

Georgian IDPs Still Stuck in Limbo

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A lack of coordination means that tens of thousands of people have yet to be rehoused, despite numerous assistance programmes.

More than 20 years have passed since the end of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict, but many of those displaced by the conflict are still living in temporary accommodation.

Abkhazia claims independent status – recognised by Russia since 2008 – but Tbilisi insists that the breakaway entity must come back under central control.

So with no progress towards a peace settlement that would allow them to go back home, the IDPs are still waiting for their turn to receive housing from the authorities.

Most internally displaced persons (IDPs) still live with relatives or friends or are housed in former hospitals, kindergartens, factories, hotels and schools.

(See also: **Georgia: Strangers in Their Own Land**).

The problem in the western region of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti is particularly acute. There are 84,000 IDPs living there, the second largest number of forced migrants after the capital Tbilisi.

At a recent round-table organised by IWPR, experts in the field agreed that a lack of coordination was severely hampering efforts by the state and various local and international organisations to resettle the IDPs.

“There are problems with communication,” said Maia Pipia from local radio station Atinat, herself a forced migrant from Abkhazia. “For so many years, everyone has been doing something: the state, the NGOs and the international community. Everyone wants to help, but the IDPs still do not have better lives. And many think that this process will go on indefinitely. Many do not even have any idea what opportunities they have, how the system of resettlement works and who is responsible for what.”

The event, held in the western Georgia city of Zugdidi in late November, brought together 22 officials, NGO workers and human rights activists.

They heard how ambitious government schemes had foundered in the face of poor communication and coordination.

For example, the ministry of internally displaced persons launched a programme called A Village House in 2014. IDPs could apply for a grant to buy a house anywhere in the country, with the amount dependent on family size. A couple was eligible for 17,000 lari (7,000 US dollars), with a family of three or four people could receive 21,000 lari (8,700 dollars).

Unfortunately, the process was so difficult that few took advantage of the offer.

Rusudan Pachkoria, of the Legal Protection Institute, said not many IDPs had heard of the programme and in any case, the procedure from the submission of the application to receiving a house took far too long.

Pachkoria explained that, across the board, IDPs struggled to access the information they needed. Citing figures from 2014, he said that 45 per cent of them looked to the ministry for IDPs as the main source of information. A further 28 per cent of the IDPs obtained information from other IDPs, and 27 per cent from the mass media. Only one per cent used the internet for this purpose.

The IDPs “go directly to the ministry, call the reception and write letters. And there is a big problem – more often than not they are given incomplete information. And almost always they don't understand it,” Pachkoria said.

Civil servants send the same letters to everyone and give the same bureaucratic answers written using legal language about regulations and laws, he said.

“Everyone comes to us with a single question, ‘What does this mean?’ That is why we always have to explain everything. This is a protracted process,” Pachkoria continued.

Iago Pasandze, head of operations at the Saunje NGO in western Georgia, agreed.

“In fact, even the NGOs do not share information with each other, to say nothing of the IDPs themselves,”

he continued. “No wonder the effectiveness of the special action plan for the resettlement of IDPs and other important programmes is so low.”

Gogi Revia, head of the social services department of the Zugdidi municipality, briefed the IWPR meeting on the local administration’s “one-stop shop” which offered a simplified system of assistance to IDPs, and allowed them to receive all the information about state assistance programmes in one location.

Revia said that this had the potential to be highly effective, and the municipality was now trying to publicise it.

All available assistance programmes are listed on the Zugdidi municipality’s home page, but feedback has indicated that this website is not very user friendly.

Participants agreed that a single information source connecting all the existing IDP assistance programmes from various organisations would be enormously helpful.

Currently, there is little awareness about the existing social assistance programmes financed by the government, even among those working in the IDP sector.

Geronti Kalichava, editor-in-chief of the online publication livepress.ge, said his staff often covered the problems of IDPs, the deficiencies in the resettlement system, the poor living conditions and ongoing projects.

But even for him, as a professional journalist, it was often difficult to find information about specific projects.

“I could not figure out who will build two new housing complexes for IDPs in Zugdidi, which were recently announced by the authorities, and how long it would take for them to be built,” Kalichava explained.

Participants also highlighted the haphazard way IDPs were resettled, for instance, being expected to move at very short notice and with scarcely any information about where they are going and what conditions they can expect.

Pasandze, of the Saunje NGO said he hoped that the IWPR event could lead to “a significant improvement of the existing defects in communication between the sectors.

“It is desirable that follow-up meetings have a thematic focus on specific issues, such as communication problems between the ministry and the community, resettlement, access to jobs and so on,” Pasandze said.

Khatuna Bechvaia from the Tanaziari NGO agreed, adding, “The main problem of all parties is poor communication with the IDPs themselves. They also need to be involved in such meetings, which should be held regularly.”

*The round-table was organised as part of the project on **Women for Equality, Peace and Development in Georgia**, which is being implemented by UN Women, and IWPR’s project **Women Connecting for Peace - a Voice for Change**, funded by the ministry of foreign affairs of Norway.*

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