



20 years of internal displacement in Georgia: the international and the personal

Julia Kharashvili

Commitment and capacity to address Georgian IDPs' needs took a long time to build, and depended heavily on non-governmental interventions and support, ranging from visits by the UN, reports and articles, legal advice, pilot projects and pressure from civil society.

Internal displacement for Georgia is not a new problem. While people displaced by the August 2008 war over South Ossetia are still displaced five years later, IDPs from Abkhazia have been displaced for almost 20 years and IDPs from Tskhinvali town in South Ossetia for about 22 years. In Georgia, as in many other parts of the former Soviet Union, the breakdown of the USSR and rapid deterioration in socio-economic conditions were accompanied by changes in the distribution of power among different groups, including among ethnic elites and within political circles.

Extreme tension in two regions of Georgia – Tskhinvali region in the north (1991-92) and Abkhazia in the west (1992-93), both bordering on Russia – led to open clashes and bloody armed conflicts and resulted in displacement for more than 300,000 persons, mainly of Georgian origin and mainly to internal regions of Georgia. In 2008, a new war between Georgia and Russia displaced more than 135,000 people, of whom approximately 26,000 could not return to their native lands due to Russian military presence and the total destruction of their villages. Currently, according to data from the Georgian Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees, there are 88,499 IDP families, comprising more than 270,000 people.

International protection

In 1993, the Georgian government asked UNHCR to establish a presence in Georgia and assume responsibility for the protection of IDPs. The government itself did not have the capacity at that time to organise real protection and for many years concentrated mainly on providing humanitarian assistance. Georgia participated in the CIS Conference on Refugees and Migrants (in Geneva, 1996) and following process but no consolidated efforts were made to improve the institutional situation; the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation was created but worked more on emergency cases than on systematic planning and elaboration of a national approach. For many years, Georgian IDPs were marginalised and forgotten.

The first signal from the international community came in 2000, when a high-level UN delegation led by Dr Francis Deng (Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on IDPs) visited Georgia to promote the implementation of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The Georgian government's subsequent official acknowledgement of the Guiding Principles triggered increased attention to Georgia's case and the involvement of international and local NGOs. In 2001, the magazine *Forced Migration Review* published an article focusing on the IDP situation in Georgia. In 2002, in collaboration with the Brookings IDP project, the

compliance of Georgian legislation with the Guiding Principles was tested and some amendments made to the law. Later, in 2003-04, as part of the New Approach to IDP Assistance programme managed by UNDP (the only programme for IDPs), ten policy papers were published describing IDP status and rights-related problems (including access to health and education, and opportunities to become economically self-reliant); two rounds of micro-projects to improve IDPs self-reliance were announced; from more than 300 applications, 15 micro-projects were selected by the Steering Committee and successfully piloted – but no further steps were planned and the initiative was left hanging in mid-air.

In December 2005, the new Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of IDPs, Dr Walter Kälin, presented his report on Georgia and highlighted the “miserable conditions of IDPs in collective centres”¹. From this moment, the government started to become more systematically interested in IDP issues. In 2006 the process of developing a State IDP Strategy was launched, with the active involvement of local NGOs. In February 2007 the Strategy was approved but not much changed for IDPs – still neither the state nor the international community could offer the funds necessary for its implementation.

The situation changed dramatically in 2008. After the August 2008 war, Georgia received US\$4.4 billion from international donors for its recovery programmes. Part of this money was envisaged for IDPs. A new Action Plan was prepared, the main focus of which was the improvement of the living conditions of IDPs.

In an article published in December 2008 in *Forced Migration Review*, one of the co-authors, the Minister for Refugees and Accommodation, confirmed the government's commitment to use these funds also for the improvement of the situation of people displaced in the early 1990s.² This commitment was taken seriously by the international community: a Steering Committee of donor agencies was formed to observe the resettlement process for IDPs and provide the government with recommendations.

Challenges and opportunities

Since 2009 there has been an active programme of privatisation of living spaces and construction of new buildings for IDPs. It has been mainly IDPs who were registered in collective centres (44% of total number of IDPs) who have benefited from these programmes. However, regardless of the hard work of state agencies and active monitoring by civil society, more than 62,000 families still need



improved living conditions. The new government which came to power after the October 2012 elections decided to speed up the process of resettlement/ privatisation of living spaces, and announced that over the following four years it would provide durable housing solutions for all IDPs in need of housing.

One of the concerns expressed by civil society in this regard relates to the lack of livelihoods support programmes and to continued problems in access to decent education and health programmes. The IDP community tends to be considered as one homogeneous social group whereas it is really quite diverse in origin, reasons for and period of displacement, language, skills and customs, access to resources and possession of social capital; such diversity of needs requires an adequately diverse response.

Another concern of IDPs is related to the absence of mechanisms for working on conflict transformation and for IDPs' active participation in this process (which could increase opportunities for them to return). Currently, the official negotiations at the Geneva international discussions attended by the high-level participants from Georgia and Russia plus Abkhazian and South Ossetian participants, while including potential return on the agenda of the second working group and, in principle, theoretically providing a platform for such discussion, are not yet proving successful. Even such measures as "go and see" and "go and inform" visits are still not agreed. Politicisation of debates prevails over the humanitarian dimension which has not been taking the lead in the negotiation process.

On the occasion of the 23rd round of the international discussions taking place in Geneva in March 2013, an information session was organised for all participants of both Working Groups on the topic of the role of women in conflict resolution. This could potentially have a positive influence as participants are now sensitised about UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and 'sister' resolutions and might be expected to take into greater account the humanitarian dimension.

After 2008, check points on the administrative borders with the de facto separated regions are guarded by the Russian military. This reduces the opportunities for IDPs from Gali district (the southern tip of Abkhazia, populated almost exclusively by Georgians) who are living in the border region to cross the administrative boundary to work their lands in Gali. IDP women living in border areas face additional challenges, their personal safety constantly being threatened.

Striving to become equal – the role of IDP women

A wide range of challenges confront any woman who is an IDP or living in a post-conflict zone. Human security – physical, psychological, material – is very fragile and dependent on external conditions. The participation of women in decision making is minimal. Women find work anywhere they can, mostly low-paid; they put all their efforts into caring for children and protecting their family; they have to replace men during and often also after the conflict; they often suffer gender-based violence and domestic violence.

And because of all this, IDP women have become the strongest advocates for peace and for positive change.

For many years, the IDP Women's Association 'Consent' has supported IDP and conflict-affected communities by helping women to increase their social, economic and civil status and providing opportunities for IDP youth and children. The wide range of Consent's activities includes training seminars, handicraft courses, adult education and small business support, creation of advocacy groups and work with local and central authorities in the framework of different projects to empower women and provide them with necessary skills to survive and develop in post-conflict conditions. Special care is provided for children and youth to give them better opportunities and help them escape the vicious cycle of internal displacement. After 20 years of displacement, stigma still exists, preventing many of them from successfully integrating and from accessing good-quality education. Consent assists women in organising Sunday schools, vocational training, celebrations and special events to enhance the employability of IDPs and to improve relationships between people from different communities now living in the same settlements.



Women return to Gugutiantkari village after Mother's Day celebrations.

Many useful policies have been agreed during the last few years in Georgia, including the Action Plan for implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. This Action Plan declares support for women affected by the conflicts and for their participation in decision making and peace building. Consent supports women from grassroots communities to participate in cross-border activities (through CARE/EU- and EED-supported projects³) and find common ground with women from the other parts of this divided society. But the participation of women in post-conflict rehabilitation, as stipulated in Resolution 1325 and the Action Plan, has still not been secured. Women, especially IDP women, are not included in local councils and have no access to decision making about the most crucial issues influencing their lives. There is a long way to go to achieve equal opportunities for IDPs with the rest of society and to make their starting conditions comparable.

As mentioned in *Forced Migration Review* issue 33 on protracted displacement: "...years after the war's end, renewed national and international efforts are needed to complete the work of securing durable solutions for IDPs."⁴



Consent

International Day of Peace in Digomi community.

Conclusions

IDPs in Georgia continue to require international assistance and attention. In border areas, the IDPs' security is threatened, and demands additional security measures. For the whole IDP community, there needs to be access to decent education, employment opportunities and dignified living conditions. Support at the international level for IDP efforts to gain equal status and the sharing of best practice from the other countries are extremely important and will continue to be a priority for the coming years. The role of women must be strengthened and the provisions of UNSC Resolution 1325 and CEDAW should be fully applied in post-conflict Georgia.

The IDP Women's Association congratulates *Forced Migration Review* on their 25th Anniversary and expresses gratitude to the Editors and authors of this publication for their continuing and highly professional work, for their support of research and provision of recommendations and, finally, for their efforts to ease the situation of internally displaced people worldwide.

Julia Kharashvili julia.kharashvili@yahoo.com is Chairperson of the IDP Women Association 'Consent'. From 2008-11 she was Deputy Head of Department of International Relations in the Georgian Ministry of IDPs from Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees. Having been forced to leave her home in Abkhazia in 1993 during the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia, Julia with other displaced women created Consent in 1995 in Tbilisi.

Julia Kharashvili has written twice before for FMR:

- 'Experience of the Guiding Principles in Georgia' (co-authored with Ilya Kharashvili and Koba Subeliani) in FMR's special issue in 2008 on Ten Years of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/GP10/16-17.pdf
- 'Internal displacement in Georgia: a personal perspective' in FMR's 2001 Oslo supplement www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/Supplements/osloidp.pdf
From this article comes the following extract:

I speak as an IDP woman whose husband was missing after the war in Georgia, and who was displaced with two small children, no shelter and no job. I speak also as a leader of an NGO which I set up with several friends to organise psycho-rehabilitation programmes for our traumatised children and vocational training programmes for the disabled women in our community; and, finally, as a member of the UN team in Georgia who has been given the opportunity to promote the needs of the IDP community at the UN level.

From all these points of view I want to give you one message: we do not want to be IDPs. We do not want our children to be labelled as IDPs; we want to return home and – until this is possible – we want to live as equal citizens, with dignity and equal rights.

1. public buildings temporarily given to IDPs as shelters
2. www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/GP10/16-17.pdf
3. Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (German donor)
4. Erin Mooney and Naveed Hussain 'Unfinished business: IDPs in Bosnia and Herzegovina' www.fmreview.org/en/FMRpdfs/FMR33/22-24.pdf

This article, published in April 2013, is part of FMR's 25th Anniversary collection, celebrating 25 years of debate, learning and advocacy for the rights of displaced and stateless people. For more information, go to www.fmreview.org/25th-anniversary