Displacement in Georgia
IDP attitudes to conflict, return and justice
Policy Brief
April 2011
The issue of internally displaced persons' (IDP) attitudes to conflict resolution, rights and return lies at the heart of the Georgian/Abkhaz conflict. Displaced communities are among the most affected by ongoing conflict and a lack of political resolution; and the issue of displacement is highly politicised.

Discussion at all levels on attitudes of the displaced population to the conflict, return and justice issues has tended to be informed more by assumptions or stereotypes than by evidence. In some instances, discussion on the ‘IDP issue’ has aimed to bolster political positions rather than find pragmatic and concrete steps toward a solution. Over the years, displaced communities have struggled to articulate their feelings about the conflict and move from being passive objects of other people's agendas. This is beginning to change, and is helped by improved integration policies.

Now, for the first time, a survey has been conducted that can begin to shed light on displaced persons’ perceptions, shatter some long-standing myths, and inform ongoing discussions on the basis of empirical evidence. It can also form the basis for feasible action points for policy makers at various levels.

Key areas of policy relevance

The need to focus on welfare and integration; addressing issues of human rights and dignity now is key and does not run counter to the right to return.

The benefits in giving displaced communities a voice, by involving IDP representatives in decision-making processes concerning integration, conflict resolution and other issues key to their wellbeing.

The importance of facilitating broad public discussion on return based on reliable sources of information and awareness of how significantly the situation in Abkhazia has changed over the last twenty years.

That IDPs are a potential resource for peace that could be greater utilised. Their strong rejection of force as a means to resolve the conflict is an important message for all parties to the conflict, and they are a vital resource for those engaging in peacebuilding practice and policy.

That beginning to address injustices that happened in the past could help progress toward conflict resolution.

This policy brief is based on the findings of a survey conducted in June 2010 among one thousand internally displaced persons displaced from Abkhazia as a result of the 1992-93 war. The survey provides insight into IDPs' attitudes to displacement, return, conflict resolution and justice.

The survey was carried out by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) in conjunction with Conciliation Resources, with the financial support of the European Union's Instrument for Stability. It is available, together with a detailed analysis of the findings, and other related documents at www.c-r.org/our-work/caucasus/displacement_in_georgia.php. If you would like further information on the survey, or on our work in the Caucasus, please contact Rachel Clogg: rclogg@c-r.org
Key survey findings

Identification and integration

The survey shows that most respondents feel relatively at ease with Georgian society and nearly half reject the oft-cited assumption that IDPs are discriminated against because of their status. Still, there is much room for improvement and IDPs’ perceptions of their inclusion in socio-political processes in Georgia are less optimistic. They are ambivalent about whether Georgian society is supportive of them: only about half completely or somewhat agree that this is the case.

Many displaced feel politically marginalised: only about a quarter agree that the government takes their concerns seriously. Nonetheless, IDPs tend to cite a high degree of trust in the authorities.

Displacement, socio-economic issues and access to information

The survey confirms that nearly twenty years since displacement from Abkhazia, a large majority of IDPs in collective centres still face serious socio-economic challenges: by far the biggest problems reported were the quality of the living space (51% cite explicit dissatisfaction; only 11% are completely satisfied) and access to employment (an overwhelming 68% are dissatisfied and only 18% say they work; these figures include those that are employed informally or part-time).

Were they to return today, going back to live in their former homes would be impossible, or fraught with challenges, for most (up to 75-85% of the total respondents). Approximately 50% of IDPs would be unable to return to their original homes because they have been destroyed. A further 25-35% would face issues of dealing with current inhabitants; and 62% do not have any official documents that would confirm ownership of the dwelling.

There has been much speculation about “backchannel private property deals” between IDPs and their Abkhaz counterparts, especially since 2008. In general, most people say they disapprove of such sales or rental arrangements. The survey data is inconclusive about whether such arrangements actually happen: either this is not a common trend, or respondents do not wish to discuss this, given the issue’s social and political sensitivity and legal constraints.

The survey confirms that an overwhelming majority (93%) are very or quite interested in events in Abkhazia today. 25% think their level of knowledge about events there is average; 42% say it ranges from below-average to zero. Only 7% say they know a lot.

The main source of information for 70% of respondents is Georgian TV, in part because of the low circulation and uneven distribution of print media in the country. Only 2% rely on the internet – a striking figure given the recent sharp increase in internet use in some sectors of the population in the South Caucasus. Surprisingly few IDPs report relying on personal networks for information. This confirms just how steep the conflict divide is in practice and that regular substantive contact across it is relatively rare.

Return

A quarter of those displaced have been back to Abkhazia since first becoming displaced. The ethnic Georgian-inhabited Gal/i region naturally accounts for a majority of these visits: 64% displaced from Gal/i have been back.

The ability regularly to visit Abkhazia is an important consideration for 85% of respondents. A majority cited maintaining a dwelling (58%) and visiting graves and cemeteries (55%) as the most pressing reasons to visit in case they could not return permanently. Those who have already visited Abkhazia were doing so mainly to visit family and friends or attend weddings and funerals.

IDPs tend to focus on the right of return, often without realising the extent to which Abkhazia has changed, or analysing what conditions would have to be fulfilled for them to be able to exercise that right. The survey attempted to tease out what proportion would consider return to Abkhazia and under what conditions.

85% are only ready to consider returning if Georgia re-establishes control over Abkhazia. 87% say they would consider returning to Abkhazia permanently if Abkhazia reintegrates with Georgia; only 9% would consider return if Abkhazia remains outside of Georgia’s jurisdiction.

Given these figures, IDPs’ projections for whether and in what time frames Abkhazia might reintegrate are an important indicator of their own understanding of how probable return might or might not be. 26% believe that Abkhazia will be reintegrated in the next 10 years; 11% expect significantly longer timeframes; 14% say never. 49% say they do not know. Nearly two thirds think the chances of Abkhazia becoming an integral part of Georgia have decreased since the 2008 conflict (as compared to 39% of the general population of Georgia).

Q. 27 What is the current situation of the dwelling in Abkhazia (%)

- It was ruined / destroyed
- Other people are living there without our permission
- It is deserted
- It is being used by our family (either full-time or several months a year)
- Other people are living there with our permission
- Don’t know

47
23
11
4
2
10
17% say they took part in fighting. 41% say their family members took part in the fighting. Many of these people are likely to face problems with exercising their right of return if and when this becomes possible.

Conflict resolution
Contrary to common belief, the displaced community is not a predominantly belligerent group: 59% believe the conflict cannot be resolved by force. A quarter, however, do not rule out the military option.

A majority of IDPs do not see the conflict as locally driven. 59% more or less agree that the conflict now is not between Georgian and Abkhaz parties, but between the Russian and Western governments. An overwhelming majority (85%) also agree that “the conflict today is not between Georgian and Abkhaz parties, but between the Georgian and Russian governments”.

However, somewhat paradoxically, most would support bilateral conflict resolution activities between Tbilisi and Sukhum/i. Most are pragmatic in their approach to practical conflict resolution activities between Tbilisi and Sukhum/i. They are pragmatic in their approach to practical conflict resolution: 72% would support giving civil society a greater role in activities contributing to reconciliation; 59% would support signing a non-use of force agreement with Abkhazia and 58% would support commencing negotiations with the de facto Abkhaz authorities about Abkhazia’s status (fewer would be in support of such measures with Russia).

Were direct negotiations with the de facto authorities to restart, only a quarter of IDPs would prioritise status discussions. Most would focus on return issues (83%); nearly half would like issues of security along the ceasefire line to be tackled. Unrestricted travel of all Georgians to Abkhazia scored as low as status (24%). Development of trade between Georgian and Abkhaz people scored only 5%; this is noteworthy, given that trade is generally believed to be a useful tool for building up cross-conflict contacts.

The data indicates that perceptions of relations between Georgian and Abkhaz people are not as problem-free as IDPs often state in public. They generally think of their relationship towards the Abkhaz as friendly, but the outward projection is not matched by IDPs’ perceptions of Abkhaz attitudes: only one third see Abkhaz as friendly to other ethnicities.

Justice
There is a clear demand for conflict-related justice issues to be dealt with: interestingly, a majority of respondents feel that injustices that happened in the past should be addressed in order to resolve the conflict; only a third think that past injustices should be left alone.

Judicial mechanisms of addressing legacies of past abuse – such as investigation and prosecution of war crimes – got high approval rates. 78% thought that war crimes should be investigated. 55% consider prosecution of people accused of war crimes to be very or somewhat important in order to feel that past injustices have been addressed.

Reparations – symbolic and financial – would be welcomed by displaced people. Almost three quarters of respondents would support financial reparations to compensate victims or their families. 39% felt the Georgian government should be primarily responsible for financial reparations to the Georgian victims, followed by the Russian government (23%). 50% of respondents felt an apology to them by the de facto Abkhaz authorities was important in order for them to feel that past injustices have been addressed.

Q. 54 When do you think Abkhazia will be reintegrated with Georgia? (%)

Q. 63 In the next two years, would you support any of the following actions that the Georgian government could take in order to find a solution to the conflict? (%)
(Positive answers reported)

A. Activities to establish the fate of missing persons
B. Give civil society a greater role in reconciliation process
C. Sign a non-use of force agreement with Abkhazia
D. Negotiations with the de-facto Abkhaz authorities about Abkhazia’s status
E. Sign a non-use of force agreement with Russia
F. Negotiations with Russia about Abkhazia’s status
G. Officially apologise to the Abkhaz people by Georgian government
H. Military intervention in Abkhazia
I. Recognise independence of Abkhazia

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Q. 65.2 In order to resolve the conflict we should... (%)
We should talk about the rights of Georgians and the rights of the Abkhaz people. We should first make it clear how we are going to live there, otherwise we can’t build a relationship with the Abkhaz people.

Lessons for policy making

1. Focusing on welfare and integration
A focus on improving the wellbeing of displaced people where they are currently located is essential. Return is not likely to happen in the near future, and neither are there expectations among the displaced community that this will be the case. While clear progress has been made in relation to integration in recent years, the survey demonstrates that there is still a way to go. There are very real issues of human rights and dignity, but also livelihoods and political participation, that can be addressed now.

Improving IDP wellbeing and encouraging integration does not run counter to the right to return, or in any way diminish the importance of addressing the issue of return. Public debate on the benefits of integration, challenging concerns that integration compromises prospects for return, would assist the process. Examples from other post-conflict contexts could be useful here. In the case of Cyprus, for example, it has been observed that those who have been empowered and integrated, rather than marginalised, are much better placed to return as and when that becomes a possibility because they have skills and confidence that they can make a contribution to the society to which they return.

2. Giving the displaced a voice
More explicit involvement of IDP representatives in decision-making processes concerning integration, conflict resolution and other issues key to their wellbeing would help address feelings of political marginalisation, and a sense that their concerns are not taken seriously.

More robust mechanisms could be created for exchange between relevant policy makers and the displaced community so that there is a transparent and regular flow of information.

If IDPs have more of a say in policy relevant to them, they will feel more in control over their present lives and futures. This relates to conflict resolution and prospects for return. It also relates to current basic needs linked to their displacement. On housing, for example, the situation would be eased if displaced people had greater involvement in and control over decisions about current (re)settlement arrangements and living conditions.

Decisions taken with their input would take into account issues of great importance to displaced people, such as social safety nets and established relationships in areas where they have put down roots.

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3. Facilitating information exchange, and broad public discussion on return

Pragmatic and realistic debate about return, involving displaced people and the wider Georgian society, is essential to prepare the ground for eventual conflict resolution. The current situation is not conducive to return in the short-term; even were it to be possible today, the survey indicates there would be considerable practical constraints on return.

There is a serious lack of available property to which displaced people could return, there are significant numbers of IDP ex-combatants and there is a perception among many IDPs that the Abkhaz are not friendly to other ethnicities. These elements need to be considered in discussion about prospects for return, and how it might work in practice. They should also be reflected in formulation of practical policy options.

In order to shape debate around issues of return in a way that is constructive there is a strong need for reliable sources of information about attitudes and current affairs in Abkhazia - the place the IDPs had to leave behind almost twenty years ago has changed significantly since. Re-establishing direct interaction between Georgians and Abkhaz at various levels (both across the conflict divide and within communities) is key to increasing understanding, challenging stereotypes and grounding discussion in current realities. Spreading information (of which these survey findings are a part) that reflects the realities of IDP attitudes is also crucial to creating the conditions for conflict transformation.

4. Utilising IDP potential as a resource for peace

There is a need to acknowledge and engage with IDP attitudes to conflict resolution, and in particular their predominant commitment to the non-use of force. If the displaced community, with all its grounds for grievance, is arguing the case for a peaceful resolution process this is a powerful signal.

The respondents in this survey declared interest in bilateral relations between Tbilisi and Sukhum/i, at the political level as well as the community level. Although most saw the conflict today as not locally driven, they acknowledged the need to work at the Georgian/Abkhaz level irrespective of the other layers of the conflict that require attention. There was support for giving local and international civil society a greater role in the reconciliation process; and for personal contacts between Georgians and Abkhaz.

Q.61 Today, do you believe that the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict can be resolved by force, can be resolved by force as a last resort or cannot be resolved by force? (%)

- The conflict cannot be resolved by force: 59%
- The conflict can be resolved by force as a last resort: 6%
- The conflict can be resolved by force: 20%
- Don’t know: 13%
- No response: 2%

5. Responding to the need for justice

A significant number of respondents expressed interest in a process of dealing with the past and addressing grievances. Were such a process to begin, involving all parties to the conflict, this would have the potential to touch on issues at the heart of the conflict and open new possibilities for moving forward. Public discussion on the benefits and risks of this approach, and appropriate ways for these issues to be addressed in this particular context, would be a useful start.

There are a number of practical interim steps that could be taken in the absence of a comprehensive political settlement. Bringing relevant people together across the divide and creating possibilities for displaced people to visit relatives’ graves, for example, would help address immediate needs, build relationships and increase exchange of information.

Preparatory work can be done now on reparation and restitution, in advance of political openings to engage systematically with these issues. Finding opportunities for more open debate about informal arrangements and so-called ‘backchannel property deals’ could be an important element of this. So could learning from experiences of reparation and restitution as practised in other examples of displacement from around the world.