Georgia: Towards Durable Solutions for IDPs

September 2010

With the adoption of the State Strategy for Internally Displaced Persons-Persecuted (IDPs) in 2007, the government of Georgia exhibited a policy shift. While continuing to maintain return as a settlement option for IDPs, the strategy also supports the integration of IDPs at their current residence. Before the adoption of this strategy, state policy and public discourse indicated that the only potentially durable settlement option for IDPs was to return to their places of origin. The 2007 strategy marked an increased willingness to invest to improve the situation of IDPs now and not only in the event of return.

The government showed genuine will to implement the new strategy after the August 2008 war with Russia. It acknowledged that IDPs displaced in the 1990s and 2008 would not be returning home in the near future and revised its action plan accordingly. Significant national and international resources have been mobilised for IDPs since the war, which have mainly been devoted to housing initiatives. Permanent housing is indeed one of the main outstanding displacement-related needs of IDPs, in addition to remedies for lost property; their other needs include economic opportunities and improved access to health care and education, though these may be shared by some of their non-displaced neighbours.

Figures and patterns of displacement

Over 450,000 people in Georgia have been displaced by several waves of conflict. Fighting erupted in the early 1990s in South Ossetia and soon after in Abkhazia. More recently in 2008, conflict broke out between Georgia and the Russian Federation over South Ossetia. All these conflicts remain unresolved and some 255,000 people are still internally displaced in Georgia proper: 233,000 from the conflicts in the 1990s and 22,000 from the 2008 conflict. Most IDPs originate from Abkhazia and over 60 per cent live in the cities of Tbilisi, Zugdidi and Kutaisi.

Obstacles to securing adequate housing

Inadequate living conditions
Inadequacy of housing remains one of the main problems facing IDPs in Georgia. Of the people displaced in the early 1990s, 58 per cent live in private accommodation, with relatives or friends or in dwellings that they rent or own. The remaining 42 per cent still live in some 1,600 multi-storey collective centres, which are former hospitals, military barracks,
hotels, schools and other buildings that were offered as temporary housing at the beginning of displacement.

Most people displaced as a result of the conflict in 2008 were quickly resettled to cottages in 38 settlements which were newly built for them, and to refurbished apartments; however some continue to live in (mostly unofficial) collective centres and private accommodation.

With regard to people displaced in the early 1990s, living conditions in collective centres are inadequate and in some areas many IDPs in private accommodation endure living spaces of similar or worse standards. Most of the latter group have moved several times since being displaced. The majority of collective centres have not been renovated for over 17 years and do not meet minimum shelter standards. Privacy and space is inadequate as families typically occupy one or two rooms with no separation of the sexes or age groups; this has reportedly led children to do worse at school. Residents share a kitchen and bathroom on their floor, which are usually run-down and unhygienic. Insulation and roofs no longer fully protect against the elements and electrical wiring is often unsafe.

People displaced in 2008 also face problems with housing. While most of them received new housing soon after their displacement, their living conditions are often inadequate in terms of location and habitability. A recent inspection of some of these new houses by engineers showed that nearly every house had a defect which had an impact on the quality of life of those living there. These were reportedly caused by oversights in initial architectural design rather than quick construction. Furthermore, many new settlements are located in isolated and economically depressed areas without adequate social services or public transport links, limiting IDPs’ access to jobs, health care services, schools, child-care centres and other social facilities.

Confused process of privatisation of collective centre space

The transfer of ownership of living spaces in some 500 collective centres to IDPs displaced in the 1990s began in February 2009, and is ongoing. While this is a positive development, the process has met many challenges. Several documents key to the protection of IDPs were revised or developed after the process had started, at the insistence of international organisations. These included the purchase agreement, minimum shelter standards, renovation standards and allocation guidelines.

The provision of information to IDPs about the process and the options available to them has also been piecemeal and inconsistent. A campaign to inform IDPs about the process was launched after the process had started, and as a result some IDPs wished to cancel contracts they earlier signed without full and impartial information.

The process was also complicated by difficulties correcting mistakes in family registration, by the lack of scheduling of visits with IDPs, and by IDPs not residing at their place of registration. Furthermore, the privatised space did not always conform to agreed minimum shelter standards, and existing inequalities in terms of space per person were not addressed during the privatisation process, but rather maintained. Some IDPs have received their ownership documents while others have no information when they will receive them.
Many collective centres slated for privatisation were renovated. Living conditions were generally improved, though the results varied. Construction companies did not always have trained workers and the renovations were often of poor quality. In some cases obvious problems in common areas (such as basements full of water) were not addressed, while in others new problems were created (for example, through the replacement of roofs that were in good condition). IDPs were not asked which renovations should be prioritised, though they had lived there for over 15 years. Another challenge was that renovation standards were not being applied in Tbilisi, on the basis of the reportedly higher value of collective centre space there. The result is that some IDPs are receiving inadequate housing as a supposedly durable housing solution.

A new wave of evictions of IDPs from collective centres and other temporary shelter began in summer 2010, potentially affecting some 37 buildings in Tbilisi, as part of the larger government plan to provide IDPs with their own housing. Between late July and late August, some 1,100 internally displaced families were evicted from nine buildings. The evictions process has not consistently respected Georgian legislation or international standards. IDPs have not always been individually given five days notice to vacate their residence as required by Georgian law, and notification has usually only been received verbally. Information on alternative accommodation has been insufficient for IDPs to make informed choices, and some of the proposed housing has been of a worse standard than what they had previously.

The pace of evictions has not allowed for consultation with IDPs or consideration of individual cases or consultation. Some IDPs are bringing their cases to court, while some have refused the accommodation offered to them because it was located in rural areas of western Georgia, many hours from their current location where they have jobs and their children go to school. Negotiations with the Government are underway to put on hold the eviction process in order to verify the situation of IDPs affected and develop recommendations on how to proceed.

There are many uncertainties over the remaining phases of the durable housing solutions process. It is also not clear which IDPs living in private accommodation will be eligible for an alternative housing solution. The government may exclude IDPs on the basis of property ownership, income and receipt of other housing support, though a UNHCR study showed that property ownership does not necessarily correspond to enjoyment of adequate housing. Usually this property is crowded and in poor condition, and as such, IDPs who own property should not be excluded from durable housing solutions solely on that basis.

Finally, IDPs displaced in 2008 who were resettled to newly built cottages will reportedly receive ownership of their space as did IDPs in collective centres. However, it remains to be clarified which conditions will be attached to the purchase agreement with respect to renting, selling and mortgaging the dwelling.

**Other obstacles to durable solutions**

Beyond housing and lack of remedies for lost property, there is a need to identify which issues IDPs still face as a result of their displacement. There is no current and accurate socio-economic profile of this group. A profiling exercise would clarify the remaining displacement-related issues they IDPs, and make it possible to plan and implement appropriate services to address these issues.
In the State Strategy the government reported that unemployment was higher among IDPs than the non-displaced population. However, given privatisation and resettlement processes, data on employment and income sources of IDPs will need to be updated. This data could inform government activities to improve the access of IDPs to jobs and other income generation activities as stated in the State Strategy on IDPs.

There is also no current data available on the health status of IDPs and whether they suffer from any particular health conditions as a result of their displacement. The same is true for the access to adequate education of internally displaced children, where the limited existing data suggests that many do not have equal access to opportunities available to other children. Another obstacle is that IDPs have not been sufficiently involved in decisions affecting their lives. Information about government programmes has been inadequate or come too late, and there has been insufficient encouragement of genuine IDP participation.

National response

Since the State Strategy was adopted, the government has shown increased responsibility for the protection of IDPs and has cooperated well with international organisations and donors to improve the protection of IDPs. The government has sought significant international input to the national action plan, and municipalities have sought international assistance and consulted with IDPs in drawing up their action plans. However, the Ministry for Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia has generally been left to implement the plans with limited human and financial resources and without much engagement from other ministries. A more comprehensive approach to enabling durable solutions should include prioritisation of vulnerable groups of IDPs, increased consultation and participation of IDPs, regular monitoring of progress towards durable solutions, and greater international coordination and support.

International response

International organisations enjoy privileged, quick and meaningful access to government officials on IDP issues. Major donors EC and USAID will continue to allocate emergency programming funding over the next two years. However, significant needs will still remain after that time. The Ministry for IDPs reported that $800 million is needed to solve the housing problems of IDPs displaced in the 1990s and 2008, and donors have to date pledged some $350 to $400 million.