

TURKEY-ARMENIA ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE DIALOGUE PROGRAMME

REPORT ON THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT MEETING

TWO SIDES OF THE BORDER: ARMENIA-TURKEY'S SHARED ENVIRONMENT

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Hosted by the Hrant Dink Foundation on May 7, 2025, *Two sides of the border: Armenia-Turkey's Shared Environment* needs assessment meeting was one of the first dedicated efforts to bring together experts from Armenia and Turkey, two neighboring countries to discuss the environment and climate as potential areas for joint action. The meeting marked a significant step in the journey toward potential collaboration between Armenia and Turkey, representing continuation of the important civil society efforts that have laid the groundwork for dialogue and cooperation especially in years when there are either no diplomatic relations or moderate-level negotiations between the two countries. Since 1993, the land border between the two countries has remained closed. While there is, in fact, significant trade and migration flow between Armenia and Turkey, these connections have largely developed through indirect channels, often routed through third countries or informal networks. As a result, these ties remain well below their potential and are frequently vulnerable to disruptions, leaving both societies without the deeper, more stable relationships that could support sustainable collaboration.

This closed border has not only stifled economic and cultural exchanges but has also made it extremely rare for any kind of cross-border cooperation to emerge, even in domains where such collaboration is not just beneficial but essential, such as the environment. Against this backdrop, the meeting brought together a diverse group of participants, including six expert researchers from Armenia and nine participants from Turkey representing academia and environmental activism. The meeting provided participants with the chance to engage in mutual introductions and relationship-building, underscoring the urgent need for sustainable cross-border cooperation in this critical policy area.

Against this backdrop, the meeting sought to identify and assess shared environmental challenges and opportunities, while also probing whether environmental collaboration could be a soft tool to act as a bridge toward broader normalization. Participants were quick to highlight that environmental degradation, whether through water scarcity, biodiversity loss, or air pollution, does not recognize political borders. In this sense, the environment itself emerged as a potential common ground, a shared vulnerability that could also become a shared opportunity for trust-building and dialogue.

Complexities and Constraints

The discussion during the needs-assessment meeting acknowledged several obstacles to cooperation, foremost among them the lack of diplomatic relations. Historical and political tensions continue to shape perceptions on both sides, limiting trust and complicating practical conversations about environmental collaboration. This is especially evident when it comes to issues like joint resources, data sharing and regulatory harmonization, where political considerations often overshadow technical imperatives.

One prominent challenge that emerged was the uneven institutional capacities between the two countries. While Turkey boasts relatively diverse energy resources and a more robust infrastructure for energy production, transmission, and distribution (and has been rapidly expanding its renewable energy capacity) its own dependence on imported primary energy sources is also a notable vulnerability. Armenia, meanwhile, remains heavily reliant on external energy, particularly from Russia. This dual dependence complicates joint planning efforts and reinforces a sense of vulnerability in Armenia's environmental strategies, even as Turkey's infrastructural strength could facilitate more flexible energy collaboration in the future.

Data fragmentation and knowledge silos also emerged as significant hurdles. Both sides acknowledged that although valuable research is being conducted within each country, there is often little coordination or sharing across borders. Moreover, participants noted that access to reliable environmental data is itself limited, with existing data often not being readily available to researchers or the public. This lack of transparency and integrated data not only impedes effective decision-making but also stymies efforts to address shared ecological challenges and foster trust between stakeholders.

Waste management was another topic that emerged during the discussions. Armenia, as a relatively small country, faces significant challenges in managing both household and toxic waste. While Turkey has more advanced waste management technologies overall, participants noted that the regions along the Armenia–Turkey border are often mountainous, peripheral and receive technological investments later than other parts of the country, leading to similar local waste management issues. Armenia has attempted to export hazardous waste through Georgia, but permission was not granted; while Turkey may be an alternative, no concrete logistics have yet been discussed. As Armenia and Turkey continue negotiations on opening the border to third-country nationals, participants suggested that parallel discussions could explore the possibility of opening the border for waste transfer as well. Participants also suggested that recognizing this shared challenge could open avenues for cooperation, particularly in developing joint solutions that address waste management needs on both sides of the border.

A particularly sensitive challenge that surfaced was Armenia's reliance on the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant, a Soviet-era facility widely regarded as outdated and controversial. Participants noted that while the plant supplies around 40% of Armenia's electricity, it also poses significant environmental risks due to its aging technology and seismic vulnerabilities. This plant often dominates the discourse around energy and environmental policy in the region, sometimes acting as a conversation-stopper rather than a catalyst for dialogue. It was also argued that, now that nuclear ambitions are also being realized on the Turkish side of the border, it may be somewhat unjust and inconsistent to single out Metsamor as uniquely problematic, given that both countries now face similar dilemmas around nuclear energy governance and safety.

Levers for Cooperation

Despite these challenges, the meeting revealed a wealth of opportunities for cross-border collaboration. One area of particular promise is the region's rich biodiversity and border landscapes. Participants noted that the closed border has, in some ways, inadvertently preserved habitats and biodiversity corridors, creating a unique opportunity to promote eco-tourism and scientific research.

However, it was also emphasized that any foray into eco-tourism must be approached with caution. While eco-tourism can support conservation and community-based livelihoods, it also carries the risk of morphing into mass tourism, undermining ecological well-being and local governance. Thus, any initiatives in this space should be designed with strong sustainability safeguards and community input but more importantly joint work between the two countries.

Water management also emerged as a critical area of potential cooperation, particularly given the shared reliance on transboundary rivers like the Arpacay (Akhourian). Participants highlighted the historical resilience of water-sharing agreements even during times of political tension, underscoring the pragmatic value of cooperation in this domain. The discussion also touched upon the upstream construction of dams in Turkey and its impact on the downstream water use in Armenia.

Joint research initiatives were frequently mentioned, including collaborative biodiversity monitoring, water management monitoring, development of shared geotope and biotope maps, and integration of satellite data for monitoring ecological change. Such efforts could help build a shared knowledge base and foster trust among scientists and policymakers alike. There are examples of joint research between academics in Turkey and Armenia particularly in the field of ornithology and the discovery of a sub-species of the common crane endemic to the border region is of particular importance and continued joint work is required for both its protection and recognition.

Educational initiatives targeting youth and local communities were also highlighted as a key opportunity. Participants discussed the potential of adapting award-winning educational materials for use on both sides of the border, with a focus on fostering environmental literacy and cross-cultural understanding. Another initiative which was discussed was the design and implementation of a self-sufficient and sustainable disaster relief park in the earthquake hit city of Hatay, Turkey. The participants of the meeting discussed the possibility of sharing the report of the park design and construction process with their counterparts in Armenia. These efforts could nurture a new generation of environmental stewards who see cooperation as not just possible but necessary.

Actionable Ideas

The meeting concluded with several practical recommendations to operationalize the insights gained. These include:

- The establishment of thematic working groups focusing on issues like water management, biodiversity conservation, renewable energy, and eco-tourism to deepen collaboration and maintain momentum.
- Developing a shared digital platform for environmental data to facilitate knowledge sharing and evidence-based policymaking.
- Designing pilot projects in the border region in areas like reforestation, wetland restoration, and eco-tourism.
- Implementing educational programs tailored to youth, particularly in communities along the border that emphasize both local and transboundary challenges which could build the foundations for long-term cooperation.
- Undertaking the joint translation and adaptation of a child-friendly publication series focused on environmental and biodiversity themes into both Turkish and Armenian to increase environmental literacy among young people, fostering a sense of connection and common purpose across borders.

Short-term recommendations include:

- Representation at upcoming international conferences for advancing environmental collaboration between Armenia and Turkey.
- Attendance of experts from Turkey at the *United Nations Biodiversity Conference* to be held in Yerevan in November 2026.
- Attendance of experts from Armenia in the next *Conference of the Parties (COP31)* to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2026 for which Turkey has an ongoing bid. If successful, this would offer another high-profile venue to showcase cooperative environmental initiatives.
- Leveraging the planning processes to catalyze dialogue and pilot joint actions
- Taking steps toward inclusion of the newly discovered sub-species of the common crane in the Red Book.

Conclusion

The needs assessment meeting illuminated the complex interplay between environmental realities and geopolitical tensions between Armenia - Turkey. While significant challenges remain, the meeting demonstrated that environmental collaboration is both a necessity and a unique opportunity to foster dialogue and build trust. By focusing on actionable ideas (such as thematic working groups, shared data platforms, pilot projects, educational initiatives, creative reframing of energy dilemmas and initiatives in future international conferences) Armenia and Turkey can begin to chart a path toward a more healthy and sustainable shared environment.

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