

Caucasus: Feb '08

IWPR radio report prompts government officials to tackle health crisis in neglected region. Georgia's healthcare ministry intervened to tackle a TB crisis in the village of Disveli in Georgia's Azerbaijani-majority Kvemo Kartli region in February, after deputy minister for refugees and resettlement listened to a report on the IWPR-sponsored radio programme, Accent.

The report, by Zaur Dargali, is part of IWPR's pioneering US-funded programme to bring independent reporting and dialogue to some of Georgia's most neglected regions and it is already bringing very tangible results.

"I went to Disveli to cover everyday-life problems facing the community of ecological migrants living there," said Dargali, referring to people who had resettled in the village because of natural disasters, such as avalanches in their native villages. "I found out that a tuberculosis epidemic was raging in the village, that many people had died there without ever learning they were ill. I immediately informed my editors about what I'd seen.

"My story persuaded the deputy minister for refugees and settlement, whom we'd invited to our studio, to urgently get in touch with his colleagues in the health ministry. The result of that is the two ministries are taking care of Disveli residents' health. Now, TB-infected children and lonely old people have been given a chance to survive."

Zaza Imedashvili, who heads the department for migration, repatriation and refugee issues in the ministry for refugees and settlement, said the first time he had heard about the situation in Disveli was on IWPR's programme.

"Never before did I hear that ecological migrants living in Disveli suffered from health problems," he said. "Though it's not my responsibility, I informed the healthcare ministry, contacted the village's authorities, and together we will try to help these people."

There are no official statistics as to how many people in Disveli are infected with or have died of tuberculosis. Zaur Dargali was told that one in every three residents of the village, a home to 80 families, was a sufferer.

"I think the rapid spread of the disease is largely due to the difficult social conditions in the village. The ecological migrants live in unfinished, damp houses made of concrete slabs," said Dargali. "They have neither drinking water, nor food. Eter Shainidze, the 73-year old protagonist of my report, whose 26-year-old daughter-in-law died of tuberculosis several weeks ago, said her grandchildren, now orphaned, were nearly starving.

"I believe that medical assistance alone won't be enough to curb the TB epidemic. Parallel efforts should be taken to solve these people's living problems."

According to the journalist, after his report was aired, a campaign aimed at studying the health problems of Disveli's ecological migrants was launched, spearheaded by the Georgian national tuberculosis and lung diseases centre. The locals themselves were happily surprised by the news.

“I cannot thank them enough,” said Eter Shainidze. “Until now, no one took interest in our problem. Now, if nothing else, they’ve come here, asking what troubles are. I don’t know how they are going to help us, but we’ve been given hope, and that means a lot to us.”

IWPR has been working in the Kvemo Kartli region for two years, first with the local newspaper Timer, the first independent title to be published in the Azeri language for the region’s Azerbaijani-majority population, and more recently with the radio project, funded by the US department of state, promoting dialogue and regional cooperation.

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