Internal displacement in Georgia: a personal perspective

by Julia Kharashvili

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.

Prospects of return

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, military conflicts in Georgia led to massive displacement of the mainly Georgian population from the zones of conflict (Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali regions). Abkhazia then announced its independence and *de facto* separation from Georgia. The return of IDPs is now dependent on restoring Georgian jurisdiction over the territory of Abkhazia (or on the creation of international mechanisms for guaranteeing security).

According to official data, there are about 282,000 IDPs in government-controlled Georgia. Approximately 40% live in so-called communal centres – former public buildings, such as hostels, hotels, hospitals, kindergartens and shops. The rest live 'temporarily' with relatives or friends; some eventually manage to buy private accommodation. Eight years have passed and those IDPs who have managed to adapt and find jobs represent the minority. The majority of IDPs still need to think about survival. The communal centres are overcrowded, most IDPs live in miserable conditions, unemployment is very high and the prospect of political settlement of the conflict is uncertain.

Security of returnees: peace initiatives and prospects

There have been official peace talks since 1994 but no real achievements. The concept of the status of Abkhazia in the framework of a united Georgia, which was prepared by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Georgia, was recently once again rejected by the UN Security Council due to the position taken by the Russian delegation.

Success is more evident at the level of civil society, where Georgian and Abkhaz NGOs have established cooperation and even managed joint implementation of some projects. Unfortunately, this cooperation stops immediately whenever the question of IDP returns is raised.

The only zone of possible return for IDPs is the border region, the Gali district, which before the war (and even now) was populated almost exclusively by Georgians. From time to time they return to work their lands but nobody takes responsibility for their security. The Georgian government has no access because this zone is controlled by Abkhaz and Russian security forces. As a result, Georgian returnees are subject to all kinds of violations of human rights – in particular personal security and right to employment. Women are major victims of these violations because they represent the majority of returnees. Schools which were reopened in the Gali district were ordered by the *de facto* Abkhaz government to operate in the Russian language which, in practice, is not yet possible as the teachers cannot teach in Russian. In the long term it is feared the Georgian language will be eliminated from the region.

Economic and social status of IDPs in Georgia: prospects for survival

The social and economic situation of the IDP community is a subject of concern. Humanitarian needs are still great, especially in remote areas where hunger is rife. IDPs with no access to land and who live in communal centres cannot ensure even a minimal standard of living: the state allowance is wholly inadequate (US$7 per month) and paid very irregularly. The overall deterioration in the situation in Georgia has brought even greater frustration for the IDP population. In the face of electricity and water shortages, the advent of winter, increasing political instability and governmental crisis, the prospects for improvement and positive action for IDPs look doubtful indeed.

For a number of years, the Georgian government recognised only one option for the IDP population: return to Abkhazia. At the same time, because of the lack of progress in official negotiations, it was clear that the displaced should have the opportunity at least to gain temporary integration. UNDP, UNHCR, the World Bank and NGOs involved in IDP issues tried for a long time to promote the right of IDPs to participate on an

equal basis in development programmes; finally in 1999 the Georgian government and the UN together launched a "new approach to IDP assistance". The Georgian Self-Reliance Fund (GSRF) was created: a pilot fund for the support of self-reliance initiatives which should be innovative and appropriate for the IDP community. The "new approach" was an attempt to include the internally displaced in a general framework of development and to ensure their equal rights to employment, housing and social services.

Initial contributions for the fund were provided by the UN agencies, USAID and the Swiss Agency for Development. Unfortunately, the GSRF has not yet become an instrument for real change, firstly because it is only a pilot fund and secondly because the process was developed too slowly. At the same time, expectations in the IDP community were and continue to be very high. It is important to mention that there is still a great interest in this fund among the IDP population. No fewer than 85 projects were submitted to the current, second round of competition.

There are several opportunities for improvement of this "new approach" initiative and for transforming it into a real tool for social change in the IDP community:

- The new approach should be implemented in its entirety, not focusing only on GSRF; the first article of this initiative, for example, stated that the UN should continue to promote the right of IDPs to return to Abkhazia.
- Equal rights and access to information should not only be financed through GSRF but also advocated at all levels; here the UN can cooperate more explicitly with the NGOs.
- More international and national NGOs should participate in the design and monitoring of this initiative.
- It is important that the initiatives coming from the UN or other intergovernmental organisations are gender-sensitive and recognise the role that IDP women have played – and continue to play – in their community's survival during the emergency and post-emergency stages.
- It is vital to ensure that the guidelines of the new approach reflect the vision of the IDPs themselves, not the donor community's vision.
- Most importantly, the new approach initiative should have sufficient financial backing to ensure that all real initiatives can be financed and implemented.
- The UN and other initiators of the new approach should ensure that useful and innovative projects approved by the GSRF can be replicated in different regions for both the IDP and the resident communities (such as road infrastructure and rehabilitation of public buildings).

Recent paramilitary operations in Abkhazia have shown that ex-combatants, veterans and war invalids can be easily recruited into the armed forces simply because they have no positive alternative. In Georgia, the international community has always been reluctant to work with this category of IDPs. No nationwide demobilisation programmes, retraining or special education have been undertaken. Their skills are a resource which should be harnessed to stabilise the situation and to give these IDPs a chance to participate in preparations for peaceful return or integration.

The word 'integration' continues to be painful for IDPs. Even when they have the chance to integrate with the resident community, it is difficult psychologically as they would still prefer to return if Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia were restored. Providing a meaningful legal guarantee that improvement of IDP living conditions

Corn-growing project for 100 Abkhaz IDP families whose prospects of return are limited.

UNHCR/A Holmann

UNHCR working with local NGO Atinati to provide psychosocial rehabilitation programmes for IDP children from Abkhazia.

in government-controlled Georgia would not imperil the chance of returning to Abkhazia would make development programmes much more attractive for the displaced population.

The IDP community in Georgia represents very different groups, ranging from peasants from the Gali to a highly educated community (about 45% with a university degree) from Sukhumi. Many have experience in technology, agricultural management and industry. With their knowledge of resources, skills and implementation, they have created their own development strategies which could easily be included in the international community's development programmes. At the same time, humanitarian assistance has almost ground to a halt and the most vulnerable IDPs have few survival resources.

Who can and should give a voice to IDPs today?

The government in exile, recreated in exile after displacement, initially served as a means of communication with the central government but has now almost lost this function. Economically, the government has showed no ability to mobilise resources for development of the IDP community. They are not sufficiently trusted by the international organisations and donor community and cannot set up real supporting structures.

From the beginning, international and local NGOs in Georgia have been working shoulder to shoulder to protect the rights of the displaced, to raise the capacity of IDPs and to address their most urgent needs. The working groups from the Geneva Conference on Migration has created a network to promote equal political and social participation of IDPs. At the same time, over the last few years the IDP community itself has not been very active at the level of civil society and has tried mainly to achieve its goals through political demands and actions. Several NGOs existing then did not significantly change the general picture.

During the last year, however, some changes in the social structure of the IDP community have been evident. When the process of establishing non-governmental and community-based organisations was reinforced both by donor policy (such as the new approach initiative) and by the failure of official negotiations for peaceful return, at least four different networks of IDP NGOs were created in the capital and in the regions. Recently, a forum of NGOs of IDPs and refugees from the Southern Caucasus was held in Tbilisi to discuss the opportunities and challenges facing them. Many constructive proposals were put forward.

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement present a range of ways to increase social participation of IDPs and to improve their standard of living and status in the community. In some regions, such as Samegrelo region which has a very large IDP population, both local authorities and IDPs themselves have a poor understanding of the Guiding Principles. In other areas, however, organisations are starting to use them as a tool in everyday practice. In 2001 a new electoral law was approved which, because of NGO lobbying, allows IDPs the right to fully participate in parliamentary and municipal elections. It is necessary to raise awareness of the Guiding Principles not only in government-controlled Georgia but also in the zone of possible return so that the *de facto* authorities also know the legal rights of returnees.

Conclusions

- There are many untapped resources within the humanitarian and intergovernmental organisations, as well as within the IDP community itself.
- After eight years of displacement, civic activists from the IDP community are ready to take on responsibility. The creation of NGOs and community based organisations is enabling them to identify and make more effective use of the intellectual and social capital of the IDP community.
- Programme design should acknowledge the capacity and vision of the IDP community.
- The state, together with international organisations, should design programmes which will employ both IDPs and residents living in the same areas, in the same type of work, for the benefit of the whole of society.
- Vulnerable groups should be assisted within the framework of development programmes, drawing on Georgia's experience from 1998 when emergency assistance was provided within the framework of development.
- Project blueprints should be developed – to be implemented by the Georgian government with support from the UN, international organisations and NGOs – which realistically meet the objectives of the new approach: better housing, better employment, equal human rights and equal benefits for IDPs and resident communities.
- The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement should be promoted to the *de facto* authorities in conflict zones which are possible areas of return.

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