

TEN YEARS OF THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

FMR – GP10

Experience of the Guiding Principles in Georgia

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Georgia has made significant strides towards incorporating the Principles in policy and practice.

In August 2008 the Russian-Georgian war made headlines but less attention is paid to the protracted displacement crisis triggered by earlier conflicts in 1991-1993 which caused most ethnic Georgians to leave the secessionist enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Prior to the recent new wave of displacement, the official number of IDPs in Georgia was 222,616. Some 45% live in collective centres – former public buildings, such as hostels, hotels, hospitals and schools. Others continue to live with host families, have rented flats or – in rare cases – have managed to buy their own dwellings.

For many years IDPs lived in limbo, passively watching the political impasse and dependent on the good will of the Georgian authorities. Lack of progress in negotiations around return with the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia made it clear that displaced Georgians needed the right to integrate. In 1996 – two years prior to the launch of the Guiding Principles – Georgia

enacted its own IDP law. Following a visit by Francis Deng, the then-Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Internal Displacement, the law was amended in 2000 to bring it into line with the Principles. Although the Principles were officially accepted by the Georgian authorities, advocacy from IDP and civil society organisations was needed to realise the rights they enshrine. In 2003 the Norwegian Refugee Council created an education module to explain the Principles to local authorities. In 2003 a ruling from the Constitutional Court of Georgia established the rights of IDPs to purchase property without losing their IDP status and entitlement to return and property restitution. IDPs were given the right to vote in local and parliamentary elections.

In December 2005 Walter Kälin – Francis Deng's successor – visited Georgia. Recommendations made in his mission report¹ spurred the Georgian government to develop a holistic IDP State Strategy through the coordinated efforts of state agencies, international organisations and

civil society. Based on the Guiding Principles, the Strategy seeks to create conditions for dignified and safe return of IDPs, support decent living conditions for IDPs and ensure their participation in society. The Strategy identifies key principles on which to base implementation – including the free and informed choice of the displaced, sustainability of outcomes and gender equality.²

New armed conflict has brought new realities. The invasion of Georgia by Russian forces led, according to the UN Flash Appeal, to an additional 128,700 people forced into dependence on humanitarian aid.³ The Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation (MRA) has worked closely with UN agencies, bilateral donors, the Red Cross Movement and other actors. All senior MRA officials have been provided with copies of the Guiding Principles as well as the Brookings-Bern Project's guidance booklet *Addressing Internal Displacement: A Framework for National Responsibility*.⁴ This has helped ensure the humanitarian response has met internationally recognised standards. The immediate, rapid response from government and civil society helped prevent any fatalities during



Reverend László Lehel, director of Hungarian Interchurch Aid, meets people displaced by the conflict in Georgia, September 2008.

displacement and ensure that the basic needs of the displaced were met.

The IDP Women Association, together with other civil society organizations, has played a prominent role in the current emergency. They have:

- organised volunteers to work with newly displaced people in collective centres
- advised the government on minimum standards of humanitarian assistance
- assisted the authorities in communications with international humanitarian agencies and donors
- helped publicise on the international stage the needs of Georgian IDPs.

Russian troops have now withdrawn from villages to the north, from Gori in the east and from some towns in western Georgia, allowing substantial numbers of people to return. Troops remain, however, in Akhalkgori district. While it is hoped that the presence of European Union monitors will increase security, the reality is that there are still more than

34,000 IDPs in regions affected by the August 2008 conflict who have few realistic prospects of return. For them, the Georgian authorities have started building some 6,000 new houses in villages in the Shida Kartli region. In the meantime, providing adequate shelter during the winter remains a formidable challenge.

As the IDP State Strategy acknowledges, it is essential that all IDPs – whether from the original or latest caseloads – should have the opportunity to receive equal assistance and durable solutions of their problems. Decisions to return, to move to new houses or to stay temporarily in shelters must be informed and voluntary.

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1. <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G06/120/14/PDF/G0612014.pdf?OpenElement>
2. <http://www.brookings.edu/projects/idp/Laws-and-Policies/georgia.aspx>
3. <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/EDIS-7HMPZ2?OpenDocument>
4. http://www.brookings.edu/projects/idp/20050401_nrframework.aspx
5. <http://www.idpwa.org.ge>

Life stories of IDPs

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC www.internal-displacement.org) with the support of the Panos London's Oral Testimony Programme (www.panos.org.uk/oraltestimony) interviewed IDPs in Georgia and Colombia to record their personal experiences of forced displacement and what it means to be displaced.

IDMC's IDP Voices website (www.idpvoices.org) gives access to a wide range of IDPs' stories and voices in written and audio formats, organised by country and by rights as stated in the Guiding Principles. Books published on IDP voices in Colombia (*Let It Be Known*, published in Spanish and English) and Georgia (*Heavy Burden*, available in Georgian, Russian and English) can also be downloaded from this website.