

The southern Caucasus experience

by Marco Borsotti

After gaining independence following the Soviet Union's dissolution, the southern Caucasus republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia saw a difficult period of transition characterised by internal and external inter-ethnic conflicts¹ that forced more than 1.44 million people to abandon their homes.² The majority of those affected became internally displaced, while some became refugees by crossing internationally recognised borders. By 1994 almost all the fighting had come to an end in these conflicts, with the exception of sporadic violations of cease-fire agreements and, on two occasions, brief resumption of hostilities between militias. The conflicts resulted in destruction of infrastructure, loss of lives and displacement of the majority of the resident population in those parts of the countries affected by war who were forced to abandon their homes due to their ethnicity. Efforts made with assistance of the international community to find durable solutions and bring peace have so far been unsuccessful.

There are some important considerations that are common to all of these conflicts. Governments in both countries have been supportive of their IDP populations, providing them assistance in cash and in kind. However, this support, even if it represents a burden for their state budgets, is still insufficient to provide dignified living conditions for IDPs. Return of IDPs to their place of origin is a key element in peace negotiations since the right to return has been sanctioned by the international community as one of the principles in finding a solution to the conflicts. However, peaceful settlements to these conflicts remain elusive and there is no international political consent to use force, if necessary, as there was in the case of Kosovo to guarantee the right to return and enforce Security Council resolutions. Prospects for early return are difficult to assess but seem poor in the short term. As a consequence, IDPs are in a sense hostages of their situation since their political leaders consider them instrumental for peace negotiations. Furthermore, IDPs cannot benefit from the same rights as

other citizens, such as the right to vote in local elections.

In both countries, the majority of the population is living below the poverty line. Independent surveys have found that IDPs are not significantly more vulnerable to poverty than the rest of the local population. However, as a result of limitations on the exercise of their rights, for instance as regards access to cultivable land and access to credit, poverty alleviation is particularly difficult for IDPs. The governments, with the support of the international community, are in various stages of preparation of integrated strategies to promote economic development to halve poverty.

In Azerbaijan and Georgia, efforts have been made to convert IDPs from a 'burden' on the state budget into development actors. Without renouncing their right to return, they should not be denied the opportunity to build for themselves a comfortable and dignified life in their place of displacement. The key for development is promotion of economic self-sufficiency by giving IDPs access to jobs, land, proper shelter, health, education, credit and infrastructure. It is necessary to recognise that IDPs have the same rights and therefore should enjoy the same opportunities available to all other citizens. Both in Baku and Tbilisi, this idea was promoted by UNHCR, UNDP and the World Bank, and has gained the governments' agreement and donors' support. Trust funds were established to finance initiatives originating from the IDPs themselves for innovative projects designed to generate employment, improve living conditions and help IDPs escape hardship. These projects should also facilitate IDPs' integration in host communities and benefit these communities as a whole.

In both countries, these approaches are already integrated into government programmes to promote economic development as part of comprehensive strategies that recognise IDPs' needs and their potential contribution to the national economy. It is recognised that the more self-reliant IDPs become, the less they will

represent a burden both while displaced and when finally able to return to their original homes. Meanwhile, the IDPs' contribution to the development of their country will emerge from the underground economy, where it is mostly relegated, to find recognition and support.

This process in Azerbaijan and Georgia has had its difficulties but has already demonstrated that an alternative exists to treating IDPs solely as recipients of humanitarian assistance. In fact, if a lesson could be learned, humanitarian programmes should have been phased out earlier in order to assist IDPs to participate fully and on an equal in the economic development of their countries, all the while ensuring assistance for those who still need it. Less dependency would have been created and government subsidies and donor aid could have been utilised more effectively and transparently. In both countries, the process of designing poverty reduction strategies is offering governments an opportunity to consider IDPs' development as an integral part of efforts to improve living conditions for all citizens. International efforts to defend IDP rights, particularly the Guiding Principles, have oriented the governments' and donors' thinking toward the same approach.

The southern Caucasus experience indicates that when large-scale displacement occurs, the international community and governments should not only provide emergency assistance but also immediately begin to integrate assistance to IDPs within existing and future development plans. In this way, dependence will be minimised and IDPs will have better opportunities to cope with their trauma with greater self-sufficiency and in a more dignified and sustainable manner.

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1. In Azerbaijan the conflict was for control of Nagorno Karabakh, while in Georgia the conflicts were for control of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.

2. See Global IDP Database at www.idpproject.org