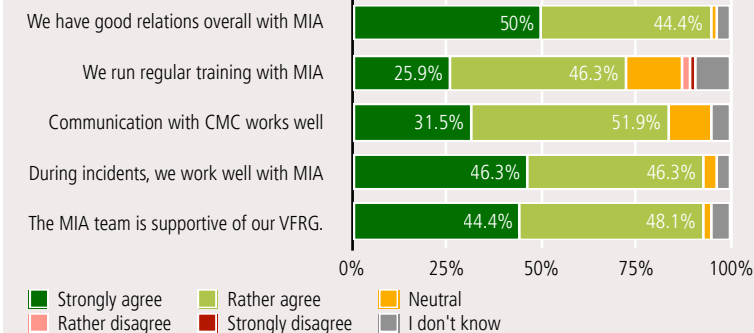
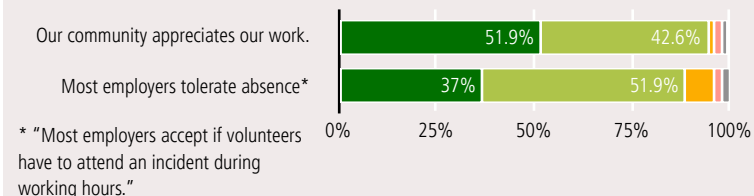


Fig. A.12 | Community support

Index: 0.83

F.3/4 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=54)



* "Most employers accept if volunteers have to attend an incident during working hours."

The final survey part for VFRG members included **personal satisfaction and outlook**. This aspect is critical for the sustainability of VFRGs. As *fig. 13 overleaf* illustrates, most volunteers enjoy being part of their VFRG and feel motivated to continue volunteering.

One respondent noted: "Thank you, I hope all of this will help people understand the true meaning of volunteering and that more people will volunteer."

Fig. A.13 | Personal satisfaction & outlook

Index: 0.86

J.1 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=54)

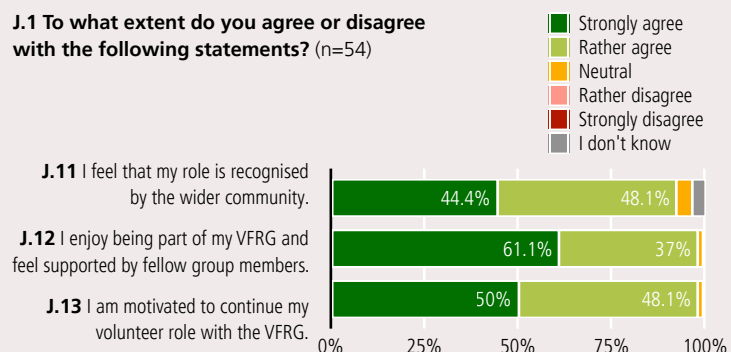
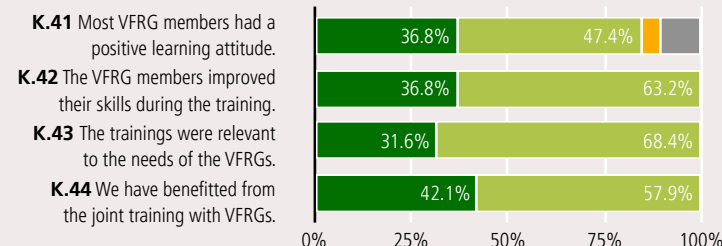


Fig. A.14 | MIA perspective: training

Index: 0.82

K.4 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=19)



In addition to VFRG members, the survey also targeted **staff members of MIA-RS stations** that work with VFRGs. 29 staff responded, with two being dispatchers and the remainder working as firefighters. This brief section covered joint training with VFRG as well as collaboration during actual response operations. It was designed to gather feedback on VFRG performance.

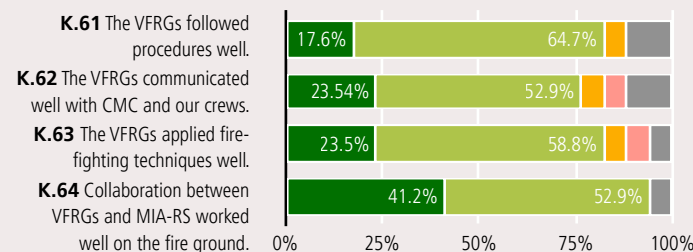
With regard to **training**, 19 of the 29 MIA respondents were involved in joint training and thus could comment. The results are consistently positive, as shown in *fig. A.14*.

Concerning **actual response operations**, 17 MIA respondents were involved in such incidents. Their feedback is positive, although less pronounced than the training results (*fig. A.15*).

Fig. A.15 | MIA perspective: operations

Index: 0.72

K.6 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n=17)



Appendix B: Location-specific findings

Fig. B.1 | Overview of VFRGs (as of May 18, 2026)

VFRG	1. Trained volunteers	2. Equipment in good order	3. Fire truck operational	4. Station available	5. Community support	6. Good links with Rescue Service	VFRG responses in 2025	Annual cases in response zone (MIA-RS estimates)	Travel time to MIA-RS station
A.1 Ptghavan Tavush region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	40	80	30 min
B.1 Mets Parni Lori region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	7	60	20 min
C.1 Aragats Aragatsotn region	Yes	Yes	Not yet delivered	Under construction	Yes	Yes	0	30	10 min
C.2 Aragatsavan Aragatsotn region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	3	20	40 min
D.1 Yervandashat Armavir region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	1	15	60 min
E.1 Meghradzor Kotayk region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8	20	20 min
E.2 Garni Kotayk region	Yes	Yes	Under repair	Yes	Yes	Yes	50	60	25 min
G.1 Lusashogh Ararat region	Yes	Yes	Not yet delivered	Under construction	Yes	Yes	0	10	30 min
H.1 Khachik Vayots Dzor region	Yes	Yes	Under repair	Yes	Yes	Yes	4	10	60 min
H.2 Martiros Vayots Dzor region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Under construction	Yes	Yes	7	10	40 min

A.1 Ptghavan (Tavush region)

Established: 2024
 Volunteers: 16 (2 female)
 Response operations: 40 (up to December 2025)
 Nearest RS station: Noyemberan (30 minutes away)

Background

Located in Armenia's northern Tavush region, Ptghavan is the border crossing for one of the main roads into Georgia. The town straddles the Debet river and is based along the river valley that at just 300m above sea level has one of Armenia's lowest elevations. Dense forest areas are around the town, especially along the slopes of the valley. The nearest RS station is in Noyemberan, 30 minutes away.

In 2024, the community was affected by river floods. As part of the recovery, UNDP and the community administration funded the construction of a multi-purpose shelter for large machinery. One section of this building now houses the VFRG. The response zone of the VFRG covers 10 settlements in surrounding areas. Established in 2024, the VFRG became fully operational in October 2025.

Findings

The team consists of 16 members and is led by the mayor. When the Red Cross approached him, he was quickly convinced of the model and supported the development. Yet, it took some convincing to get volunteers —eventually, he managed to get volunteers from all settlements that are part of the community. “We did six trainings in the first eight months”, recalls the mayor.

Throughout 2025, the VFRG responded to 40 incidents, mainly fires and traffic accidents. Between August and October, the group responded to several wildfires. “We are always at least 15 minutes faster than the crew from Noyemberan”, highlights the mayor. It usually takes some

time for volunteers to come to the station and then to turn out. But on days of high risk, volunteers often gather at the station to ensure quicker responses. The station has sofas (donated by the mayor), a fridge, and a computer, making it a popular space for the crew to gather and work.

During the evaluation visit, we tested the crew's skills through an impromptu exercise. Within just 4.5 minutes, the team had extinguished a small fire and then retrieved a patient from a car accident.

The fire truck is the VFRG's main challenge: “when we received the truck, it didn't work at all”, says the mayor. “We worked as a team to fix it — now it works okay.” However, it is too weak to access some of the steep slopes in the area. The team thus initiated an application to the Japanese Embassy, requesting the procurement of a quick-response vehicle. The mayor's wife, who also works in the community administration and serves as a firefighter, lodged the application.

Any other challenges? “Yes”, is the team's answer. With many traffic accidents along the road and no ambulance nearby, the team highlights the need for very strong First Aid skills as well as ‘jaws of life’ (hydraulic cutters to enable extraction of trapped patients). With snake bites common, they also highlight the need for appropriate skills in managing such incidents.

The team was found to be of strong team spirit and very high technical capacities in line with their mandate. At



the Noyemberan RS, MIA-RS firefighters commended their dedication. “We are surprised by how motivated the people from the VFRG are”, says the station head. “I first thought that it would take them long to respond because many work in fields — but they are always so fast.”

Specific recommendations

Ptghavan VFRG is one of the strongest groups visited and seen as highly effective and sustainable. The expressed need for advanced FA skills and technical rescue equipment is very valid and should be explored in future programming.

Furthermore, given the highly forested areas and risk of wildfires, it may be worth for the project to advocate for a review on the suitability of equipment for large wildfires along steep slopes (*see lesson learned H*).

B.1 Mets Parni (Lori region)

Established: 2020
 Volunteers: 15 (0 female)
 Response operations: 7 in 2025
 Nearest RS station: Spitak (20 minutes away)

Background

Home to 2,000 residents, Mets Parni is a rural community along the Pambak river, surrounded by wide open fields. The settlement is 20 km west of the town of Spitak, where the nearest MIA-RS station is based.

The VFRG was originally established under the Strength-Vol project in 2020. It has a team of dedicated members and is based at a farming compound close to the settlement's centre. The station was upgraded with VolFiRe project support and now features a truck bay, wash room, and turnout area. Its blue Zil 130 fire truck is a replacement; the truck that had been originally provided by MIA-RS was found to be beyond repairs.

Findings

During the evaluation visit, the VFRG members showed pride in the service they provide and in their upgraded station. They continue to respond to emergencies, despite lack of support from the community administration: neither water nor electricity was covered (and thus turned off). The mayor merely agreed to cover costs for 20 litres of fuel per month. In the light of this situation, members on occasion paid for fuel out of their own pockets, or respond to incidents in private cars.

How did this situation come about? When the VFRG was established, Mets Parni was a single community whose mayor had been very supportive. Then Mets Parni was amalgamated with adjacent settlements into a so-called 'consolidated community' (under a pilot of administrative

reform led by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (MTAI). The new mayor did not see the VFRG as his responsibility; strong efforts of the project team thus far only yielded to limited fuel cost coverage.

Meanwhile, the VFRG is well-trained and equipped. The head of the MIA-RS station in Spitak commented: "The VFRG is really important. The people are excellent rescuers, and in many ways, they have better equipment than us."

He hoped that the issue of community support could be sorted out soon so that the VFRG could respond more consistently: there are around 60 incidents in the VFRG response zone per year, but thus far, not all of them involved VFRG responses.

Specific recommendations

An intermediate solution must be found to address the lack of support by the community administration. It is suggested to temporarily cover funding of fuel, water and electricity so that the VFRG can continue to respond to emergencies, without members having to contribute their own funds. The overall volume of these costs is minor but can make a major difference.

This support should be time-limited until long-term funding by the community administration is secured. See also recommendation 3 (p.32) on the inclusion of MTAI in national framing.



C.1 Aragats (Aragatsotn region)

Established: February 2025
 Volunteers: 15 (0 female)
 Response operations: 0
 Nearest RS station: Aparan (10 minutes away)

Background

Aragats is a rural community at the eastern slope of Mount Aragats, Armenia's highest mountain (4,090m). This area is popular with climbers and walkers. The community is 10 minutes away from the town of Aparan, where the nearest MIA-RS station is based. One of the main highways runs just to the east of Aragats, where traffic accidents are common.

Aragats was added to the list of VFRG locations mid-project, replacing a location that had originally planned in Shirak province but that saw very limited support by the community. In Aragats meanwhile, the community actually requested the VFRG and has been extremely supportive since the start. It provided a room in the town hall for the VFRG to store equipment as well as land just next to the town hall for the construction of the rescue station (by the time of the evaluation visit, work for the foundation was underway).

Findings

The strong support by the community administration is a major asset of the VFRG, and volunteers are very motivated. Equipment was neatly stored, and VFRG members were excited about the training they had received. Although the group does not have a truck yet, the VFRG says that they responded to 12 incidents in 2025, mostly following local calls for help (these were not recorded however in the MIA-RS incident log).

The team has not yet had regular trainings with the MIA-RS station but took part in many trainings organised by the project.

Given its location and popularity of the area by hikers, VFRG members highlighted that it would be great for them to have specific training and equipment for mountain rescue (this point was also raised by MIA-RS).

The VFRG has come up with a plan for a local awareness campaign on fire safety and preparedness; it wants to have one team member being in charge of delivering key messages in each of the various settlements within the community.

While the truck was yet to be delivered at the time of the evaluation, the staff at the Aparan MIA-RS station warned that the typical Zil-130 trucks had limitations in accessing steep and snow-covered roads (they showed a video in which one of their trucks had to be pulled by a tractor).

Ideally, the VFRG should be equipped with a snowmobile eventually to ensure access to mountain areas. MIA-RS staff offered giving more specific advice on procuring technical equipment suitable for the area.

Furthermore, they suggested that some VFRG crew should be on standby, at least on high-risk days to enable a faster turnout.



Specific recommendations

Explore the provision of technical equipment and specific training for mountain rescue, as this is expected to be a major component of Aragats' incident profile.

C.2 Aragatsavan (Aragatsotn region)

Established: August 2025
 Volunteers: 6 (1 female)
 Response operations: 3
 Nearest RS station: Talin (40 minutes away)

Background

Aragatsavan is a village with 6,800 people close to the border with Türkiye. It is surrounded by vast agricultural fields and vineyards and features a cement factory nearby. The community administration provided space for the VFRG in a disused building, which was upgraded with project support.

Findings

The head of the community administration was happy about the newly formed VFRG: “Yes, the VFRG is absolutely needed! It makes a huge difference, especially when it comes to protecting assets from an ongoing fire.” The VFRG had already protected apricot plantations, vineyards and grazing land from fires in their past responses. He highlighted that there should be a legal framework that underpins the operations of VFRGs.

Furthermore, he noted the importance of VFRG members being well-trained in First Aid: although the community has a health centre, there is no ambulance, and it can take more than 30 minutes for the nearest ambulance to arrive.

Over at the VFRG station, highly motivated team members meet the evaluators. They report of effective trainings and of their plans for new initiatives. “Many of the houses here have wood-fired combustion heaters, so house fires are common. We would like to raise awareness on fire safety around the community.”

The VFRG has already provided a training on the use of fire extinguishers and plans to work with the two schools as well as a supermarket to raise awareness.

The VFRG also requested to receive a standpipe from MIA-RS: the town now has eight working hydrants, but the team thus far lacks the tool to source water from them.

In terms of their station, the team says there is ample space — it would appreciate if the community fixed damage from a water leak and provided some furniture to make the space more amenable for crew standby and trainings.

They also show a disused room at the back, highlighting that there is potential for growth (Aragatsavan could even become a sub-branch of ARCS).

Most of the six VFRG members work in government offices, and they say they are quick on the truck when there is an incident. They highlight the need for a legal framework — in their understanding, employers are liable if they have an accident during work time.

At the MIA-RS station, the staff commend the performance of the VFRG: “They are very active. Communication is going well. There have been a few fires, and the VFRG had already extinguished them by the time we arrived at the scene.” The staff say that the only key issue is the reliability of the VFRG truck. Furthermore, they point out that the team is small:



“it would be good if they gained some more volunteers.” The team should also be trained for and equipped for car accidents, which happen often in the area. In terms of the VFRG model, the MIA-RS staff said that it worked well. They proposed the community of Aruch as another possible location for a VFRG — an area that is similarly far from the MIA-RS base.

Specific recommendations

The VFRG in Aragatsavan is highly motivated and has good ideas for future growth. It is recommended to support these initiatives (community outreach, training and equipment for road accidents) and to provide back-up support for their requests to MIA-RS (hydrants) and the community administration (station repairs, furniture).

D.1 Yervandashat (Armavir region)

Established: 2025
 Volunteers: 7 (0 female)
 Response operations: 1
 Nearest RS station: Baghramyan (60 minutes away)

Background

Yervandashat lies in the Aras valley; Türkiye is just across the river (see photo on page. 2). As a small farming community of 600 people that is 60 minutes away from the nearest MIA-RS station, the need for a local fire service had been long recognised. In 2020, long before the start of the VolFiRe project, the government had provided a fire truck. “But conditions were horrible. We had a crew of mainly young people, and they all left.”, says the head of the community.

From May 2024, VolFiRe provided support for a newly formed group, which now consists of mainly older members. “The team is stable and committed.” The VFRG station was inaugurated in May 2026, but the crew had been operational for a while.

Findings

In a haystack fire that the crew responded to, a nearby house, cattle and fields were spared from the flames. “We had already refilled our truck three times by the time the crew from Baghramyan arrived”, says a member of the VFRG. The team says that there are 6-8 emergency calls per year in the area, so they anticipate many more callouts now that everything is ready. The community covers costs for fuel, water, power, and repairs.

Cooperation with MIA-RS is good, both in terms of training and incidents. There is at least quarterly training. In terms of challenges, the crew raised the

reliability of the truck, although it has worked well so far. By the time of the evaluation, the truck had a minor leak in the water tank that the team was going to fix (for the time being, the truck was stored with an empty water tank, but could be filled within three minutes from a water source opposite the station).

With a look at the future development of the VFRG, the crew reflected: “We need to attract more younger people to become members.” To that end, a legal framework would be helpful: the crew mentioned that younger members of the original group had at times been prevented from attending incidents by their employers.

At the MIA-RS station in Baghramyan, the staff commented that the VFRG had performed very well in the haystack fire response. They also had done well during trainings and exercises.

The station staff recommended that another VFRG should be established in Argina, a community of 1,700 people about an hour away from their base.

Specific recommendations

While there are no specific recommendations for Yervandashat, the case highlights that a system is needed to recruit and train new volunteers to render the service sustainable in the long run.



E.1 Meghradzor (Kotayk region)

Established: June 2025
 Volunteers: 23 (5 female)
 Response operations: 8 in 2025
 Nearest RS station: Hrazdan (20 minutes away)

Background

Meghradzor is a community of 2,300 people south of the Pambak mountain range, at an altitude of 1,800 meters. While farming is the main livelihood, the community benefits from mining and tourism businesses nearby. The new VFRG station was constructed with funding from the Embassy of Japan — it includes a large truck bay, training and admin rooms, as well as sleeping quarters. Most furniture was donated by a gold mine company.

Findings

The community has been very supportive of the new station, and plans to provide a quick-response vehicle to complement the existing fire truck. Interestingly, it plans to create a standby service - with 18 paid firefighters working in shifts from the station. All expenses will be covered by the community administration, although the merit of this investment is questionable (despite plans to expand the VFRG response zone — see also box on p.25: paying volunteers?).

The VFRG crew started responding to callouts in November 2024. The team said that there had been 35 incidents since then in their response zone, although they only responded to 22 of them (the truck had not been functional or other yet). Indeed, the truck had been the main issue so far. At the MIA-RS station, the staff commented that reliability issues aside, 4x4 trucks were needed for the area.

The crew was very satisfied with the training they had received — a sentiment that was mirrored by MIA-RS staff: “We have a great system in place. We train together at least once per quarter. Last year, we had a very large exercise that include the scenarios of a massive wildfire.” The performance of the VFRG has been excellent.

In addition to existing trainings, the MIA-RS station staff also proposed to have ‘volunteer internships’ so that VFRG members could further consolidate their skills by working at the Hrazdan station for some time. However, the training system would need to be canvassed into a legal framework so that both staff and volunteers would have clarity on their roles.

Ideally, the VFRG would like to have additional equipment for both mountain rescue and for car accidents: “we are on a busy road, there are 1-2 traffic accidents here every week.”

Specific recommendations

While adding technical equipment and specific training would make sense for Meghradzor VFRG, it is suggested that the project team starts a discussion with the community administration on the suitability of the paid staff system. The costs incurred may be better invested in the upgrades of technical equipment that the VFRG seeks for its future operations.



E.2 Garni (Kotayk region)

Established: 2020
 Volunteers: 23 (5 female)
 Response operations: 103
 Nearest RS station: Abovyan (40 minutes away)

Background

Home to 6,900 people, Garni is a large community about 60 minutes north-east of Yerevan. Known for its classical temple, it is one of Armenia's key tourist destinations. The VFRG was established in 2020 under the StrengthVol project, and it is by far the busiest VFRG in terms of incident responses.

Findings

The VFRG crew was proud sharing their track record: “in 90% of all callouts, we have completed the job by the time the MIA-RS crews arrive from Abovyan. We are at least 30 minutes faster!” Communication and collaboration with the MIA-RS crews worked well, an aspect that was confirmed by the MIA-RS team in Abovyan. There is now at least quarterly training between volunteer and paid firefighters — and as the VFRG points out, “we have so many callouts, they help us to stay fit.”

By contrast, their fire truck is not so fit: it has had numerous issues, and about EUR 6,700 had been spent on repairs so far. When the evaluation team visited, it had been non-operational for several months. While the truck was out of service, the members usually respond to incidents in private cars. They highlighted that a better solution should be found and raised the request for a quick-response vehicle.

The community administration has been of huge support to the VFRG. This went as far as paying 8 members of the VFRG ‘core team’ for standby at the base.

At the MIA-RS station meanwhile, staff was highly satisfied with the good collaboration: “we have had so many cases in which the VFRG made a difference: wildfires, car accidents, an (averted) suicide attempt.”

The staff made several recommendations on how the VFRG system could be further improved. These included the creation of a legal framework that would cover insurance aspects, benefits, roles and responsibilities; advances to the training system; and the provision of more suitable and more reliable fire trucks.

Specific recommendation

Similar to Meghradzor, the system of paying volunteers should be reviewed. The costs incurred may be better invested in the upgrades of technical equipment that the VFRG seeks for future operations.



G.1 Lusashogh (Ararat region)

Established: July 2026 (planned)
Volunteers: 10 (3 female)
Response operations: 0
Nearest RS station: Vedi (40 minutes away)

Background

Lusashogh is a small farming village of around 500 people at an altitude of 1,850 meters. The VFRG members had undergone training and taken part in exercises — however, by the time of the evaluation, it had yet to receive its fire truck (this has since been delivered, PB). The VFRG station was under construction.

Findings

The VFRG members were very satisfied with the training they had received, and were looking forward to becoming fully operational. The response zone sees 10—12 incidents per year (according to the team at the Vedi MIA-RS station). These include structure fires, wildfires, and haystack fires.

The establishment of the VFRG was seen as critical by the MIA-RS team, due to long response times that can be above one hour when roads are covered with snow. The community administration contributed funds to the construction of the station and will cover operational costs.

The head of the Vedi MIA-RS station reflected that the training package for VFRGs had been very effective, and that VFRG members had performed well during training and exercises. He hoped that the VFRG model would be underpinned by a legal framework, and that he would be able to recruit new staff firefighters from the pool of trained VFRG members.



In the area of Vedi, Lusashogh was the only VFRG required to cover incidents across the Vedi response area.

Specific recommendations

As the VFRG was yet to be inaugurated, there are no specific recommendations for this area.

H.1 Khachik (Vayots Dzor region)

Established: 2020
 Volunteers: 36 (7 female)
 Response operations: 3
 Nearest RS station: Eghegnazor (40 minutes away)

Background

Home to around 600 people, Khachik is a village right on the border with Azerbaijan. It can be reached from Areni; the nearest MIA-RS station is 40 minutes away but it can take twice as long in winter for MIA-RS crews to arrive.

The VFRG had been established under the StrengthVol project. Since its formation, the VFRG has responded to 5-10 callouts per year (mostly wildfires). Most incidents are reported by residents to VFRG members (“everyone in the community knows somebody from the VFRG”), with group members alerting each other through a Whatsapp group.

Findings

The community administration has been very supportive of the VFRG, covering operational costs of about EUR 7,000 per year. The VFRG is one of the largest and has strong female membership. Members were very satisfied with the training they had received. They are a cohesive and dynamic group, inspired by several success stories from incidents. The group responded to a house fire and had the fire contained by the time MIA-RS crews arrived.

In terms of challenges, the fire truck was the key issue. By the time of the evaluation, the truck had been out of service for several months (it has since returned to service), and the team suggested that a quick-response vehicle would be needed to better access steep slopes. The team also requested more knap sacks and fire



shovels so that a larger number of their volunteers could be deployed for wildfires.

At the MIA-RS station in Eghegnazor, staff commended the work of the Khachik VFRG and endorsed the VFRG model more broadly. In fact, they said that the model should be upscaled — ideally, another three VFRGs should be formed across Vayots Dzor.

The MIA-RS station head highlighted that the insights from the current set of VFRGs should be used when new groups are formed. A legal basis should be created that

includes professional progression pathways for all firefighters as well as regulations on insurance and benefits.

Specific recommendations

Given the large size of this VFRG, it may be worth considering the provision of additional knap sacks and fire shovels, as requested by the group.

H.2 Martiros (Vayots Dzor region)

Established: January 2020
 Volunteers: 19 (1 female)
 Response operations: 6
 Nearest RS station: Yayk (30-50 minutes away)

Background

Martiros is a small upland farming community at an elevation of 2,000m that can be reached from the town of Vayk via a single road. According to the rescue service in Yayk, it takes 30-50 minutes to reach Martiros — with road conditions being difficult in winter. The VFRG is needed to reduce response times for incidents in Martiros as well as areas away to its south.

The VFRG was established under the StrengthVol project — however, during the VolFiRe project, further training and equipment was provided. During the evaluation visit on 8 May 2026, the fire station was under construction. Group members pointed out that progress had been delayed due to weather conditions but hoped that the new building would be completed by end of June. Meanwhile, the group's fire truck and equipment was stored at the adjacent compound of the agricultural association.

Findings

As in other locations, the VFRG had several serious issues with the fire truck. The group thus requested and received a replacement truck, with the former serving as a source for spare parts.

During the evaluation visit, an impromptu exercise was conducted: the evaluators set up a traffic cone on a field ("the fire") that the group had to topple over with the jet from the fire-fighting branch. The crew arrived on scene,



connected two hose lengths, and succeeded with the task in 10.5 minutes. Although some areas for improvement were identified (effective use of the new branch, coupling of hose lengths, correct wearing of PPE), the team performed well overall.

Members pointed out they tried to arrange more frequent trainings in addition to the yearly training that Vayk RS provided, but that they had not trained since December.

Made up of middle-aged and older men, the VFRG remarked that younger villagers were not yet interested.

Nevertheless, given the strong relevance and motivation, the VFRG is found to be very sustainable.

Specific recommendations

The Martiros group managed to keep their truck in a functional but precarious state. Newer equipment is recommended. This should be complemented by a smaller appliance that is more mobile and that can be deployed for wildfires. The group should also strive to train more frequently and work to attract younger members. The group proposed competitions between VFRGs, which has strong motivation potential.

Appendix C: Evaluation schedule

Day	Date	Activities, interviews
Monday	4.05.	▸ Meetings AutRC ▸ Document review
Tuesday	5.05.	▸ Staff reflection workshop (Yerevan)
Wednesday	6.05.	▸ Visit E.2 Garni (Abuvyan RS, VFRG, Community) ▸ Interviews MIA-RS (Yerevan)
Thursday	7.05.	▸ Visit G.1 Lusashogh (Vedi RS, VFRG, Community)
Friday	8.05.	▸ Visit H.1 Khachik (Areni RS, VFRG, Community) ▸ Visit H.2 Martiros (Yayk RS, VFRG, Community)
Saturday	9.05.	▸ Return travel to Yerevan
Sunday	10.05.	▸ Data review

Day	Date	Activities, interviews
Monday	11.05.	▸ Visit C.1 Aragats (Aparan RS, VFRG, community) ▸ Visit B.1 Mets Parni (Spitak RS, VFRG)
Tuesday	12.05.	▸ Visit A.1 Ptghavan (Noyemberan RS, VFRG, community)
Wednesday	13.05.	▸ Visit D.1 Yervandashat (Baghramyan RS, VFRG)
Thursday	14.05.	▸ Visit C.2 Aragatsavan (Talin RS, VFRG, community)
Friday	15.05.	▸ Interviews with project officer and the head of the Strategic Planning & Policy-making department. ▸ Data analysis, stakeholder interview
Saturday	16.05.	▸ Visit E.1 Meghradzor (Hrazdan RS, VFRG)
Sunday	17.05.	▸ Data analysis and preparation of PPT
Monday	18.05.	▸ Validation workshop: presentation of initial evaluation findings

Appendix D: Literature

During the initial preparation for this evaluation, a scan of literature relevant to aspects of the VolFiRe project was conducted — in particular with a view to **a)** experiences of the establishment of volunteer-based fire services in post-Soviet or eastern European countries and **b)** information related to wildfire trends and management in Armenia (note also the overview of the legal context on page 28 of this report).

Regarding the **first aspect**, the body of literature is very limited and mainly refers to eastern European countries that became part of the European Union. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in particular developed strong volunteer-based systems. The articles by Harabin and Skrabacz shed some light on experiences in Poland — however, it should be noted that the context is very different to Armenia's.

Harabin, A. et al. (2026). Training of Volunteer Fire Brigades in civil protection and crisis management: assessments and applicable recommendations based on the Cracow Poviát in Poland. https://www.mdpi.com/2571-6255/8/7/260?utm_source=researchgate.net&utm_medium=article

Skrabacz, A. (2026). Development of a local system for civil protection and civil defence using the resources of Voluntary Fire Brigades. *Roczniki Nauk Społecznych*, 54(1), 25–37. <https://doi.org/10.18290/rns2026.0011>

Regarding the **second aspect**, some relevant resources are listed below (again, there is a limited body of literature).

Belou, M. et al. (2026). Climate-driven upward spread of forest fires in European mountain regions. *Nature Communications* 17:5912. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-026-72551-0>

FAO, (2022). Comprehensive analysis of the disaster risk reduction system for the agricultural sector in Armenia. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb8677en>

Global Wildfire Information System (GWIS) (2026). Armenia country profile: burned areas. <https://gwis.jrc.ec.europa.eu/apps/country/profile/overview>

Global Wildfire Information System (GWIS) (2026a). Annual Statistics for Armenia. <https://gwis.jrc.ec.europa.eu/apps/gwis/statistics/estimates>

UNDP (2012). Building wildfire management capacities to enhance adaptation of the vulnerable mountain forests of Armenia. Lessons from recent experience. <https://files.acquia.undp.org/public/migration/am/Report-WM-AM.pdf>

Appendix E: Terms of Reference



Terms of Reference (ToR) - Final Evaluation

of the project

Institutionalising a Volunteer First Responder Service in Armenia (VolFiRe)

ADA Project Number: 2639-01/2022

1. Context and Background

Title of the project	Institutionalising a Volunteer First Responder Service in Armenia (VolFiRe)
Country / Location	Armenia / countrywide
Date of the Action	01.12.2022 - 31.07.2026
Total Budget of the Project	1.579.000 EUR

The Civil Protection system in Armenia is currently mainly based on professional responders from governmental institutions. They are to a large extent on-duty firefighters and other paid staff of the Rescue Service (RS) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). But Armenia has numerous remote areas particularly affected by the limited coverage through the regional fire and rescue services. These areas are often out of reach if we consider international standards for rapid response to emergencies and disasters. Closest MIA RS local fire brigades are established far from these municipalities, 20km to 45km, and access is often difficult (bad road conditions, mountainous roads...). In some cases, the emergency services cannot at all reach the municipalities due to snow fall in winter or landslides in spring. This fact also applies to ambulances and other medical services. Therefore, the Armenian population living in remote areas is extremely vulnerable in case of emergencies (e.g. accidents, medical emergencies, house fires) and disasters (e.g. landslides, forest fires).

The Austrian Red Cross (AutRC) implemented the StrengthVOL project (<https://strengthvol.org/>) from 2020 – 2022 (funded by DG ECHO and co-funded by the Austrian Development Agency). In the frame of this project the Rescue Services of the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Armenia (MES)¹, Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) and Austrian Red Cross (AutRC) developed a comprehensive model for Civil Protection volunteering for Armenia.

In this model, the volunteers are first responders, firefighters and rescuers called “Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups” (VFRGs). The volunteers are affiliated to the Armenian Red Cross Society. Volunteers also pass an exam with the MIA Rescue services (RS) and successful candidates receive from the RS an official rescuer ID. The VFRGs are alerted and deployed by the MIA Crisis Management Centre (911) for any emergency or disaster occurring within their municipality. They are available 24/7 and should deploy within 15 minutes after the alert. The groups themselves are responsible for running a VFR

¹ now merged into the Ministry of Internal Affairs



station, maintaining equipment and a fire truck. They are alerted and deployed on a regular basis. They are volunteer firefighters like in similar volunteer systems in many European countries, e.g., Austria.

The current project “Institutionalising a Volunteer First Responder Service in Armenia (VolFiRe)” is funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), co-funded and coordinated by the Austrian Red Cross (AutRC). It is implemented in Armenia along with three project partners: Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS), Caritas Austria (CA) and Armenian Caritas (AC).

All activities are implemented in close cooperation with the Rescue Services of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Armenia (MIA, formerly Ministry of Emergency Situations).

The project should contribute to the further development of 4 VFRGs already established within the preceding StrengthVOL project and facilitate the establishment of 9 additional VFRGs in Armenia.

The following 13 municipalities, in 9 regions of Armenia, are targeted: Aparan, Areni, Baghramyan, Chambarak, Garni, Kapan, Noyemberan, Spitak, Talin, Tsakhkadzor, Tegg, Vayk, Vedi.

Based on the lessons learned from the StrengthVOL project and its main recommendations, the following outputs have been defined for the VolFiRe project:

- **Output 1:** A conceptual framework for Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups in Armenia is developed
- **Output 2:** The Volunteer Fire Rescue Group model is an integral part of the civil protection system of Armenia
- **Output 3:** Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups are established, operational and well supported countrywide
- **Output 4:** The local Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups are deployable for regional and national disaster response
- **Output 5:** Enhanced integration of gender equality and disability inclusion in the Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups of Armenia

2. Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this evaluation is to derive lessons learned, capture valuable background information, and generate recommendations for future engagement in this thematic area.

The evaluation seeks to assess the overall performance of the project against its planned outcomes and outputs, identifying key achievements, challenges, and areas for improvement. Conducted during the final months of project implementation, this is the most suitable time to reflect on progress and assess the extent to which the project's objectives have been met. The findings and insights gained will serve as an evidence base to inform future operations and the design of follow-up projects in Armenia, while also providing transferable learnings relevant to similar initiatives in other regions and contexts. The primary users of the evaluation will be the project partners, who will utilize the results to plan and enhance future interventions in the same thematic area.





3. Scope

The scope of this final evaluation covers the entire project duration from 1st of December 2022 to the end of data collection during the conduct of this evaluation. The evaluation will take place from March 2026 to July 2026 towards the end of the project implementation. The overall evaluation duration will be about 18 weeks (from first meetings until final report). The evaluation will generally cover all nine project regions with data collection in the field limited to six regions. The selection of the exact locations for data collection will be discussed and decided upon during the inception phase.

The following criteria will be assessed in the course of this evaluation: Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Sustainability. The Evaluation will also assess how gender equality and social inclusion (in particular disability inclusion) have been addressed.

The evaluation has to adhere to the current quality standards, norms and principles for evaluation specified by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD/DAC)² and the Austrian Development Agency (ADA)³. Based on the objectives of this evaluation the questions stated below are formulated to facilitate the evaluation process. The Final Evaluation will include a consultation meeting with all project partners on the findings of the evaluation.

4. Evaluation Questions

Effectiveness:

- 1) To what extent is the developed Volunteer Fire Rescue System (VFRS) considered functional and to what extent is the performance of the VFRGs successful based on actual deployments and capabilities?
- 2) How did the achievement of Output 3 (VFRGs are established) and Output 5 (Gender equality and disability inclusion) differ by communities? What were the reasons for the differences in the communities? Which lessons learnt can be drawn and what enabling and hindering factors influenced the achievement of Output 3, and 5?
- 3) How and to what extent was Output 2 (VFRG model as integral part of the civil protection system in Armenia) achieved? What difference does the intervention make for the civil protection system in Armenia? What difference does the intervention make for strengthening the operational capacities of the MIA Rescue Service fire brigades?
- 4) To what extent did the project management decisions influence the results considering the challenges and uncertainties encountered during project implementation?
- 5) To what extent were the project resources used for the direct benefit of the population?

Efficiency:

- 6) What have been facilitating and hindering factors for an efficient project implementation and

² [Quality Standards for Development Evaluation | OECD](#)

³ [Guidelines for Programme and Project Evaluations ADA 2020.pdf](#)



how have they affected results delivery and what are important lessons learned in this context?

Sustainability:

- 7) How and to what extent is the functionality of the Volunteer Fire Rescue System (VFRS) ensured beyond the project period? What are hindering and facilitating factors in this context?

5. Design and Approach

The evaluation must be conducted in a gender-sensitive and inclusive manner respecting the principle of "do not harm" through-out the process. The proposed approach should sufficiently address the issues and questions outlined within this ToR, specifying the specific evaluation issues, data collection and analysis methods that will be undertaken to achieve a comprehensive evaluation. The evaluation should use mixed-methods research design with respective quantitative and qualitative data collection. The evaluation should be participatory and should actively involve all project partners. The evaluation will be done by an external consultant or an evaluation team. Strong support from staff and volunteers of all project partners at HQ and field level is provided where needed and appropriate.

The evaluation should be conducted using:

- Available project documents such as baseline data, project reports, monitoring reports; documents developed in the project (review by fire rescue expert of the Volunteer Fire Rescue System and standard equipment, VFRG handbook, Fire Rescue Instruction Manual (FRIM) for rescue volunteers, etc.)
- Key Informant Interviews of individual stakeholders
- Focus Group Discussions with relevant stakeholders (MIA Rescue Service, MIA Educational Complex, ADA delegation, local organizations supporting women and people with disabilities, UNDP, etc.)
- Visit and data collection in targeted communities, inspection of Volunteer Fire Rescue stations, fire trucks, pedagogic material and equipment

Deliverables:

All deliverables shall be presented in English and need to adhere to the ADA Guidelines for Programme and Project Evaluations. The following deliverables are expected:

1) Inception Report

Draft and final inception report is to be provided, maximum 10 pages. For structure and content requirement see Annex 5, ADA Guidelines for Programme and Project Evaluations. The Inception report can also include suggestions for ToR amendments (if any). It should include the following points:

1. Background, Purpose and Objectives
2. Evaluation Design and Approach
 - 2.1. Methodology and Methods
 - 2.2. Evaluation Matrix





- 2.3. Data Collection Instruments
- 2.4. Data Analysis
- 2.5. Limitations, Risks and Mitigation Measures
3. Quality Assurance and Ethical Considerations
4. Workplan

2) Evaluation Report

For structure and content requirement see Annex 6, ADA Guidelines for Programme and Project Evaluations. A comprehensive evaluation report, including both a draft and a final version, with the main body of about 40-45 pages without annexes and the Results Assessment Form. It should include the following points:

1. Executive Summary
2. Introduction
3. Background and Context Analysis
4. Evaluation Design and Approach
 - 4.1. Methodological Approach
 - 4.2. Data Collection and Analysis Tools
 - 4.3. Limitations, Risks and Mitigations Measures
5. Findings
6. Conclusions
7. Recommendations

- Report to be coherently structured with a logical flow
- Sources of information to be clearly stated
- Methodological limitations, assumptions, concerns and any constraints encountered need to be acknowledged and their impact to the findings assessed
- Constructive analysis of the findings to be included, findings and recommendations to be clearly linked in the report
- Comprehensive answering of the main evaluation questions

3) Presentation of Results

A Microsoft Power Point Presentation summarizing the findings of the assessment is to be presented to the project team at the end of the evaluation.

The consultant(s) must conduct the work in accordance with the Red Cross Fundamental Principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, universality), the principles outlined in ADA project guidelines and in the "Austrian Red Cross Code of Conduct". All relevant documents will be provided to the consultant(s) in due time.



6. Workplan

The total number of days for the assignment planned is about 61 working days.

Evaluation Phase/Tasks	Timeframe	Working Days
Inception meeting	March 2026	1
Desk Review	Before and after Inception meeting	10
Submission draft inception report	10.04.2026	
Receipt of feedback to inception report draft	17.04.2026	
Final inception report	24.04.2026	1
Field visit/ Data collection	May/June	30
Submission Evaluation report (1st Version)	19.06.2026	15
Receipt of comments by project partners	26.06.2026	
Receipt of comments by ADA	03.07.2026	
Final report with incorporated comments	10.07.2026	3
Presentation of Results	Week 13.07.-17.07.2026	1
		61 days TOTAL

Details of the workplan to be discussed in the contracting and inception phase.

Duration of the contract will be from March 23 till July 17, 2025.

The international evaluator will be based partly abroad and partly in Yerevan, Armenia (for field visit and data collection) with regular travels to the communities. The national evaluator will be based in Armenia.

7. Evaluation Management Arrangements

The evaluation management team will consist of at least one member of each project partner (Austrian Red Cross, Armenian Red Cross Society, Armenian Caritas). It will respect the ethical standards and guiding principles from OECD/DAC for the evaluation, especially impartiality and independence.

Responsibilities of the external evaluator/external evaluator team leader

- Coordinate with the evaluation management team to ensure the quality and independence of the evaluation.
- Be responsible for determining the evaluation methodology, schedule, content and materials required for meetings, interviews and workshops.
- Leading and facilitating the evaluation process
- Planning field itinerary/schedule/duration (Interviews, Focus Group Discussions, etc.)
- Communicate additional data needs
- Keep up continuous exchange with the evaluation management team
- Conduct field work within agreed period
- Timely reporting as per agreed time frame
- Comply with guidance provided by the evaluation management team regarding security regulations and code of conduct

Responsibilities of the Evaluation Management Team





- Sharing of existing data and documents
- Support general preparations for the field work in collaboration with the evaluator and give suggestions to the field work itinerary
- Feedback on all developed interview guides and draft reports
- Organize meetings with key informants as guided by the evaluator, mobilize community for FGDs
- Organize transport to the regions and accommodation
- Adhere to time frame
- Support to the actual field work as needed

Payment & practical arrangements

- Consultancy fee per day for a total of 61 working days, which will be processed as a lump sum payment after all deliverables are received and after an invoice was sent to AutRC. A first payment after receiving the final inception report of up to max. 30% of the consultancy fee is possible upon negotiation.
- All costs related to travel and accommodation are to be separated in the financial offer. Transport from Yerevan to the project regions will be organized and covered by ARCS and AutRC. Accommodation can be organized by ARCS and AutRC but needs to be included in the financial offer.
- Austrian Red Cross reserves the right not to pay the Contractors or withhold part of the payable amount if requirement(s) established for this assignment are not met or if the deadline set for the accomplishment of the tasks is missed.

8. Requirements for the Evaluator(s)

An evaluation team consisting of both national and international members, with one member designated as team leader, as well as gender-diverse teams, are strongly preferred. The team must possess the following qualifications and competences:

Education:

- Academic degree or equivalent education in relevant field

Knowledge / experience:

- experience of working as a professional or volunteer firefighter is highly desired
- Knowledge of regulatory and organisational frameworks of European volunteer fire rescue services and their integration into national civil protection systems
- Proven experience conducting evaluations of international programmes funded by institutional donors
- Proven experience in the use of participatory evaluation methods
- Familiar with Armenian context is a strong asset

Skills:

- Intercultural sensitivity and ability to work across language barriers
- Excellent writing and presentation skills and ability to formulate clear and concise
- Strong computer skills in word processing and formatting



- Ability to work self-organised, independently and in a very structured manner
- Strong interpersonal and organisational skills

Languages:

- Fluency in English (C1 written and spoken) is required
- Proficiency in Armenian or Russian is a clear asset

Other:

- The evaluator(s) have not been involved in the design or implementation of the project.

9. Specifications for the Submission of Offers

Bidders shall submit both a compact technical (max. 5 pages) and financial proposal (max. 2 pages), both excl. annexes, until **04 January 2026** incl. the following at minimum:

- CV of lead evaluator and other evaluators involved
- Cover letter clearly summarizing their experience
- a detailed proposal (incl. work plan, methodology, list and examples of similar work, names and contact details of two referees demonstrating their ability to deliver on this assignment)
- Consultancy fee, working days and budget breakdown incl. all connected costs.
- example of an evaluation report written by the applicant in the same or similar field relevant to the ToRs (desirable)

The estimated net costs for this assignment are indicated with a maximum of EUR 35,000.00 and the applied ratio for the selection of the proposal will be weighed with 80% technical aspects and 20% financial aspects.

Submission should be made via the application system. In case of any questions, please contact Mareta Gantemirova mareta.gazikova@ifrc.org.



Appendix F: Results assessment form

FOR THE EVALUATION MANAGER AND ADA PPM TO FILL IN (Part 1)

ADA PP Number	ADA Organizational Unit managing the PP	PP Title	CRS Code/s	Country/Region of PP	Evaluation Manager	Project Budget
2639-01/2022		Institutionalising a Volunteer First Responder Service in Armenia (VolFiRe)		Armenia	Thierry Girard (AutRC)	1.579.000 EUR

FOR THE EVALUATOR/S TO FILL IN (Part 2)

Evaluation company/evaluators	Timing of the evaluation	Completion date of evaluation
Banyaneer Consulting Pty Ltd. Evaluators: Patrick Bolte, Armen Chilingaryan	Contract period: 23.03.2026-17.07.2026 In-country-research: 04.05. - 19.05.2026	17 July 2026

FOR THE EVALUATOR/S TO FILL IN (Part 2)

Assessment of results - key aspects	Score (choose only one answer for each aspect assessed)	Justify score. Include finding and reference page/s in evaluation report.
1. The extent to which the planned output/s (as defined in the project document/logframe/Theory of Change) has/have been achieved taking into account the causal link between inputs and outputs.	L (Largely achieved)	Out of the 13 OP indicators, 6 were fully achieved and 5 were partly achieved (2 lacked robust data; see p.12 of the report). Critically, the project succeeded in establishing an effective fire & rescue service that is now responding to incidents (120 in 2025). The outputs created the technical, material, structural and strategic foundations.
2. The extent to which the planned out-come/s (as defined in the project document/logframe/Theory of Change) has/have been achieved taking into account the causal link between outputs and outcomes.	L (Largely achieved)	The first OC indicator was fully achieved. The second OC indicator was partly achieved, but the fact that fewer people benefit from the service is due to a change in targeted areas with smaller populations, rather than 'unfinished business'. The third OC indicator was not achieved; and in the way it was worded, it could not have been: The Strategy preceded the project. More importantly, the project created a powerful proof-of-concept for volunteer-based fire and rescue services in Armenia that enjoys broad strategic support by key agencies — this will enable full institutionalisation of the system.
3. The extent to which the PP contributed to the objectives at impact level (as defined in the project document/logframe/ToC).	L (Largely achieved)	The impact of the project includes reduced damages and losses from fires and other incidents due to faster arrival of emergency services (by 33.5 minutes on average). While strong anecdotal evidence highlights this impact, there was no available data to quantify avoided losses. Nevertheless, with 120 incident responses by VFRGs in 2025 and overall incidents in response zones estimated to be around 400 per year (not all VFRGs were operational yet in 2025), the long-term impact is likely to be very substantial. Other impacts include increased surge capacity for disaster responses (such as earthquakes), and advances to gender and disability inclusion.

FOR THE EVALUATOR/S TO FILL IN (Part 2)		
Assessment of results - key aspects	Score (choose only one answer for each aspect assessed)	Justify score. Include finding and reference page/s in evaluation report.
4. The extent to which the outputs, out-comes and impact achieved contributed to results related to the relevant cross-cutting issues. Please add a justification for each relevant cross-cutting issue.	F (Fully achieved)	Gender and disability inclusion: The VolFiRe project spearheaded the inclusion of female firefighters in Armenia's emergency services, against the background of conservative norms as well as a sector that is male-dominated around the world. 14.4% of VFRG members are female, a share that is higher than in Austria (10.1%). With a strong inclusion portfolio that included awareness sessions, workshops and easy-to-read materials, VolFiRe led to changed mindsets amongst volunteers, community administrations, and stakeholders.
5. Have the right approaches - with a view to implementing ADA's overarching principles - been adopted to ensure results achievement?	F (Fully achieved)	Understanding that this point refers to the overarching principles laid out in 1.2 of the EGSIM Manual, the following observations are made. • Ownership: the project operated with an approach that endeared a strong sense of local ownership by communities, VFRGs, and stakeholders such as MIA-RS. It systematically leveraged local contributions and a high level of process ownership. See chapters 3 and 7 of the report. • Do no harm: no unintentional negative impacts were reported. The project team carefully monitored risk and practiced sound adaptive management. • Equity, equality and non-discrimination: The project enabled equitable access to roles in VFRGs. The production of easy-to-read material, inclusive role descriptions, and promotion of female membership in VFRGs are noted in particular. • Inclusive participation and equal representation of all stakeholders: Starting with an inclusion assessment study, the project team was cognisant of cultural and social barriers and designed the implementation in a manner that addressed and tackled these barriers. • Accountability and transparency: the project had effective mechanisms in place to ensure full accountability and transparency. • Empowerment: The project empowered communities and VFRG members as well as stakeholders. See 'process ownership' in chapter 3 of the evaluation report. • Sustainability: See chapter 7 of the report. The overall sustainability is rated as rather high. • Environmental sustainability: risks related to environmental sustainability are seen as minimal. • Gender Sensitivity, Responsiveness, and Transformation: This aspect was a very strong element of the VolFiRe project; it specifically promoted gender and disability inclusion (see description above). • Zero-Tolerance of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH): The project was in full compliance with zero-tolerance standards. • Human Rights and Social Inclusion: Human rights of all involved were upheld.

Forming new fire & rescue services is technically complex and strategically challenging. Yet, as the evaluation report demonstrates, the VolFiRe project (Institutionalising a Volunteer First Responder Service in Armenia) succeeded in the development of a volunteer-based service that is aligned with and complements staff-based fire stations. The new Volunteer Fire Rescue Groups (VFRGs) now respond to incidents in rural areas, improving the incident outcomes through shorter response times.

Implemented between 2022 and 2026, VolFiRe developed key training and operational resources underpinning the new service, and linked the new groups with critical stakeholders. The consortium led by Austrian Red Cross navigated challenges with sound adaptive management.

At the same time, further efforts are required to render the service more effective. The report recommends to extend programming, with the view to elevate the model to a legally framed system, to enhance current services, and to expand coverage to new stations.

