



IN THE WAITING ROOM

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE IN GEORGIA

“Seventeen years ago when the war broke out I was a student of foreign languages at the state university, but never finished because I became a refugee. It still brings me a pain when I think about it. Now my son is in high school, but I do not have any means to afford his university. I cannot rebuild my future any more, maybe I no longer have the prospects of ever finding employment or a career, but I hope that at least my children will not have to suffer the same fate, I hope at least they will have a better future.”

Iza, displaced woman in a collective centre in Kutaisi

The legacy of the territorial conflicts which accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union remains a daily reality for hundreds of thousands of families displaced in their wake. This is particularly true for Georgia, where about 6 per cent of the overall population (some 246,000 people) are internally displaced.

About 220,000 people were forced from their homes during conflicts that took place in the early 1990s. Recent displacement as a result of the war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 added approximately 26,000 people to the overall picture of displacement in the country.

For more than 15 years, Georgia lacked a state policy on its displaced population. The government’s policy was geared towards return as the only acceptable durable solution for the displaced. A breakthrough occurred in 2007, with the adoption of a state strategy on internally displaced persons (IDPs), which recognized the right to local integration, at least until return home became feasible. In 2009, the government adopted an Action Plan and initiated a process of renovating and transferring living spaces into the ownership of displaced people.

However, much remains to be done to fulfil the rights of the displaced to live in dignity. In terms of realizing economic and social rights other than housing, the present action plan does little more than integrate most of the internally displaced into existing state social assistance programmes. Concerns remain regarding the ongoing lack of adequate housing in many collective centres and housing solutions are only part of a durable solution for the displaced. High unemployment remains an especially pressing issue and displaced persons face important information and financial barriers that limit their access to healthcare, and have negative consequences for their health. The effectiveness of government policies and programmes is also hindered by a lack of planning, coordination and consultation with representatives of the displaced population.

RIGHT TO ADEQUATE HOUSING

“I have spent 20 years of my life in this tiny room in terrible conditions. I may have been young when we first came here, but I am not any longer... After all this time, me and my husband are still waiting and no one has told us anything. We do not know if we have to spend the rest of our lives here or if there will be any change. I may not have many years to live, but I want to spend at least the rest of my life in decent conditions.”

Izolda, 69-year-old woman in a collective centre in Tbilisi

After almost two decades of displacement, many people displaced during the 90s continue to live in appalling conditions in collective centres not designed for long-term occupation. Many buildings awaiting renovation are extremely dilapidated, overcrowded, lacking access to water and proper sanitation, some with unsafe electrical wiring or even posing the danger of collapsing. While some of those collective centres were deemed too run-down to be repaired, the authorities have still not provided alternative accommodation or a date for the resettlement.

The majority of newly displaced people who could not return after the 2008 war were re-housed in newly

constructed settlement villages. The speed with which 36 new settlements were built in the aftermath of the war to re-house the newly displaced before the winter has been recognized as a major achievement, yet problems remain. It remains unclear what considerations were made and which criteria were applied in order to select suitable locations for the construction of new settlements, such as infrastructure, geological factors including the risk of floods, availability of land plots and possibilities to generate an income. The living conditions vary considerably from one settlement to another, some equipped with indoor plumbing and drinking water, others with outdoor washing facilities and wooden latrines. The biggest challenge cited by inhabitants was the absence of employment opportunities, which made residents increasingly dependent on humanitarian aid or financial allowances.

At this stage, the provision of durable housing solutions does not involve the estimated 130,000 displaced people living in or renting privately owned accommodation. These residents, almost exclusively displaced by the conflicts of the 90s, are in limbo pending the finalization of the next phase of the Action Plan, while neither the government nor NGOs have a complete and accurate picture of their number and living conditions. Furthermore, there is a shared concern among IDP organizations that donor money may not suffice to meet their needs.

Vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, persons with disabilities or chronic diseases and severely traumatized people appear not to be prioritized by the authorities in the process of allocation of durable housing solutions.

EMPLOYMENT

"I do not want any assistance or charity; I only wish that I could work to earn my own living. Back at home I and my husband worked on land from dusk till dawn, for people like us it is very hard to be sitting in this small room feeling idle and useless."

Leila, 70-year-old woman living in a collective centre in Gori

The housing conditions and especially the location of the settlements and collective centres influence the chances and availability of income generation and employment. Many collective centres, newly built settlements and other accommodation for displaced people are situated in areas where there are few opportunities for work, limiting the chances of securing jobs and becoming self-reliant even further. The lack of income generating opportunities becomes a frequent factor for economic migration and family separation, results in a deterioration of professional skills and reinforces the vicious cycle of dependence on the state. Many who could not find jobs have fallen victim to passiveness and depression.

High unemployment remains an especially pressing issue for displaced people. However, at present, the programmes to assist displaced people to earn a living are mostly of a pilot nature; they are neither nationwide nor comprehensive and generally lack sustainability due to an absence of follow-up measures. Lack of follow-up on vocational training also discourages many displaced from participating in such trainings. The Action Plan fails to set clear indicators and benchmarks by which progress in relation to employment of internally displaced people can be measured and periodically reviewed.

SOCIAL SECURITY

"After school I go with my father to collect scrap metal and sell it for money, it is not much but even a little helps. The IDP assistance that we get goes to buy textbooks for school, and we also have to eat."

Levan, 14-year-old boy, living with his father in a collective centre in Zugdidi

The quality of life and prospects for a durable solution for the displaced persons from the 90s have improved little over the years. The limited assistance and attention by the Georgian government to support displaced people have kept them in a state of "perpetual limbo" -enough to keep them alive, but too little to allow them to re-establish themselves and restart their lives in a meaningful way.

Displaced people continue to be disproportionately represented among the approximately 11.3 per cent of the population which continues to live below the poverty line. While state allowances are the main source of income for many displaced, presently they are insufficient to provide displaced people with minimum essential levels of benefits. Both the allowance for internally displaced and the alternative social assistance fall far below the subsistence minimum specified by the Georgian government, and therefore are not adequate for meeting the basic standards of living for the displaced, especially the most vulnerable.

HEALTH

"My husband passed away so I am alone taking care of my two children. A couple of months ago, my grandmother had an insulin attack and was partially paralyzed and cannot walk any more. I took her in with us since she had no one else to take care of her and we could not afford to leave her in hospital. Until recently, we had the government-sponsored health insurance but this year it was cancelled. We were told that we no longer qualify for the assistance, because we own a TV set."

Thea, a single mother living in the collective centre in Tbilisi

The lack of information and inability to afford medical services is the biggest impediment in displaced people's access to healthcare. Because of these barriers, displaced people are either left without care, or their families are pushed further into poverty. Financial constraints, lack of information and fear of unmanageable expenses also limit their willingness to seek healthcare until the critical moment. Even preventable diseases are rarely diagnosed quickly and treated adequately, resulting in serious consequences to the health of displaced people.

Poverty as well as lack of income and poor housing conditions negatively affects the health of displaced people, exposing them to higher health risks and long-term depreciation of health. Displacement and the trauma for those who fled result in a variety of mental health disorders. Inadequate living conditions and malnutrition that are especially widespread among displaced people also increase the susceptibility to diseases such as tuberculosis, diphtheria and anaemia.

The government-financed state insurance programme, which benefits some displaced people who qualify as socially vulnerable, has gone some way to ensuring greater access to health care for the poorest among the displaced, but it does not solve the lack of access to necessary healthcare completely. Its coverage is limited both in terms of services and benefits afforded as well as the coverage of its beneficiaries. In addition, due to its limitations, some very poor displaced people with serious health conditions are left without the state sponsored health insurance.

LOCAL INTEGRATION

"Almost 20 years ago, when we had to flee our homes in Tskhinvali, the government told us we would return in six months. We have been waiting ever since but after so many years we still do not know what our fate will be. We want to return but we also want to live whatever is left of our lives in dignity."

Elderly couple in a collective centre in Tbilisi

Until 2007, government policy was geared towards the return of displaced people to their original homes. This has hindered the provision of durable solutions as well as the integration of displaced people into their host communities.

Local integration provides an opportunity to allow people to live normal lives until conditions change so that they can voluntarily and safely return to their areas of origin. People who have been displaced for years, however, and have suffered marginalization and social stigma through their dependence on meagre government assistance, need more to guarantee their empowerment than just housing. The same is true for people displaced following the August 2008 war, especially those living in rural areas in the newly-build settlements. In order to create sustainable communities out of these new artificial settlements, the government must create appropriate conditions such as the provision of employment or income opportunities and ensure access to social infrastructure and essential services such as schools, kindergartens, pharmacies and health facilities for those displaced.

INFORMATION AND PARTICIPATION

"The ministry representatives come and offer us their vision on how the renovation works should be done. They tell us we can privatize the current space, but in case of many families their current space is cut or reduced significantly because they claim that is what is needed for overall renovation of the building. They have not really offered us any alternative or inquired about our needs or given us any information about our rights. Basically it is a take it or leave it deal and we do not really have a say in it."

Displaced woman in a collective centre in Kutaisi

The vast majority of displaced persons that Amnesty International spoke to lacked even basic information about their rights, options and remedies available. They had little awareness of what services they were entitled to within the new and complex state health insurance scheme, and most did not know about the timing, procedures and standards involved in renovating their living space, or alternatives to housing privatization. Many displaced people

also complained about the lack of information on availability of employment opportunities.

This lack of information and awareness of their rights not only jeopardizes and delays the effectiveness of state programmes for displaced people but also deepens their isolation and reinforces their dependence on the state. Without full knowledge of their rights, entitlements and options, the displaced population will find it even harder to integrate into the rest of Georgian society. Lack of consultation and dialogue while developing or implementing durable solutions also means that displaced people in Georgia have very few channels to exert any influence on the decision-making processes that directly affect their access to economic and social rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International calls upon the Georgian authorities:

To ensure the progressive realisation of the human rights of the internally displaced population. In particular:

- Devote the maximum available resources to progressively achieving the full realization of economic, social and cultural rights.
- Collect disaggregated data to monitor the realisation of rights by the internally displaced population through the implementation of regular and comprehensive surveys.

To ensure that durable housing solutions meet with the criteria for adequate housing and are extended to all the displaced persons in need:

- Prioritize those who require the most urgent attention, as well as the most disadvantaged groups of people in the allocation of durable housing solutions while ensuring that plans for durable housing solutions are extended to all displaced people, including those living or renting private accommodation.
- Ensure that housing provided to displaced people in collective centres and in new resettlement sites meets the criteria of habitability, as well as access to water, sanitation and other basic infrastructure and is in a suitable location.

To take effective measures to address the barriers on access to work, in particular:

- Develop comprehensive programme and policy to address the barriers to work, especially amongst displaced people and other particularly disadvantaged groups, as well as a detailed plan for its realization.
- Provide information on employment opportunities and facilitate access of internally displaced persons to employment opportunities.

To take effective measures to address the barriers on access to healthcare, in particular:

- Ensure the availability and quality of health care facilities, goods and services.
- Provide information on schemes for healthcare to all the internally displaced and support them in accessing such schemes. Ensure that essential medicines are affordable and available to them.

To take effective measures to address the social security of the internally displaced population, in particular:

- Harmonize the state benefits and allowances available to all displaced people, to ensure that similarly situated groups of the internally displaced are not treated differently. Ensure that all assessments are based on clearly identified criteria, which do not exclude groups who require assistance.
- Review the criteria for assessment of families under targeted social assistance programmes. Ensure that they are formulated and implemented in a manner which ensures that such benefits are accessible to all those who require them.

To ensure the right of the entire internally displaced population to genuinely participate in decisions affecting the exercise of their human rights. Steps to implement this would include:

- Creating mechanisms to consult with displaced people on the development and implementation of the State Strategy and Action Plan and on decisions relating to return, local integration, and durable housing solutions amongst others.
- Ensure that displaced persons have access to full and updated information on durable solutions, assistance available for both return and local integration or resettlement/relocation to another part of the country, documentation, social assistance, security, income generation and vocational training.

Amnesty International calls upon the international community to:

- Continue to provide international cooperation and assistance to Georgia, in particular to realise minimum essential levels of economic, social and cultural rights for all persons.
- Continue efforts to monitor and support conditions for the enjoyment of the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, association and participation to ensure that full and transparent debates over the direction of policy on internal displacement may be ensured.

This is a summary of the report, *In the Waiting Room: Internally Displaced People in Georgia*, EUR 56/002/2010.