



Out of the margins

Securing a voice for internally displaced people:
lessons from Georgia

2009



conciliation
resources

Front cover: People displaced from Gali region in Abkhazia. They have lived for the past 16 years in this unfinished building used as a collective centre in the neighbouring Zugdidi region. They can see the fields of Gali from there.

All photographs were taken by Dato Meskhi, except where indicated.

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Summary

Over 200,000 ethnic Georgians remain displaced from their homes since the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in the early 1990s. Despite this long-term displacement successive Georgian governments have done little to promote their participation in politics. Instead they have encouraged the displaced to believe they will soon return, and stalled on taking action to secure them an effective political voice. This study documents the experience of a network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists, who carried out a European Commission-funded project in 2007-2008 to help raise political participation among displaced people. It discusses problems with different approaches to the political representation of displaced people. Attitudes among displaced people to conflict resolution, and responses to war in and around South Ossetia in August 2008, are also documented. The study provides insights into the dilemmas of integration and return for the long-term displaced.

Obstacles to inclusion

While displacement affected all communities in the conflicts of the early 1990s, only ethnic Georgian communities have been unable to return to territory now under *de facto* Abkhazian or South Ossetian control. Peace processes have remained deadlocked and successive governments have insisted on return as the only option. As a result displaced people have not been integrated into Georgian society, remaining at the margins of national politics.

Several factors have hampered the political inclusion of displaced people. The concept of integration has negative connotations for many. National politicians emphasizing the return of seceded territories have seen integration as a vote-loser. Displaced people themselves have also feared integration as meaning giving up their right to return.

Institutions surviving from the pre-war era in Abkhazia contributed heavily to these fears. Known as the 'government-in-exile', politicians still holding office from before the war opposed integration, which they saw as threatening their claim to represent a separate, unified displaced community.

The result was an 'either/or' understanding of integration and return: if displaced people integrated, this was widely perceived as coming at the cost of return. Restrictions on the integration of displaced and maintaining government-in-exile institutions resulted in several problems:

- the manipulation of displaced people by a wide variety of political actors for votes, lobbying power and other interests

- entrenched corruption within the government-in-exile
- the violation of voting rights, resulting in political invisibility for displaced people.

Most significantly the taboo on integration resulted in ongoing discrimination, segregation and socio-economic disadvantages for displaced people. Many felt unable to address their social and economic problems, and no institutional framework existed for them to do so.

From separation to integration

After the 2003 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia, the government-in-exile lost much of its influence due to reforms and changes in personnel. The Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation (MRA) became the leading government agency working on displacement; the MRA to some extent lifted the taboo on integration and tried to address current problems. However, displaced people remained excluded. No longer 'represented' by ineffective but nonetheless highly vocal government-in-exile bodies, they also lacked preparation and training in how to relate with national politicians, parliamentarians or political parties.

Many displaced people themselves also feared integrating into Georgian society as individuals, rather than as a community. They still understood integration as the surrender of their right to return, and ultimately, of Abkhazia. It was also seen as possibly cementing forever the socio-economic disadvantages and discrimination that many suffered in displacement.

Integration only began to be more widely accepted when it was separated from ideas of 'assimilation' or 'naturalization', and associated instead with non-discrimination and access to services. The network carrying out the EC project in 2007-2008 actively pursued this model. Network members engaged, for example, in advocacy training, training in grassroots activism among specific groups (especially youth), meetings between displaced people and parliamentary candidates and other national politicians, and explicit treatment of the problems of the displaced in media programming.

These and other activities resulted in various positive outcomes:

- different political views among displaced people, replacing the earlier norm of mass support for the ruling party, and higher turnouts at national elections
- opportunities to influence the development of a government strategy on displacement

- more moderate public views by some politicians on displacement and the conflicts after discussions with displaced people.

Despite these gains numerous problems remain. Although the Georgian government finally adopted a strategy on displacement in 2006, after a good level of consultation with displaced activists, it has yet to be put into practice. And while displaced people have addressed some social and economic problems, they have been less able to influence Georgian state strategy on conflict resolution.

Influencing debates on conflict resolution

A core aspect of the project documented in this study is the work done to raise the ability of displaced people to influence debates and ultimately policy on conflict. National politicians and the government-in-exile traditionally portrayed the displaced as aggressive and vengeful towards communities on 'the other side'. This strategy was pursued to put pressure on adversaries in the peace process, and, by emphasizing displaced people as victims, to secure votes among the wider population and international sympathy.

Yet portrayals of displaced communities as exclusively hostile further diminish the already narrow prospects for their return and living peacefully with communities on the other side of conflict divides. They are also untrue: the work of Georgian NGOs revealed a range of views among displaced people, including many disposed to conciliation. The project therefore aimed to emphasize alternatives to violence in conflict resolution.

The project helped raise levels of debate on the conflict among key displaced groups. For the first time they were able to pose hard questions to national politicians and parliamentary candidates regarding strategies for resolving Georgia's conflicts. Network members were also able to take effective action to defuse aggressive media campaigns.

However, the limitations to advocacy of non-violent approaches were clearly illustrated by renewed large-scale hostilities in and beyond South Ossetia in August 2008. This resulted in new waves of displacement and for many of those displaced since the early 1990s, final confirmation of their long-term status as displaced. These outcomes underscored the need for comprehensive and long-term strategies to safeguard the rights of people living in displacement.

Creating a framework for displaced people to have a voice

Governments must resist the temptation of exploiting displacement to secure votes or international support in conflicts, and must prioritize building capacities among displaced people to make their own choices.

They should:

- Avoid the rhetoric of return at any cost. 'Imminent return' has been shown to be unrealistic and beyond any government's ability to deliver; rhetoric of this kind hinders discussion of longer-term strategies more likely to benefit displaced people.
- Stop portraying all displaced people as hostile towards communities on the other side of conflicts. These stereotypes diminish chances of eventual return and close off space for discussion of non-violent approaches to conflict resolution.
- Present integration as a gradual process compatible with the right of return (or restitution) as and when conditions allow. Understandings of integration as incompatible with return consign displaced people to violations of their rights for as long as displacement continues.
- Implement strategies on displacement through the effective and timely adoption and execution of action plans.
- Encourage displaced people to get involved in local and national politics, and ensure accountability for politicians who represent them.
- Provide forums for the displaced to influence government strategy on displacement and conflict resolution more widely.
- Ensure that government-in-exile institutions comply with basic principles of democratic election and representation, and reform them where they fail to do so.

Internal displacement is an enduring feature of conflict in the South Caucasus. Hundreds of thousands of people remain unable to return to homes abandoned during or in the aftermath of violence. Some of these homes still stand, many others are completely destroyed; in some cases, representatives of 'the enemy', who may themselves be displaced and homeless, inhabit them.

In all cases these homes or their remnants are now located on the territory of rival, secessionist state-building projects. *De facto* authorities controlling these territories demand final settlement of their political status as a pre-condition for the full return of internally displaced populations. *De jure* central state authorities demand the complete return of internally displaced persons before political status can be resolved.

These competing tensions have been a central obstacle to the region's peace processes. For over 15 years, as negotiators have tried unsuccessfully to make these contradictory positions meet, hundreds of thousands of people remain in displacement.

Between February 2007 and August 2008 the European Commission funded a project in Georgia entitled *Building capacity among IDPs for political participation*, facilitated by the London-based non-governmental organization (NGO) Conciliation Resources.¹ This project (referred to throughout this paper as 'the project') built on the experience gained by a network of local activists and NGOs over a decade of work with displaced communities. It sought to advance the political inclusion of Georgia's displaced community during a particularly eventful period in Georgian politics.

This publication aims to document this experience:

- by identifying key obstacles to the political inclusion of internally displaced people
- outlining the experience gained by local NGO activists in confronting these obstacles
- reflecting on both the specific lessons learned during the course of the project and, more generally, some conclusions that can be drawn after a decade of work in this field.

These reflections may prove useful in devising current and future strategies for the political inclusion of internally displaced communities, in Georgia and elsewhere.

There is a close correlation between displacement and disenfranchisement. Many displaced persons are left both uncertain of their rights and unable to assert those rights, despite remaining (on paper at least) fully-fledged citizens of their country. In Georgia this correlation was heightened by the fact that the term of the project coincided with pre-term presidential and parliamentary elections in Georgia, in January and May 2008 respectively.

Furthermore, the fragility of the political context in which this project was implemented was vividly illustrated by the resumption of full-scale hostilities in and beyond South Ossetia in August 2008. The August war and its aftermath resulted in new waves of displacement. For many of those displaced since the early 1990s, Georgian defeat in the war was final confirmation of displacement as a long-term condition.

These outcomes only underline the importance of understanding the dynamics of interaction between displaced communities and surrounding societies. Work must continue to promote the political participation of displaced communities in their immediate environment for as long as displacement continues.

1.1 Internal displacement: pasts, futures and the present

Internally displaced persons, like refugees², are often portrayed in narratives of conflict as 'victims'. Numbers of displaced people are typically cited (and exaggerated) as symbolic of the losses and suffering sustained by a conflict party – usually the party that has been defeated in the violent phase of the conflict. As a living demonstration of the suffering imposed by one's adversary, the internally displaced become a human metaphor for many of the strongest emotions associated with conflict.

The suffering of internally displaced people (particularly those housed in emergency or substandard conditions) is one of the most widely disseminated and recognizable

1 In this paper the acronym IDP (internally displaced person) has been consciously avoided. In a field already overloaded with acronyms, wide usage of the acronym IDP (and its Russian equivalent VPL) can serve to dehumanize its subject. At the cost of sometimes unwieldy language, this paper uses instead formulae such as 'internally displaced people' and 'internally displaced community'. In the Georgian language the terms *itolvili* (literally, 'forced to flee', 'driven out') and *devnili* (literally, 'persecuted', 'pursued') are used in practice interchangeably to mean both 'refugee' and 'internally displaced person'.

2 Internally displaced people are those forcibly displaced as a result of conflict within their own country. They are distinguished from refugees in that they have not crossed an internationally recognized border as a result of their displacement. In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, Georgians define ethnic Georgians displaced from Abkhazia as internally displaced, since the Georgian-Abkhaz border is not internationally recognized. The Abkhaz define them as refugees, since they see the Georgian-Abkhaz boundary as one between two states.



Three generations of displaced women in a corridor of a collective centre.

images of conflict in the South Caucasus, above all those promoted in official accounts. At the same time memories of homes and villages left behind, and the way of life associated with the pre-conflict era, are woven into narratives of loss. Through the link to 'lost' territories that they represent, the internally displaced become a key focal point of multiple assumptions, projections and expectations structuring conflict. They are essentially called upon to fulfil the national aspiration of reasserting control over lost territory, and to embody that claim by returning to their former homes as and when conditions allow. This is indeed the special 'national duty' of internally displaced persons as without their compliance, claims to territory without people ring hollow.

Through this process internally displaced persons are often forced to live in alternate realities. One is the physical reality. For many this has involved living for extended periods in emergency shelter, many in collective centres, former public buildings and 'tent cities'. Despite their centrality to the conflicts, displaced persons in such contexts have often found themselves to be outsiders in their 'own' society. They are treated with suspicion as 'newcomers' competing with surrounding societies for scarce resources. Unable to effectively compete with surrounding societies in an already strained market for jobs, education, healthcare and other social services, they have been relegated to the margins of society.

Dependence on subsidies from the state has been an integral aspect of this experience, but the state has itself lacked adequate resources and the institutional capacity to

equitably manage available resources. Internal displacement has become powerfully associated with a series of negative stereotypes associated with poverty, dependency and marginality. In some contexts, these stereotypes have coincided with regional and/or sub-ethnic identities to produce a complex, layered sense of social distance from the surrounding society.

The second 'reality' is the mythologized reality of the homeland from which they have been displaced. As the human embodiment of the claim to lost territory, displaced communities become a focal point for the imagination about that territory – but only its past and its future.

The past is maintained through a range of mechanisms depending on context. For example, in Azerbaijan collective centres housing displaced persons have been organized by place of origin, so that those displaced from the same region or town are housed together. In newly constructed towns a similar principle applies: employment can only be sought within one's own (displaced) community. Constant reminders, such as newly instituted 'genocide days' and commemorative materials in public buildings, bind the community in its shared trauma.

In Georgia segregation of displaced people in separate schools, health care units and other social services has defined them as a community apart. The accommodation of displaced people in some of the most prominent hotels and public buildings in Tbilisi and other cities served for several years as a constant visual reminder – like open wounds in the urban landscape – of the trauma of displacement. Their

future is imagined through the lens of return: many retain the desire and dream of return, especially those displaced in middle or later life. The scenario of return has been vehemently asserted by central governments as the only acceptable conclusion to displacement.

Through these processes displaced communities are effectively prohibited from living in the present. Rather, they are required to live partly in the past but mainly in the future, a future their governments cannot deliver. In contexts of protracted displacement, such as those of the South Caucasus, displaced communities have effectively been offered a 'temporary' acceptance in surrounding societies. Whatever they have been offered by their governments it has usually been qualified as provisional, pending their 'imminent' return.

Displaced people arrived late in the day in terms of processes of privatization, in which they were not able to participate as equals, if at all. This resulted in many contexts in the violation of rights such as the right to property; other rights, such as the right to vote in local elections and the right to run for local public office, have also been violated. These violations of rights have always been justified by reference to the 'original sin' of displacement – the violation by the enemy of the right to live in their homeland.

This situation has imposed on displaced communities two problematic identities – a social identity in the present associated to varying extents with exclusion and discrimination, and a kind of moral-ethical identity symbolic of a historical wrong that cannot be forgotten. In many ways theirs is an identity similar to that of a diaspora. Paradoxically, however, displaced communities are like an internal diaspora, strangers in their own country.

Two other phenomena arise from this context. First, as a totemic emblem of collective suffering internally displaced communities are typically seen as a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass. In reality, they are an unevenly distributed population with correspondingly different needs, resources and opportunities. State policies in the South Caucasus have taken a long time to acknowledge this diversity, and therefore to be able to differentiate between different categories of need. Uniform policies can leave the most vulnerable exposed, while continuing to support those who no longer need the same degree of support.

Second, their status as a symbol of the claim to 'lost' territory means that displaced communities are very often denied their own voice and are spoken for by a wide range of political actors. National politicians have often seen displaced communities and an aggressive emphasis on return as a source of electoral dividends. Displaced communities have as a result been consistently instrumentalized and manipulated for political gain, rather than having the social, economic and political problems they face addressed.

As peace processes remained deadlocked through the late 1990s and into the new millennium, displacement continued into its second decade. Displaced communities experienced a rising tension between the pressure not to integrate into surrounding societies and the desire to establish, as far as possible, normal lives – and equality with the rest of the population. How have displaced people responded to this impasse and the demands it made of them?

The response of a Georgian network of NGOs, representing wide constituencies within the displaced community, is the subject of this publication. Essentially, this response



A memorial corner in a room in a collective centre in Zugdidi region. The black and white photograph dates from the war in Abkhazia, while the photograph of the young boy dates from the period of displacement.



The view from a collective centre in the village of Rukhi in Zugdidi region. Soft toys and a pot plant provide some relief from the harsh surroundings. Yet refurbishment has begun: new metal and plastic windows have replaced the old window frames.

has taken the form of articulating a different identity for displaced communities – that of mobilized citizens, integrated on an equal basis across economic, social and political dimensions with the surrounding society, while retaining a specific communal identity rooted in a right to return. This strategy reconfigured the displaced as a kind of social movement aimed at achieving certain social and political goals through 'temporary' or provisional integration, defined in terms of freedom from discrimination, access to services and greater political participation.

This approach also envisaged displaced people as having a specific role to play with regard to the peace process. Here the approach was rooted in a pragmatic assumption that as a social or political actor you need to take action in those contexts where you have access.

Where you can exert influence is where you are located now, and for Georgian displaced people, that is in Georgia. Integration can be seen as a way to create levers of influence on Georgian strategies towards the conflict, and as a way to own the displacement agenda in Georgia and avoid being manipulated by other political agendas that do not reflect your interests – CR staff member.

This strategy also carries its risks and problems. On the one hand it allows displaced persons to live in the present, to acknowledge social and economic inequalities as resolvable problems they have the right to address, and not the obligatory burden of a community in exile. The notion of temporary integration also allays fears regarding complete assimilation. Indeed, overcoming the zero sum opposition between integration and return, and its implicit reproach

to displaced communities, has been a key aspect to the activities of NGOs and activists working on displacement.

On the other hand the perceived relinquishing of the right of return (or at least its postponement to some, as yet unclear, future) raises concerns among many that integration amounts to the renunciation of return and, in effect, the surrender of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The success of a project to increase the participation of displaced communities in political life could, after all, lead to their absorption into the broader body politic, and effectively to their disappearance.

This was a concern for many involved in the project, as well as many in the wider displaced population, who remain firmly committed to the eventual realization of the right of return. They believe that a separate communal identity is still essential. It is important to acknowledge that there is no consensus on the 'right' approach to the dilemma of separation or integration. The choices to be made are the subject of passionate discussion among activists and others, both within and without the displaced community.

This publication examines how Georgian civic activists have worked together to overcome the overwhelming emphasis on return, in order to empower displaced people to address the social and political problems experienced in displacement. The findings presented here are based on extended interviews with members of the project's core management team and the leaders of key NGOs working with displaced people. It also draws upon written evaluations of the project, submitted by network organizations, and the input of Conciliation Resources' staff.

In the early 1990s violent conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two autonomous territories within the boundaries of Soviet Georgia, ended with the *de facto* secession of both territories. Large numbers of people were displaced as a result of these conflicts. Although internal displacement affected all of the communities involved in the conflicts, it has remained a more pressing and wide-ranging problem for those on the losing side.³

In the case of Abkhazia, the defeat of Georgian forces in 1993 was accompanied by the flight from Abkhazia of almost the entire Georgian community, although some were subsequently able to return to homes in Abkhazia's southernmost Gali district (known as Gal to Abkhazians).⁴ In the case of the conflict over South Ossetia (known as Tskhinvali region or Samachablo to Georgians) part of the Georgian population in South Ossetia was displaced from there, as was part of the Ossetian population, while there was a significant movement in the 1990s of Ossetians living in other parts of Georgia into South Ossetia and also the North Ossetian Republic in the Russian Federation as a result of the conflict.

Through the late 1990s and the current decade negotiations were mediated by the United Nations (in the case of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (in the case of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict). The sequencing of the return of displaced communities with the determination of the political status of seceded territories has been one of several core themes in the negotiations. However, these negotiations have had a negligible impact on conditions on the ground in the conflict zones. Insofar as displaced communities have returned to their former homes, this has happened largely spontaneously.

Both the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts have seen resumptions of large-scale violence (in May 1998 and August 2008 respectively, though there

has been ongoing low-level violence as well), resulting in further waves of displacement and for those who had returned, displacement for a second time.

2.1 Numbers and waves of displacement

Numbers of both those displaced and returnees are inevitably contested by the conflict parties, and are not a reliable indicator of a migrant and seasonally fluctuating population.

According to the Georgian government's *State Strategy for Internally Displaced Persons of 2007* there were 247,000 internally displaced persons from Abkhazia in Georgia at that time, although the figure of 209,000 displaced persons from Abkhazia was cited by the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation in 2005.⁵ Abkhazians dispute these figures, suggesting instead that only 160,000 people were displaced from Abkhazia. As of December 2008, i.e. after the August war in 2008, up to 279,000 people were claimed to be displaced in Georgia.⁶ The vast majority of these were internally displaced people from the 1992-1993 conflict in Abkhazia; the second biggest grouping was those newly displaced as a result of the August 2008 war.⁷

A substantial part of the ethnic Georgian population of the southernmost Abkhazian province of Gali (almost entirely populated by Georgians prior to the conflict) returned in the years following the war in Abkhazia; again, exact numbers are both disputed and seasonally variable but are thought to be in the region of 45,000.⁸ The Gali district experienced a resumption of large-scale hostilities in May 1998, leading to a second wave of displacement for some 30,000 - 40,000 people. Again much of this population has returned, many on a provisional basis retaining residency registration in undisputed Georgian territory and therefore eligibility to Georgian state social security benefits. A further approximately 2,000 people were displaced from the Kodori gorge in Abkhazia where the area was retaken by Abkhazian forces in August 2008.

³ Representatives of winning sides in the conflicts of the South Caucasus have protested what they see as the monopolization of the displacement issue by their adversaries. For the winners in South Caucasus conflicts, however, satisfaction with the status quo and an apparent conclusion that return to societies on the losing sides of the conflicts is unlikely means that they have not prioritized the issue of return. Losing sides in the conflicts have actively prioritized displacement as a conflict issue both because of the larger numbers of people involved and because it can be seen as a lever of change on an unsatisfactory situation.

⁴ Place-names are highly politicized in the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts. The place-names used here reflect those in use at the onset of the conflicts in the early 1990s; hence 'Sukhumi' is used rather than 'Sukhum', and 'South Ossetia' rather than 'Tskhinvali region' or 'Samachablo'. However, the version preferred by the other side is given in brackets after the first usage in each case.

⁵ See the discussion in International Crisis Group, *Abkhazia: Ways Forward*, Crisis Group Europe Report No.179, 18 January 2007, p.19. Available at http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/europe/caucasus/179_abkhazia_ways_forward.pdf

⁶ Norwegian Refugee Council/Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "252,000-279,000 IDPs as of December 2008", [http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/\(httpEnvelopes\)/234CB919545031A9C12571D2004E4F73?OpenDocument](http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/(httpEnvelopes)/234CB919545031A9C12571D2004E4F73?OpenDocument)

⁷ Since the end of the conflict in Abkhazia Georgian officials have consistently cited the figure of 300,000 and upwards as the number of ethnic Georgians displaced from Abkhazia only. This figure is implausible when related to census data for that population, which indicates that in 1989, i.e. some three years prior to the war in Abkhazia, the Georgian population there was 240,000. Given that part of this population has returned to the Gali district since the end of the war, this exaggeration becomes even more extreme.

⁸ International Crisis Group, *Abkhazia Today*, Crisis Group Europe Report No.176, 15 September 2006, p.11. Available at http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/europe/caucasus/176_abkhazia_today.pdf



A lesson at a school for displaced children in western Georgia. In the top-right window there is a vent for channelling smoke from a stove. Despite the cold the stove has not yet been installed, perhaps to conserve firewood.

Some 60,000 people were thought to have been displaced from South Ossetia as a result of the 1990-1992 conflict there, of whom Georgians were thought to comprise about 10,000. The resumption of large-scale violence in South Ossetia in August 2008 resulted in new waves of large-scale displacement. Although at the peak of displacement 131,169 internally displaced persons of Georgian nationality had been registered by the Georgian authorities, many of these were subsequently able to return to homes in territory forming part of the so-called "buffer zone" of undisputed Georgian territory neighbouring South Ossetia. Of that figure, some 21,000 have been unable to return and currently face the prospect of long-term displacement. This is made up of 19,111 displaced from South Ossetia and 1,821 displaced from the upper Kodori valley in Abkhazia.

The result is a substantial internally displaced community, differentiated into a majority that has lived with protracted displacement since the early 1990s and a minority displaced in August 2008 as a result of the Georgian-Ossetian-Russian conflict. A further approximately 17,000 from Akhgori district in South Ossetia were thought in late 2008 to be facing temporary displacement pending improvements in security conditions and infrastructure.

Internally displaced people from Abkhazia are distributed throughout Georgia but are concentrated in the western regions of Mingrelia and Imereti, as well as the capital Tbilisi and Batumi. Those from South Ossetia were concentrated in the town of Gori and the surrounding region. As of May 2009, approximately 45 per cent of the

internally displaced population was thought to be living in collective centres. Most of these are located in former public or military buildings, such as barracks, former schools, recreational sanatoria and municipal buildings.

2.2 Separateness and alienation

Internal displacement is inevitably accompanied by feelings of distance from the surrounding society. Alienation can arise from perceptions of second-class status, manifested in the form of unequal access to basic social services (when compared to non-displaced citizens); residence in collective centres; and isolation from the mainstream of political and social life. In some cases regional or sub-ethnic identities associated with the place of origin can coincide with these differences to create perceptions of significant social distance from surrounding societies. Identity documents belonging to displaced persons still show former addresses in Abkhazia or South Ossetia as if they were current.

Approaches to separateness and difference from the surrounding society will be examined in detail below. Displaced people are often differentiated from the rest of the population by markers of social disadvantage, such as poor accommodation, health care, unemployment and so on. These trends can be the result of discrimination against them, yet also serve as a basis for their consolidation as a community and can be seen as preventing its dissolution.

In the context of protracted displacement this can lead to an impulse to retain differences emblematic of their



A young displaced woman in full mourning dress in her room in a collective centre. Her husband died during the war, while her son died of pneumonia following displacement. Their portraits can be seen in the photograph on page 8.

marginalization and alienation from the surrounding society. Together with the perception that efforts to assist them are lacking, this situation effectively invites displaced communities to wear their disadvantages with pride, and accept violations of their rights as the price for at least a minimal sense of belonging in a marginal community. As will be detailed in subsequent chapters, shedding markers of disadvantage can be re-framed as a necessary step towards achieving equality with other, non-displaced citizens and indeed towards a process of empowerment.

There are several factors consolidating displaced communities.⁹ The notion of the displaced as a separate and coherent community (whether this was or should be the case) was one passionately debated by those involved in the project, and indeed displaced people at large.¹⁰ For

some, there was a natural affinity between the displaced community and other forms of community, such as national minorities.¹¹ A communal identity was in this view a resource assisting otherwise unprotected individuals and offering the group some lobbying power and influence. For others a separate communal identity was a residual left-over from the first phase of displacement, which may have played a useful role but which needed to be dispensed with if displaced people were to be truly empowered.

Settlement in collective centres, despite being associated with sub-standard conditions, was strongly associated with a communal life. It allowed mutual assistance in sharing information and other goods and a much-needed sense of belonging. Those who resettled to live among the surrounding society sometimes reinforced these feelings:

9 In the case of people displaced from Abkhazia, regional identity associated with their place of origin also played a certain role. Georgians from the Gali district (and the neighbouring undisputed Georgian province of Mingrelia, *samegrelo* in Georgian) belong to a sub-ethnic group within the Georgian nation, known as the Mingrelians, who speak a separate vernacular related to but not intelligible with the Georgian language. As a result of the influence of Russian in Abkhazia many had a poor or only passive knowledge of Georgian at the time of displacement. However, most, if not all, Mingrelians identify simultaneously with a local Mingrelian identity and a national Georgian identity. Particularly in the first years of displacement poor knowledge of Georgian, speaking Mingrelian, dependency on state subsidies and the imperative of work in petty trade for many displaced persons generated a set of stereotypes demarcating the displaced community around ideas of poverty and provincialism. However, project participants agreed that this had considerably lessened over time (with many displaced persons, for example, acquiring active knowledge of Georgian) and that it was now no longer a significant factor in relations between displaced communities and surrounding societies.

10 Impassioned debates regarding the existence or not of a single 'internally displaced community' were a feature of network meetings. Cleavages and sensitivities certainly differentiated the displaced population, for example, between 'old' and 'new' displaced people in the aftermath of the August war. In this paper the term 'community' has been used as shorthand to denote those living in displacement, without necessarily implying any particular unity or cohesion amongst this population.

11 The problematic nature of this analogy for many needs to be acknowledged. A national minority identity in Georgia (as in other parts of the former Soviet Union) has long carried a negative connotation associated, rightly or wrongly, with marginal status compared to the dominant/majority nationality. In post-war Georgia national minorities, and indeed minority identities at large, are associated with the threat of further fragmentation, a perception feeding relationships with minorities characterized by mutual distrust and fear.

some reported back that their reception by new neighbours had been less than welcoming and times in the collective centre were remembered with nostalgia.

Clearly the memories of pre-displacement life are also a major source of solidarity, one which could only be experienced collectively. Project coordinators noted that this could result in certain patterns associated with impulses to preserve group identity, such as the desire among displaced parents for their children to marry within the displaced community. One network member reported that when her son got married, friends and acquaintances among the displaced community inquired whether his bride was herself displaced.

2.3 Return to the Gali district

The only context where some level of return has been possible is to the Gali district, the southernmost province of Abkhazia. This district was entirely populated by Georgians (of Mingrelian background) prior to the war. This mono-ethnic context and the district's location immediately bordering the line of contact appear to have been enabling factors allowing the return of a migrant and seasonally varying population. Such resettlement as exists is thought to comprise mainly older returnees, while younger family members move back and forth over the line of contact (depending on prevailing political conditions).

The status, needs and 'intentions' of the Gali Georgian community are subject to misrepresentation by both sides of the conflict. In Abkhazia this community is regarded with mistrust as a potential fifth column; in Georgia it is also regarded with mistrust as 'endorsing' illegal Abkhazian sovereignty and "collaborating" with the *de facto* Abkhaz authorities by choosing to return. The reality of everyday life in Gali is a situation of permanent insecurity, with regular kidnappings, shooting incidents and various kinds of organized crime. This reality, which neither side appears to have the will to address, serves as a deterrent to further return.

The project did not explicitly address the situation and needs of the Gali population, although these are the subject of other projects implemented by Conciliation Resources and local partners. None of the network members involved in this particular project were based in Gali, although some network members are of Gali origin. Individuals from Gali sometimes attended network meetings but were reluctant to appear in any media reporting or publicity materials as this could prejudice their position in Gali on their return.

2.4 Political context for the project

Over the late 1990s and early 2000s the political environment in Georgia was characterized at times by high levels of instability, poor standards of governance and representation, and persistent problems such as corruption, clientelism, and the dominance of personalities

over platforms. Together, these factors resulted in the low capacity of the state to effectively implement policy.

In 2003 President Eduard Shevardnadze's administration was swept away in the 'Rose Revolution', and replaced by that of Mikheil Saakashvili and the United National Movement. Although the Rose Revolution initially focused on popular desires for social justice, the resolution of Georgia's conflicts soon assumed a central place in official rhetoric. This was accompanied by series of initiatives from the Georgian side aimed at shifting the balance of power in the conflicts its favour; these included the 2006 operation to recapture the Kodori valley in Abkhazia, previously under the control of the *de facto* Abkhaz authorities; the promotion of a rival and pro-Georgian *de facto* administration in South Ossetia; and concerted efforts to counter Russian influence in the conflict zones.

The term of the project (February 2007 – August 2008) coincided with a period of particular upheaval in Georgian politics, with direct consequences for the internally displaced. The arrest in September 2007 of the former Minister of Defence Irakli Okruashvili on charges of extortion and money laundering sparked off a process of wider-ranging protest, culminating in mass demonstrations in November 2007. Following the use of force to disperse these demonstrations President Saakashvili resigned, precipitating pre-term presidential elections in January 2008. Mikheil Saakashvili made the return of displaced populations the central theme of his campaign. He pledged that if he won the election he would secure appropriate conditions for displaced persons to return and criticized "certain international organizations" for promoting their integration.

On 5 January 2008 Saakashvili won the election in the first round with the narrowest possible margin of 53 per cent, amid allegations of fraud and malpractice. President Saakashvili's re-election was quickly followed by unrelated but significant events: Kosovo's declaration of independence on 17 February and the decision in April by NATO not to offer Georgia and Ukraine action plans for membership. Peace proposals to the Abkhaz involving the establishment of free economic zones, the representation of Abkhaz in central Georgian government structures and other measures, which had not been shared with the Abkhaz authorities prior to their public release, were rejected by Sukhumi (known as Sukhum to the Abkhaz) in March. On 21 May parliamentary elections were held in Georgia. They were again characterized by controversy, including alleged attacks on residents of Abkhazia's southernmost Gali district who were travelling across the conflict divide in order to vote.

In August rising tensions in South Ossetia escalated into full-blown war involving Georgian, Ossetian and Russian forces (plus Abkhaz forces in Abkhazia). Most, if not all, of the ethnic Georgian population of South Ossetia fled the region; displacement also affected many thousands of Georgians in the town of Gori and the surrounding area,

as well as thousands of Ossetians and others fleeing north from South Ossetia into the Russian Federation. Most of those displaced in and around Gori were able to return home in the aftermath of the conflict. Those facing long-term displacement are mainly those from inside South Ossetia and the Upper Kodori valley of Abkhazia.

In the aftermath of its defeat of Georgian forces Russia recognized Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence, significantly altering (at least for the moment) the

balance of power in the negotiations. Access across lines of contact has become more restricted, with Gali returnees reportedly required to pay bribes in order to cross into Zugdidi region and beyond. Access to South Ossetia from Georgia has been completely restricted since the August 2008 conflict, by both the authority in Tskhinvali (known as Tskhinval to Ossetians) and its Russian allies, and by Tbilisi, which views Abkhazia and South Ossetia as occupied territories and through legislation has sought to restrict access to them.



A photograph of presidential candidate Mikheil Saakashvili's visit to a collective centre in Tskhaltubo during the pre-election campaign in late 2007. The inscription reads: "Thank you, I wish you health and return to your home. M Saakashvili."

Displaced communities and political inclusion in Georgia

The political inclusion of the displaced community in Georgia has been structured by the three-way relationship between the displaced community itself, the residual institutions 'belonging' to that community from the pre-displacement era (known as the government-in-exile and widely referred to in Georgia as the 'legitimate' government of Abkhazia) and central government.

Over time two opposed models for the political inclusion of the displaced community emerged through this relationship. The first offered inclusion as a separate community via its 'own' dedicated institutions the – government-in-exile – which ostensibly represented the displaced community and lobbied for its interests. According to this model the displaced community acted as one of many social and political groups in the country, with its own leadership and communal identity. The second model essentially bypassed separate government-in-exile institutions to articulate a direct relationship between central government and displaced persons as individual citizens. This second model assumes a stronger central state, less amenable to lobbying interests, and the inclusion of displaced persons in national, mainstream political parties, rather than as a separate lobby. These models represent very different kinds of 'voice' for displaced communities, and suggest the following questions.

How are the interests of displaced persons best defended and promoted – as a community or as individuals? What role can residual government-in-exile institutions play? Should they be preserved, or should displaced communities be encouraged to participate in mainstream politics without explicit differentiation?

3.1 Inclusion as a separate community with dedicated institutions

Over the first decade or so of displacement, coinciding more or less with the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze, the first model of political inclusion predominated. The institutions of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) of Abkhazia were maintained in exile through the automatic renewal, without re-election, of the mandate of 11 parliamentary seats held by ethnic Georgians in exile. These 'represented' Abkhazia and the continued existence

of the ASSR's Supreme Soviet, under the chairmanship of Tamaz Nadareishvili.

In Georgia the government-in-exile was taken to be the legitimate continuation of sovereign Georgian government in Abkhazia (as opposed to the *de facto* authorities in Sukhumi). This was of course now a government without territory or an electorate, 'governing' instead the scattered population of those displaced from Abkhazia.¹² As such, the government-in-exile became the most visible manifestation of the displaced community on the Georgian political scene in this period. However, these institutions rapidly became enmeshed in the clan and personal networks structuring Georgian politics; the question of representing displaced persons' interests was consequently subordinated to these vested interests.

Tamaz Nadareishvili and the government-in-exile were strongly associated with hardline positions on the resolution of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict. Nadareishvili, for example, authored a number of books narrating a history of the 'genocide' of the Georgian population in Abkhazia. Nadareishvili allegedly also supported partisan movements carrying out operations against Abkhaz forces in the conflict zone. Although central government distanced itself from the partisan movements, the government-in-exile was officially affiliated to Shevardnadze's ruling Citizens' Union of Georgia party.

Throughout successive parliamentary and presidential elections in the late 1990s and early 2000s the internally displaced community became known as one of the most reliable pillars of electoral support for the ruling party and incumbent president. The 'displaced community's vote' was regarded as a bloc of votes, delivered by the community's leaders to the central government in return for their status and privileges. Displaced persons encountered strong pressure to vote for incumbents, and they also knew that if they did not go to vote, their vote would in any case be given to ruling party candidates.¹³ This trend was reinforced by the fact that until 1999 displaced persons could only vote for candidates fielded in the party list section of the vote.¹⁴ This provision effectively served to distance displaced persons from local politics, and consequently, their immediate social and political environment.

12 Georgians displaced from South Ossetia did not bring government-in-exile institutions with them, mainly because the displaced community was much smaller than that from Abkhazia and did not possess majorities in the Soviet-era autonomous institutions of the former South Ossetian autonomous region.

13 Project participants agreed that by withholding their vote some displaced persons could and did make a form of protest, which could be seen as a form of political participation. This situation gives rise to the apparent paradox of participation through abstention. Abstention is of course a political act, but in the context of widespread electoral malpractice displaced persons who did not go to vote would be well aware that their vote would nonetheless 'be cast', without their participation, in favour of the ruling party.

14 Party list candidates are elected from a central, sequential list according to the proportion of the overall nationwide vote secured by their party. Majoritarian candidates win according to whoever secures the most votes within a single electoral district. Majoritarian candidates are consequently much more engaged with local politics.

Nadareishvili was nonetheless known for sharp criticism of government, despite being officially affiliated to it. This was in essence a tactical opposition: purportedly lobbying in the name of the displaced community's interests, Nadareishvili sought specific benefits for his clan, such as a higher place on party lists of parliamentary candidates, and, to some extent for his constituency, for instance in the form of aid for displaced persons. It was also a symbiotic relationship with central government, in which 'opposition' was strictly choreographed. By apparently voicing the grievances of a consolidated, coherent displaced community, the government-in-exile gave leverage to central government in the conduct of the peace process. In the words of one project coordinator, President Shevardnadze "created Nadareishvili as a scarecrow for Abkhazia", intended to intimidate Abkhazia and leverage international sympathy and support for the Georgian position in the conflict. This special position on the Georgian political scene afforded the government-in-exile considerable privileges and leeway: one project coordinator recalled an official from the Red Cross observing in the late 1990s that while he had never had a problem securing a meeting with the president, he had never been able to meet Nadareishvili.

What were the outcomes of this form of representation for the wider displaced community? Project participants considered that although government-in-exile institutions ensured some degree of political visibility for displaced communities, their activities did not represent those communities in any equitable, democratic or accountable way. There was no mechanism or process for the concerns of displaced persons to be delegated to government-in-exile institutions, so they could not be seen as 'representative'. Rather, the promotion of displaced communities' interests was used as a lobbying resource by government-in-exile institutions in the pursuit of their own interests. Displaced communities could receive some moral satisfaction that they were not totally ignored as a result, but this did not translate into tangible benefits at the level of the individual.

This was an imitation of representation but one, nonetheless, that could result in some minimal acknowledgment and satisfaction of the displaced community's needs. In the conditions of political chaos and social breakdown in Georgia during and after the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, government-in-exile institutions provided at least some basic degree of protection for parts of the displaced community.

The work of these structures could be seen as positive at that moment in time. Over time, however, those structures in the form of Tamaz Nadareishvili became the sole representation of the community. He wanted to establish a monopoly on this bloc of people and what they represented in terms of political resources he could deliver to patrons higher up in the state – project coordinator.

We created a 'virtual Abkhazia' through continuing and reproducing those structures, and maybe that was not a bad thing in the conditions of chaos that existed then in Georgia. Those structures became a means of securing resources, wages and basic goods like soap at that time. But then this virtual Abkhazia became a brake on representing the displaced community, a source of corruption and a dysfunctional organism within the state
– project coordinator.

The continued existence of the government-in-exile and the lobbying power on which it depended demanded the continued visibility of a separate displaced community. Nadareishvili and others in the government-in-exile were therefore categorically opposed to the integration of displaced communities as this would represent the dissolution of 'their' constituency and their influence. This paradigm also demanded a separate leadership – only a leadership from within the displaced community could speak for that community. This system was dependent on a kind of permanent exclusion of displaced people from the political mainstream. Effectively, for as long it was visibly poorer and excluded the displaced community could secure some ostensible lobbying power. The principal challenge to this form of representation would arise from a narrowing of the distance between the displaced community and surrounding society: in other words, if displaced persons were to become more integrated.

3.2 Inclusion as individuals in the mainstream of Georgian politics

Shortly after the Rose Revolution in January 2004 Nadareishvili was forced to resign after a vote of no confidence by the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet-in-exile. He was replaced by Temur Mzhavia, an activist from the now ruling National Movement party. The 11 parliamentary deputies still representing Abkhazia were relieved of their seats, now left vacant, spelling the end of the faction 'representing' the displaced community in parliament. Partisan operations in Abkhazia were also largely stamped out.

Under the new administration the Ministry for Refugees and Accommodation (MRA) became the principal agency dealing with the displaced community. As a result of these changes the government-in-exile lost virtually all of its power, certainly in Tbilisi, though it retained some influence in the regions in the form of key individuals in local government able to hold onto their posts. At the same time the new administration initiated a debate on the concept of integration as a policy compatible, rather than mutually exclusive, with return. This approach earned plaudits from various international organizations promoting durable solutions to internal displacement.

These changes pre-supposed a radical shift away from the previous model of political inclusion. Internally displaced persons were no longer represented by their



An icon of the Virgin Mary, the national flag of Georgia (also the flag of the ruling party, the United National Movement) and a soft toy decorate this living room in a collective centre.

'own' separate government institutions or in parliament. Government-in-exile institutions were emasculated as they were re-staffed with activists and supporters of the ruling party. Nothing symbolized the irrelevance and purely symbolic role of the government-in-exile under the new administration more clearly than its relocation to the Upper Kodori valley, following the 2006 operation re-establishing Georgian control over this area.

The Upper Kodori valley, populated until 2008 by some 2,000 people, is a remote mountainous district, inaccessible for most of the year due to hazardous climatic conditions. Few locations could be farther from the real exercise of governing power and influence. Yet at the same time the Kodori valley is in Abkhazia; the relocation could create the illusion of the 'legitimate' Abkhazian government actually ruling from within Abkhazia – much as in the same way the alternative *de facto* authority under Dmitri Sanakoev, based in the South Ossetian village of Kurta, governed territory in South Ossetia. To confirm this symbolism, the Upper Kodori valley was renamed 'Upper Abkhazia'.

At the same time amid energetically pursued programmes of urban privatization and renewal, many displaced persons were relocated from some of the most visible emergency shelter they had been inhabiting over the previous decade, such as Soviet-era hotels in central locations in Tbilisi, Batumi and other locations.

These changes were not necessarily related to the objective of improving the representation of displaced people in government. They were related more to the objective of removing alternative power bases in society. This is evident in President Mikheil Saakashvili's comment

in an interview with the magazine *Newsweek* on 29 May 2006: "We resettled refugees out of the hotels so as to be able to approach the problem of excess lobbying power more calmly". Although these measures did result in the sweeping away of corrupt, discredited and dysfunctional government-in-exile institutions, and tackled the demonization of integration, they did not replace the previous model with a structured alternative.

While the displaced no longer confronted government-in-exile institutions monopolizing their entry point into mainstream politics, they now faced entering that space – from which they had for a decade been estranged – as individuals in an organizational and institutional vacuum. A corrupt, dysfunctional but nonetheless multipolar system was effectively replaced with a one-party monopoly, which displaced people were not equipped to challenge. The result, in the words of one project coordinator, was "a situation in which the voice of the displaced community was not heard at all".

Furthermore, return did not disappear from positions articulated by leading officials. Indeed, the pledge of imminent return was a central motif of President Saakashvili's campaign in the run up to the 5 January 2008 presidential election. This suggests that even if at the level of policy-making within the MRA the usefulness of integration as a strategy was adopted as policy, there were still electoral dividends to be gained from promoting return. The result was a flurry of mixed messages. The internally displaced community was still encouraged by the president to believe in return, while being encouraged to integrate by the leading state agency on displacement.

Aims and progress of the project

4

Raising levels of political participation is no simple or easily defined goal. It entails a wide-ranging and long-term shift in social consciousness across a critical mass of individuals. In the context of post-Soviet societies, this involves a significant shift away from popular cynicism towards new expectations of accountability of government institutions. Furthermore, in an environment of generally weak political representation, people tend to consider the rights of marginal groups, such as displaced people, irrelevant.

Coordinators for the project defined the goals of the project in different ways. Some emphasized its non-directive nature as allowing displaced communities to make informed choices over their future options:

My aim in this project was to instil the idea among displaced communities that it was in their hands to change their situation, that they could change their situation themselves through organization and working together, and not with Kalashnikovs. The idea was that people should make informed choices about the problems they confronted – network participant.

The project could also be seen as accelerating integration into the mainstream of Georgian politics as a means to end the manipulation of the displaced community associated with the retention of separate institutions. These institutions, as noted in Chapter 3, had become widely associated with political passivity and corruption. All, however, agreed on the necessity of patient, long-term engagement with the issues involved:

If anything this project has mapped the terrain, it has made clear the enormity of the task in hand and the need for consistent, long-term engagement. It has put a beginning to the process, but without continued engagement it will remain only that: a beginning – network participant.

4.1 Brief description of the project

The project included a number of different strands of activity:

- The mentoring of network member organizations by the core management team, all experienced activists: more than 35 mentoring sessions were held during the course of the project in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Tskhaltubo and Zugdidi.
- Training in activism and advocacy: two seminars were conducted for the network by a Latvian parliamentarian and member of the Permanent Assembly of the Council of Europe.

- An advocacy working group.
- Network meetings: seven meetings of the entire network were held over the course of the project. These were generally two- to three-day events at which a wide range of political issues were discussed and strategies formulated.
- Activities encouraging grassroots activism among particular groups. These included some 25 workshops with youth, 24 meetings with ex-combatants and workshops with women.
- Two weekly radio programmes were broadcast by Radio Atinati, based in Zugdidi, as part of the project. One of these programmes specifically addressed the problems of displaced people, such as schooling for displaced children, the sale of Georgian homes in Abkhazia and registration issues for the displaced, through the format of an invited studio guest and phone-in participation by members of the public. Studio guests included government officials from the relevant ministries, NGO activists and human rights experts. The second programme profiled individuals from the displaced community who had successfully pursued careers in their chosen field. In addition Postfactum Radio produced and broadcast twenty-two analytical radio programmes targeted towards internally displaced people.
- A number of public debates were organized on specific themes. For example 29 debates were held on a discussion paper on the status of Abkhazia within a re-integrated Georgian state. Ten public screenings of films produced by Studio Re addressing the conflict were also held; Studio Re also produced eight studio discussions on various themes.
- Finally meetings were organized with national politicians and officials. These included officials working in electoral structures and candidates running for majoritarian constituencies in the parliamentary elections of May 2008.

4.2 Working as a network

The network implementing the project came into being in the years 2000-2001 and was already part of the socio-political landscape of organizations working among displaced communities. The project design was therefore conceived with the network in mind and was implemented through an already existing set of actors and resources. The sequencing of activities is therefore important: in the words of one coordinator. "the project could not create the network, but the project could deploy the network to effectively address a set of goals corresponding to a particular stage of community development".



Network members and CR staff at a meeting in July 2008.

Views differed on the advantages and disadvantages of formalizing and institutionalizing the network. It has to date never been formally identified by a single name or 'brand'. It had informal mechanisms for procedures such as adopting new members. Just two key principles governed their inclusion: a willingness to seriously explore peaceful means of resolving conflict, and a prior connection to work with displaced communities. Some of the coordinators felt that the loose, flexible nature of the network was an advantage: "we did not want to become slaves to protocol". Other participants regretted the lack of a name, charter or set of founding principles. In their view, this made its work difficult to explain to outsiders; they felt that clearer identification a coherent, single entity could also bring greater recognition in official circles.

Twelve network organizations were named as partners in the project; many more participated in the network. According to one coordinator, some of the 'junior' partners actually turned out to be the most daring and direct in their dealings with government representatives.

Several advantages of working as a network became clear during the course of the project. It became a primary source of rapidly transmitted information on events, above all from the regions. Members passed information from their local constituencies and also built trust between those in Tbilisi and those in the regions. It also served as a cushion against the cyclical nature of funding, providing

ongoing moral support and motivation despite funding obstacles. By continued engagement and moral support the network could support organizations through 'fallow' funding periods, allowing some organizations to survive that otherwise might not have done. Participation in the network also encouraged constructive competition and cooperation, as members provided skills and resources lacking in others and learned from others in return.

Through the course of its work, the network also became a mechanism for comparative learning. Via the network concrete, individual experiences of problem solving could be distilled and generalized for application elsewhere. In this sense the network provided a framework for comparing and relating experiences in tackling similar problems in different contexts across the country. One coordinator said:

I was amazed by the rise in analytical capacity among NGOs working with the displaced over the course of the project. There was a conscious search for the reasons for differences between Tbilisi and the regions; by the end of the project they were identifying systemic features that could account for the differences in the situation in Zugdidi, for instance, rather than explaining them in terms of Zugdidi's uniqueness. This was a significant shift..

There was also a shift in ambition. At the beginning of the project NGOs preferred to limit themselves to narrow categories of constituency, such as working with youth, women or veterans. Over the course of the project NGOs demonstrated greater desire and capacity to work with wider constituencies of displaced people.

In some instances the network also provided a kind of 'rapid reaction mechanism' directed at overturning misguided policy. One example is the *chemi saxli* ('my house') programme implemented by the MRA, according to which displaced persons were required to present evidence that they owned property in Abkhazia. Ostensibly this programme was intended to preclude fraudulent registration: those who could not prove ownership of property in Abkhazia would be stripped of their status as displaced and the attendant benefits. As many displaced people did not possess this kind of documentary evidence of ownership, this programme threatened to deprive them of their status. After mobilization through the network and the publication of a critique in the newspaper *24 saati* ('24 Hours') the policy was rescinded and the minister removed from office.

Peacebuilding work is always controversial. Participating in a network also offered some protection and solidarity when network members were being interviewed by security services or misquoted in the media. The network symbolized a constituency favouring, though not unambiguously, the non-violent resolution of the conflict, a view that could invite aggressive resistance from supporters of more militaristic approaches.

Weaknesses remained, however. One coordinator noted that network members still lacked initiative, waiting for direction from the coordinators or Conciliation Resources rather than acting independently. This suggests the need for long-term engagement to build the capacity of network members to a point where they can survive without external input.

4.3 Working with displaced people

Certain key aspects to working with displaced communities manifested themselves during the course of the project. Trust is absolutely essential in work with displaced communities, who because of their experiences have a heightened sensitivity to being instrumentalized. Such defensive stances arising from previous exploitation can only be addressed through patient, long-term work. This context has important implications in terms of how work with these communities is carried out. For example, the network's experience speaks of the benefits of working simultaneously across a range of community needs:

When someone needs clothes and you bring information, it is not enough. If someone needs information and you bring sugar, it is not enough. You need a spectrum of activities serving the needs of this community. These communities are characterized by

a very high level of mistrust and they are constantly afraid that they will be used by someone. You need to constantly show them that you are working for them and not for you – network participant.

A gradual and long-term perspective needs to be taken when introducing sensitive themes such as gender equality or political participation. Handled insensitively, such work can result in the unintended conflation, for instance, of political participation and joining the opposition.

The concentration of displaced people in collective centres can skew project work aimed at improving their conditions. The centres provide a natural focus for such work, but can leave those living dispersed outside of such centres exposed. This is relevant for both governments and NGOs working with displaced people and donors financing projects for the displaced:

It is much easier for governments to organize and structure aid to displaced persons when there are 500 people all together in one place. It's much more effort to identify dispersed, smaller units of displaced persons who can be more genuinely vulnerable. The logic of donor aid follows the same principle: donors seek a quantifiable and visible effect and so they prefer projects focused on collective centres. It is widely assumed that those displaced persons who are more dispersed are more integrated. This can be a dangerous assumption: they may actually be more in need but their needs are invisible – network participant.

4.4 Working with government

Working as a network also provided greater resources to influence local and central government institutions. Presenting a collective front of organizations was a significant shift away from the previous practice of individuals applying to government offices. In the words of one coordinator, "The network made officials sit up and listen". Access to official structures improved significantly through the work of the network. Furthermore, network members who had established good relations with officials in one context were able to mediate for others to enter that context. In an environment where personal relations still have a considerable impact on the work and interaction of organizations this was an important benefit.

We learned to distil our various concerns and to interact with officials as a network. They respected our numbers and were aware that the network was a conduit for information. If they acted in a certain way in one location, everyone would know about it through the network. This proved to be an effective mechanism for responding to common foot-dragging tactics among officials, for example, when they would claim that some issue is not in their field of competence. That would go straight to Tbilisi via the network for verification – network participant.



Participants at a network meeting in July 2008.

In Tbilisi the network was able to engage directly with the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation (MRA), the key agency responsible for policy on internal displacement.

Probably the most successful example where displaced community organizations (not only those engaged in this project) were able to influence the policy process was during the development of the government strategy on internal displacement between summer 2005 and February 2006. A working group was established within the MRA with four sub-committees addressing economic, social, legal and resettlement issues respectively. Representatives of displaced community NGOs participated in the subgroups as speakers, creating a direct link between constituencies of the displaced and the policy-making process. Focus groups distilled the concerns of the wider community and fed recommendations into the strategy.

The Georgian experience suggests, however, that governments attribute more importance to the production of a strategy than to its implementation. Adoption of the strategy secured approval from international organizations advocating durable solutions to internal displacement. It could also be interpreted as a constructive move towards conflict resolution and fulfilment of the Georgian government's obligations to the displaced community under international human rights law.

However, the strategy formally adopted by the Georgian government in 2006 was never properly implemented. This was partly due to a shortage of resources and partly due to wider political developments. An action plan introduced for discussion in the Georgian Parliament in July 2008 was overtaken by events as the hostilities broke out in South Ossetia in August. According to one coordinator, "we

lost hope that the strategy would be implemented a long time ago".

A clear axis opened up between Tbilisi and the regions. While they are significant factors across Georgia as a whole, the influence of specific personalities and local/clan affiliations remains strongest in the regions. Coordinators noted that the influence of the government-in-exile remained strongest in some regional locations, for example in Imereti. In other regional locations, such as Mingrelia, local government remained tightly controlled by local clans and was correspondingly less amenable to lobbying (see Chapter 5).

4.5 The advocacy group

The advocacy group was formed as an information-gathering and analytical unit within the network. It was aimed at promoting the activation of displaced persons in both participating in political processes and resolving their social and housing problems. Specifically, the advocacy group aimed to achieve the following:

- analysis of the local effectiveness of the network in identifying problems within displaced communities, how these problems were addressed through appropriate recommendations and the lobbying of government structures to overcome them
- the organization of meetings with officials responsible for decisions directly affecting displaced people
- creation of a direct, two-way chain of effect linking government, NGOs and displaced people.



Network members in discussion during a seminar held in 2006.

The advocacy group undertook the following activities:

1. Informing governmental structures about the purpose and aims of the project, bringing supporting arguments and stressing the need for mutual assistance. A series of meetings was organized, at which official views on integration, state strategy and displaced people's social and housing problems were discussed. The advocacy group promoted a differentiated approach to displaced people at these meetings and emphasized the benefits of using the experience and human resources of NGOs in addressing social and housing problems. In response the MRA invited the advocacy group to submit its proposals and recommendations for the elaboration of the state strategy on addressing internal displacement.
2. The presentation of the project in the regions, with the participation of local government officials. It was emphasized that the problems of employment, access to good medical care, and weak social programming are more serious in the regions and the problem of creating normal living conditions for people is especially severe.
3. Mentoring displaced people to demand more in terms of the information received from local

government offices, to send information through the MRA's 'hotline' and to convey information on various kinds of problems. The advocacy group posed questions about the long-term problems of displaced people, framing them in terms of the 'Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement'. Among the issues raised were the importance of displaced persons' participation in the administration of collective centres and of the creation of community organizations by displaced people themselves. This work had significant results in the formation of community organizations, especially where collective centres had already passed over to private ownership.

4. A manifesto highlighting the socio-economic and political problems of displaced people was prepared and distributed to political parties as an invitation to work together with the displaced community, and to acknowledge displaced people's problems in political party platforms.

As a result of this work a number of problems were at least partially overcome. First, alienation and distance between government and displaced people lessened.

The authorities realized that working with the network gave them a realistic view of conditions and circumstances within

the displaced community. They were able to react in a more agile fashion to the problems since they received not only information from the NGOs but also recommendations emanating from the grass-roots level on how to address them. NGOs effectively served as a conduit in a two-way communications link between government and individual displaced people.

Although there were cases of 'traditional methods' – such as the manipulation of NGOs as a political instrument ("do what you are told") – in a wide range of cases across the regions local government authorities proved more flexible. Cooperative working relationships were established with network members, which continue to this day (for example in Imereti). These working relationships at the same time exposed the incompetence and incapacity of government authorities (this was especially true of government-in-exile institutions) in dealing with the problems of displaced people.

The work with political parties brought home that politicians did not know how (and did not have the resources) to resolve the problems of displaced people. For political parties this underscored a belief that they did not have an electorate among the displaced community. Displaced people, meanwhile, saw that their interests were not reflected by many parties. Work continues by the network to encourage displaced people to promote candidates from within their community for election to local government and higher office.

The forced eviction of displaced people – with the excess use of force by police – on 24 April 2007 caused an outrage in society and among NGOs. The latter wrote a letter to the Georgian Parliament demanding the regulation of resettlement in ways compatible with human rights standards. As a result, the network successfully secured amendments to Article 172 of the Civil Code and to Article 9 of the Law on Police. These amendments secured the protection of displaced people from forced eviction from buildings housing them.

5.1 Integration

The term 'integration' has proved to be one of the most controversial and enduring themes in working with displaced communities in Georgia. Until 2004 integration was framed in terms of a zero sum choice in opposition to return: if displaced people integrated into local society, they surrendered their right to return. This accounts for the significant degree of resistance to the idea of integration: it was associated with capitulation.

Displaced people were always offered a choice: return or integration. People feared that choice. Integration was perceived as the setting in stone of the current situation, so the poorer the displaced person and the worse their conditions, the more resistant they were to the idea of integration. It was only when the two concepts were presented as compatible that integration began to become acceptable – network participant.

There was resistance both within the displaced community and Georgian society at large to the idea of integration. Among the displaced integration was initially understood as the 'fixing in stone' of their current predicament as a marginalized and socially disadvantaged group. It was only through changing their understanding of integration as a means to improve current living conditions and secure dignity, without dismissing the long-term ideal of return, that integration became an acceptable concept. Perceptions of integration as capitulation – attended by slogans such as 'We've surrendered Abkhazia' – were a major obstacle to policies addressing the socio-economic needs of the displaced. This situation only changed when displaced communities accepted integration as a stage, a necessary first step to the future.

There were opposing views on how displaced people should seek to influence the political process: as a separate, coherent community or as individuals, integrated into mainstream political parties and structures. There was no consensus on the desirability of either approach among the project's coordinators. For some, the optimal approach was to not to stress difference between internally displaced people and surrounding societies:

Displaced people do not see themselves as a separate society. They consider themselves citizens of Georgia, but whose rights are violated on account of their inability to return to Abkhazia as fully enfranchised citizens. Yet displaced people were perceived in Georgian society as a marginal group, which had just one core goal: to return to Abkhazia, and to this end they were prepared to put up with a

range of disadvantages... The perception of displaced people as second-class citizens was further rooted in the fact that they were not permitted to participate in local elections. Although even when the prohibition on their participation in local elections was lifted, many of the displaced were passive, and did not participate in elections. Several political parties exploited their social situation and manipulated them by promising material and social assistance in order to receive their votes. The electoral platforms of these parties were very populist, promising swift return to Abkhazia and the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity. But this only contributed to distrust among the displaced towards government and the spread of political nihilism among the community – network participant.

For as long as displaced people were perceived and presented as a collective defined by the aspiration to return, rather than a set of citizens demanding equal conditions, they remained vulnerable to exploitation. The portrayal of the displaced community as an angry community of grievance, a strategy rooted in gaining leverage in the peace process with the *de facto* authorities in Abkhazia, both simultaneously prolonged their socio-economic marginalization and encouraged their alienation from the political process.

What is more important: people or territory? It turned out to be territory, as the Georgian government made hostages out of the displaced community. The government should have avoided the language of threat and intimidation, it should have avoided using the displaced community to frighten the Abkhaz. Instead it should have promoted ideas of integration, social issues and dignity for the displaced and adopted a cautious policy warning that return would be a very long-term eventuality. Governments should not portray displaced communities as some homogenous mass thirsting for return and revenge: that is not in the interests of either those displaced or conciliation more generally – network participant.

Integration became more palatable as an option when it was consciously separated from ideas of 'assimilation' or 'naturalization' and instead framed as non-discrimination and access to services. The notion of 'temporary' or provisional integration played an important part in this process, one aimed at improving the current conditions of the displaced.

Yet a wide margin of disagreement over the implications of integration remains. For some the disappearance



A room in a kindergarten in Tbilisi, used to temporarily provide shelter for people displaced from South Ossetia in August 2008. The first electrical items to be installed were an improvised stove and a television.

of a separate communal identity as displaced, and the incorporation of displaced people into the wider body politic, is a necessary stage in their eventual return. In this scenario the political integration of displaced people facilitates their capacity to return. Rather than pursuing a separate identity and political platform, for example in the form of a political party created by and for the displaced, there is a view that displaced people need to penetrate mainstream parties and encourage them to articulate a political agenda on displacement as part of their broader political platforms. In this view separate institutions for the displaced, which depend on preserving difference between the displaced and surrounding society, prolong their marginalization. Furthermore, enforcing a separate identity for the displaced simply preserves the basic violation of displacement, rather than allowing individuals to move on and enjoy a full set of civil and political rights.

I am not against the right of return but I do not actively defend this right. I would like to see this right emphasized much less in the political discourse

about displacement, as I believe that displaced persons will be much more likely and able to return if they are integrated into mainstream political and civic life here. Preserving structures for the displaced as a separate, cohesive and angry community means that they will never be able to return. In any case separate political institutions can never serve their interests because they are completely passive and subordinate to vested interests. We need to work with political parties and make them articulate an agenda vis-à-vis displaced communities, not the other way around – project coordinator.

Opponents to this view within the displaced community fear that integration can lead to the dissolution of their identity, and, in effect, amounts to the ceding of the right to return. They say that contrary to expectation, even second generation displaced persons identify with their ancestral home in Abkhazia or South Ossetia and do not see themselves as part of local society.¹⁵ Accordingly, there should certainly be no obstacle to full integration

and indeed shedding of an identity as displaced, provided it is voluntary. But the choice to return needs to be actively upheld.

People have to have the right to choose. Of course a lot of people won't choose to return, but the important thing for me is that people should have the rights both to return and to full equality before then – network participant.

The debate over whether displaced people should seek representation through separate institutions, or whether they can secure their interests through participation in mainstream political parties remains open, and is still passionately debated. It should be stated that no pressure was put on project participants to adhere to any one approach. Indeed, the project was aimed at enabling displaced people at all levels to make their own choices.

5.2 Interaction with mainstream party politics

As noted in the introduction the term of the project coincided with both presidential and parliamentary elections. Following 2003's Rose Revolution, these elections provided a concrete framework for the displaced community to participate directly in national politics. The project coordinators agreed that their aim was to move on from both 'bloc voting' for the ruling party, the dominant pattern during the first decade of displacement, and also electoral passivity, which in the Georgian context of endemic electoral fraud resulted in the same outcome: a vote for ruling party candidates.

What we hoped to see was a similar degree of differentiation among the displaced community's vote as among the wider population. This would indicate that internally displaced persons were no longer voting according to the prior practices of either awarding all votes to the ruling party or not voting, which in the context of wide electoral abuses, amounted to ceding one's vote to ruling party candidates – project coordinator.

Concurrently there had been a number of changes in electoral legislation. First, the composition of the Georgian parliament in terms of the split between party list and majoritarian deputies was changed prior to the 2008 parliamentary elections. It moved from a 100:50 split to an even split at 75 party list and 75 majoritarian deputies. One result of this change was that the main emphasis of the campaign shifted to the majoritarian part of the vote, and consequently to local-level politics. Hence mechanisms needed to be created to allow displaced communities to meet with those who would represent them in parliament.

This was a fundamentally new context for political participation by displaced persons: rather than interacting

with 'their' community leaders in the government-in-exile (who felt little need to listen to their concerns), displaced persons now needed to take their concerns to candidates from mainstream parties. In many cases these candidates had no particular experience with displaced communities or their needs, or in discussing a conflict resolution agenda with such an audience.

Furthermore, in 2008 the right to nominate a candidate for a majoritarian seat through an initiative group was abolished. From that point, majoritarian candidates could only be nominated through political parties. This change strongly underlined the need for the displaced to become actively engaged in mainstream party politics. Conversely, mainstream party candidates needed to familiarize themselves with the needs and concerns of the displaced as well as with their specific views on approaches to resolving the conflict. After all, in the event of a peace settlement it would be precisely this segment of the population that would most likely have to co-exist with those communities now living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The project arranged a series of meetings between displaced persons and mainstream party candidates for majoritarian constituencies. The main issues raised at these meetings were social (inadequate housing, poor health care, education and employment) and conflict-related, including approaches to resolving the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the benefits of Georgian membership of NATO. These meetings offered displaced persons – many for the first time – the opportunity to meet with their would-be representatives in government and to ask them about their policies on the conflict. Candidates were not always prepared to answer these questions from an audience of displaced persons (see below, Working on conflict).

Overall, the project encouraged a considerable degree of engagement with the electoral process, producing higher turnout among the displaced population and significant numbers of votes for opposition parties among the community. This was most marked in Tbilisi, traditionally an opposition stronghold. Results from the January 2008 presidential election showed that in oppositional electoral districts in Tbilisi, opposition candidates had also won in all of the dedicated displaced persons' electoral precincts. Displaced people had ceased to vote uniformly for ruling party candidates and had started to demonstrate a significant degree of political differentiation. These outcomes were particularly prevalent in, but by no means restricted to Tbilisi. Another coordinator observed of western Georgia:

If in the past displaced persons' participation in pre-electoral campaigns and in elections themselves was purely nominal, after the work conducted within the framework of this project the picture changed. Displaced people began to understand their own

15 This is seen not an artificial process, but one arising, among other factors, from the important role that grandparents play in raising children: in these households the memories of former homes and the life prior to displacement are naturally transferred to the younger generation.

significance, their role in the building of civil society and the importance of their participation in such crucial processes as presidential and parliamentary elections, so one could say it was one of the most important steps on the displaced community's path to adapting to and realizing its own role in society.

This increased mobilization could be seen as the first genuinely grassroots movement in Georgia. Wide social

movements rooted in grassroots activity, such as – for example – a women's or peace movement, are absent in Georgia. For one coordinator, this project demonstrated the displaced community's potential to become the first such movement in Georgia:

The displaced community has become the most socially and politically mobilized group in Georgia. If one group can become a grassroots movement it is



A wood stove and a primitive oven for baking bread are essential items in the homes of displaced people in Georgia's regions. Almost all families, even the poorest, own a television as their main source of information and amusement.



A parliamentary candidate in discussion with displaced people.

the displaced and the government knows that. It's as if everyone has understood that there is a resource here, and that explains why the state machine began to work on them. But displaced people have the capacity to resist manipulation now.

However, one coordinator observed that greater results may have been achieved on account of the project's coinciding with presidential and parliamentary elections; "these heights were not sustainable: what was achieved was achieved as a result of extreme conditions".

Direct citizen participation was not, however, an even process or one which completely replaced the previous model of inclusion as a separate community. Some regions proved more resistant to autonomous civic activism among the displaced. The key example here was the western Georgian region of Mingrelia, bordering Abkhazia and home to a concentrated population of displaced persons. Support for Mikheil Saakashvili and the United National Movement did not significantly diminish in the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2008. Project coordinators offered various explanations. First, as a region distant from the centre, changes in political behaviour were slower to penetrate Mingrelia.¹⁶ Second, the influence of local government-affiliated clans remained stronger than in many other regions, a reflection of the continued influence of key individuals and personalities in regional politics. Third,

it was thought that many displaced persons acknowledged and approved of the improvements in local infrastructure implemented by the Saakashvili administration, which could account for continued support.

The onset of direct citizen participation among the displaced community has not, however, completely stemmed efforts to maintain a cohesive, separate identity as a group. In autumn 2008 the party *chveni apkhazeti* ('Our Abkhazia') was formed. However, the party has experienced difficulties with defining a clear leadership and agenda from within the displaced population, an indicator that displaced persons are better integrated than before. In the words of one coordinator: "Displaced people can now discern when a party has been artificially created to take advantage of their situation. It's about a growth in political culture, a capacity to see through schemes to instrumentalize them".

In 2007 Paata Davitaia, a former associate of Tamaz Nadareishvili formed another party *chven tviton* ('We ourselves'). Presented by Davitaia as a party for the displaced, neither Davitaia nor the party agenda seemed to attract much support at meetings with the network.¹⁷ Davitaia later entered parliament through the party list system via the United Opposition bloc, but unlike other members of the bloc did not boycott parliament and took up his seat.

5.3 Working on conflict

The project also explicitly aimed to raise the capacity of displaced people to influence debates on the conflict in Abkhazia. Central government (and especially government-in-exile) figures have consistently portrayed the displaced community as both aggressively disposed to Abkhazians as adversaries in the conflict, and oriented solely towards return as their sole option. The resulting stereotype was of an angry, homogeneous and threatening group, bent on return at any cost. This stereotype, emphasizing displacement itself as the source of all subsequent rights violations, was actively cultivated by central government as a source of leverage in the peace process with Abkhazia. This is not an uncommon strategy among governments on the losing side of territorial conflicts and coping with an internal displacement problem: a similar dynamic can be observed in Azerbaijan.

Since the conflicts of the early 1990s many Georgian politicians have perceived electoral dividends in presenting the displaced as traumatized and yearning only for return. There is a periodic resort to the rhetoric of return, couched in boisterous – sometimes militant – language. When this discourse is separated from the pursuit of electoral dividends, however, its inaccuracy and indeed harmfulness for other agendas – namely, securing the rights of people in displacement and creating conditions for resolving the conflict – become very clear. There is undeniably anger and aggression, including advocacy of violence, that exists within the displaced community, as it does in the rest of the population. It is a serious error, however, and indeed deliberate misrepresentation, to portray such views as universal or typical of the displaced community.

On one level the notion that all displaced people are hostile to the 'enemy' is counterintuitive. It is precisely the displaced community that has lived most intimately with the 'enemy': as colleagues, neighbours, friends, husbands, wives, and in some cases as mothers and fathers, sons and daughters. Such ties cannot plausibly be translated – especially by those who are not part of this community but claim the right to speak for it – into the language of hatred and vengeance. On another level, while militant rhetoric may secure necessary nationalist credentials for support at the ballot box, it shuts off consideration of alternatives to violence in resolving conflicts. The rhetoric of return at any cost does not and cannot propose workable solutions to real issues of renewed co-existence, power-sharing and re-establishing relationships and common values with the other side, issues defining a conflict resolution agenda. Rather, the rhetoric of return seems to be calculated to appeal to those who are the most disadvantaged in displacement, and therefore receptive to offers of escape

from their situation, and to those outside the displaced community who will not have to confront these issues if and when return should become possible.

For as long as return is tied to a concept of the displaced community as uniformly hostile and vengeful, it cannot be included into a conflict resolution agenda (indeed, it serves as a motor of continued displacement and powerlessness). The project therefore aimed to challenge the manipulation of assumed views among the displaced, and to provide arenas for different positions and views to be expressed. By breaking the monopoly on the discourse of the conflict held by those claiming to represent the displaced community, a more realistic picture of a variety of views would be revealed. This would improve the level of debate on approaches to resolving the conflicts, allowing for more informed, conscious choices between alternatives. By breaking the stereotype that displaced people are necessarily aggressive and hostile to those on the other side, resources for peacebuilding could also be activated within the displaced community. Views that in the past may have been censured as 'capitulationist' could be expressed and evaluated without *a priori* dismissal. Finally, politicians could be made more accountable in their platforms on the conflict by a better-informed and prepared displaced population.

The project therefore included a number of activities explicitly addressing conflict. Many of these made use of previously existing materials produced by local NGOs with the support of Conciliation Resources. These activities included:

- screenings and facilitated discussions of films about the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict produced by Studio Re, Tbilisi
- screenings and facilitated discussions of a DVD of Guram Odisharia's play *A Faraway Sea*
- public debates on a concept for Abkhazia's status within a federalized Georgian state produced by Georgian NGOs
- analysis and discussion of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict with ex-combatants
- work with youth to analyse the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

These activities were widely held as having raising the level of debate. One indicator of this was the level of debate at the meetings held with majoritarian candidates for the May 2008 parliamentary elections. One coordinator observed:

These meetings gave displaced people the opportunity to ask those who were going to represent them in parliament directly: what are you

16 Mingrelia is also a distinctive region on account of its history as a stronghold of support for the first post-independence Georgian president, Zviad Gamaskhurdia, deposed in January 1992. In the civil war accompanying his removal from power, Mingrelia was subjected to particularly severe reprisals by the paramilitary groups, especially the *mkhedrioni*, responsible for his demise. As these groups were strongly associated with Tbilisi these events left a legacy of long-term alienation from Tbilisi and 'centre politics' in Mingrelia.

17 The apparent lack of a wide social support base for Davitaia's party was expressed in a humorous reworking of the party's name to *me tviton* ('Me myself').



Two displaced secondary school pupils who are members of the Kutaisi girls' rugby team.

going to about the conflict? Candidates were not ready for that kind of question. Displaced people also submitted written questions and proposals to candidates, but virtually no one answered them.

Another indicator was change in some politicians' public position before and after such meetings. In some cases politicians known for their hardline views softened these positions as a result of having met with displaced people. This effectively signified the onset of direct influence for displaced people over the debates of the most immediate concern to them, and new forms of accountability for politicians in their treatment of conflict.

The network also mobilized to protest against what participating organizations saw as periodic tensions artificially whipped up by the Georgian media. One example was work to defuse the tension and aggression generated by the imprisonment in Abkhazia of Georgian student protesters following protests on the Enguri (known as the Ingur to the Abkhaz) bridge along the line of contact. In the words of one coordinator, "This was one important achievement of the project: the correction of certain misrepresentations in the media". However, the extent of influence achieved by the displaced community should not be exaggerated. In the words of the same coordinator:

We might have succeeded in moderating the views of individual politicians, and in promoting non-violent approaches to resolving the conflicts. But more broadly speaking, while displaced people can influence policy on resolving their social problems,

they have much less impact on shaping policy on the conflict itself. This is symptomatic of a broad democratic deficit in Georgian society at large.

The work on conflict revealed unexpected levels of openness to a conflict resolution agenda among segments of the displaced community. Work with youth proved especially notable in this respect:

Among young displaced people from Abkhazia, despite their powerful desire for return to Abkhazia there was no aggression towards Abkhazians. During the course of interviews and radio broadcasts they spoke actively of forgiveness, tolerance and friendship – network participant.

Participating organizations reported that youth work often assumed its own momentum as 'old hands' – young people engaged in previous rounds of activities enacted through prior projects – actively introduced 'new hands' to the aims and activities of the project. Among the activities that they went on to participate in were Georgian-Abkhaz youth dialogue meetings organized by Conciliation Resources, work as observers and monitors in the pre-electoral campaign and the formation of a discussion club 'Our Vision'.

Work with other segments proved less successful. While ex-combatants in the project's discussion club did change their personal views, they did not become a vehicle for change among other ex-combatants. This disproved assumptions that ex-combatants, as individuals who had

experienced war first-hand, would be more inclined to a peace agenda. It also reflected a profound ambivalence about the likely outcome of a conflict resolution agenda rooted in non-violence. For those experiencing this ambivalence, peace was increasingly seen as incompatible with justice. A focus on non-violence was seen as leading to acquiescence in an unjust resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia's favour.

Challenging assumptions about 'life on the other side' shattered illusions about return and the restoration of the past. Painful realizations that displaced people will never return to previous lives helped to ground debates in the present, and what is possible now. Realization that no conflict party has a monopoly on loss – and indeed that the futility of war cannot be 'privatized' by any one nation or community – paved the way for more realistic understanding of the other side's psychology. Whatever community existed prior to the conflict, it is now gone.

Exploring such issues together raised important questions concerning the meaning and aim of conflict resolution and peacebuilding work. Assumptions were challenged: for example, that cordial relations with adversaries should be established by omitting or postponing discussion of painful topics and taboos. An integral element of the work was to encourage participants to bring difficult emotions to the surface and find ways to talk about them with counterparts from 'the other side'.

Overall, the project provided explicit mechanisms for improving the quality of debate about the conflicts among the displaced community. This work challenged the monopoly held by those in power aiming to speak for the displaced community. In turn it also challenged the false representation of this community as hardline in its stances on conflict resolution. The project revealed the potential for segments of the community to engage meaningfully on debate over alternative approaches to conflict resolution, and created opportunities for displaced people to transmit their views to politicians.

At the same time, the project revealed that while displaced communities can impact significantly on the implementation of social policy, much work remains to be done for them to impact effectively on the policy process vis-à-vis their core political concern: Georgian approaches to conflict resolution. Nothing demonstrated this more clearly than the resumption of large-scale hostilities in South Ossetia in August 2008.



Source: Conciliation Resources

A meeting of the ex-combatants' club.

The August war

6

The August 2008 war involving Georgian, Ossetian and Russian forces, plus Abkhaz forces in Abkhazia, resulted in new waves of displacement and also signified a watershed moment for those displaced in the early 1990s. On the one hand, the defeat of Georgian forces and Russia's recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence shattered long-sustained hopes of return. On the other, the chance to assist newly displaced people provided a means to alleviate others' suffering, drawing on the painful experience of the previous 16 years.

The war resulted in new waves of displacement on all sides. On the Georgian side while most of those displaced were able to return to their homes in the aftermath of the conflict, some 21,000 – principally those ethnic Georgians displaced from South Ossetia and the Kodori valley – face long-term displacement. The Georgian government acted quickly to invest in durable solutions to their immediate accommodation needs by constructing new settlements. These settlements were a significant improvement relative to the improvised, emergency shelter inhabited by many

of those displaced in the early years of displacement in the early 1990s.

Although the government earned plaudits for investing straightaway in durable winter-proof housing, the construction of entirely new settlements for displaced people (such as Tserovani), was also problematic. The new housing, with small land plots attached to them, presented problems of adaptation for the largely rural population housed in them. While providing a solution to the immediate accommodation problem, the rapid construction of new settlements did not appear to take into consideration their longer-term economic sustainability. In some cases newly built settlements in geographically isolated locations presented problems with access to basic social services such as schools. There was very little consultation with displaced people about their resettlement to the new towns.

The isolation and segregation that these new settlements represent for their inhabitants also affected prospects for



A new settlement of 2,200 cottages constructed for displaced people in Tserovani. This photograph was taken from the window of a Ministry of Internal Affairs building, at the entrance to the settlement.



An internally displaced person in Tserovani settlement.

political participation. Unlike those displaced from Abkhazia in the 1990s Georgians displaced from South Ossetia in August 2008 did not bring their own local government institutions with them. Civil society development among the ethnic Georgian community of South Ossetia in recent years – a tense political environment beyond the reach of civil society development programmes – had been minimal. In the view of the project coordinators this makes the newly displaced especially vulnerable to intimidation and control. Displaced persons residing in the new settlements have reportedly experienced close monitoring of their movements and are not consulted regarding development plans (for example, planting schemes).

The appearance [through international aid] of substantial resources for the government has enabled it to implement a policy towards displaced people that is more focused on political and social control – project coordinator.

The speedy allocation of significant resources to the newly displaced also caused friction between 'old' and 'new' displaced communities. Having struggled for so long to extract both a coherent policy and resources from the Georgian government over the previous decade and a half there was frustration among 'first-wave' displaced people at the immediate commitment of significant resources for the 'second wave' of displacement. At the same time the war allowed a new platform from which to lobby the government for the implementation of prior measures envisaged for the older displaced community.

There is also concern regarding Georgian government policy towards those Georgians remaining in South Ossetia. Some media reports documented the cutting of salary payments and energy supplies from the Georgian side to Georgians still living in Akhmagori (known as Leningori to Ossetians); one featured an interview with an ethnic Georgian teacher asking the Georgian government not to cease salary payments or cut water and electricity supplies to Akhmagori. This reported development could be interpreted as pressuring those Georgians opting to stay in South Ossetia into leaving, contributing to the impression that the Georgian population is being forced to flee due to pressure from the *de facto* South Ossetian authority. The emergence of these reports demonstrates the apparently still strong temptation for governments to manipulate internal displacement – in this case, if true, to actively encourage internal displacement – for political purposes.

6.1 Emotional impact of the war and responses

In the aftermath of the conflict Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent; to date no other state, with the exception of Nicaragua, has followed suit. Nonetheless, Russian support to the *de facto* authorities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia during the conflict and recognition has significantly strengthened the hand of the *de facto* regimes in both territories vis-à-vis the negotiations process with Tbilisi. For many of those living in displacement since the early 1990s these developments have been perceived as final confirmation that return to these territories is very unlikely in any foreseeable future. According to one coordinator: "The protest against



Especially in Mingrelia, western Georgia, there is a strong tradition of displaying photographs of the deceased in windows or on balconies for 40 days after the death, and sometimes for a year afterwards.

integration stopped immediately as it became clear that Georgian forces had lost: the opposition between return and integration disappeared completely".

At the same time the appearance of a newly displaced community offered opportunities for the older displaced community to impart its experience in managing the immediate crisis in the early days and months of displacement, and take steps for the longer term empowerment of this community. This included spontaneous mobilization of already existing NGOs working on displacement (including network member organizations) to catalogue the newly displaced population. For example, activists were mobilized to catalogue pregnant women among the displaced, the length of their pregnancy to date, their immediate and short- to medium-term needs and action was taken to fulfil these needs. There was a rapid creation of structures – new NGOs, spokespeople and communications officers for specific communities and collective centres. Moral support, counselling and the gathering of oral histories for the future documentation of these events were all undertaken. In the words of one coordinator: "There was no panic; the older displaced community knew how to help the newly displaced in a way that other citizens could not".

At the same time project coordinators expressed concern regarding the capacity of the network to articulate views

opposed to the use of force by the Georgian government in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. Although there were a variety of views within the displaced community, the capacity of those advocating non-violent approaches proved to be weaker:

We didn't react to the entry of Georgian tanks into South Ossetia, we only reacted to Russian aggression against us. We reacted against violence, but only with regard to one victim: the Georgian community. We did not react to violence in itself, against violence as a means of resolving the problems at hand. There was a mood that we should tolerate some losses in the name of victory in the end, and there was the nuance that those who did speak out against violence would be punished if the Georgian side won. There was a pretence that there was only one aggressor – project coordinator.

A number of paradoxes characterize the current context of internal displacement in Georgia. While the Georgian government quickly adopted a 'durable solutions' approach to the accommodation of the newly displaced, it did this without appropriate consultation processes and in ways that could have a detrimental effect on the capacity of those housed in new settlements to speak and act for themselves. The August war provided a kind of closure and release by appearing to end hopes for return to Abkhazia and

South Ossetia in the foreseeable future. At the same time the experience of assisting newly displaced people was empowering for those displaced in the early 1990s.

Renewed conflict in August 2008 and reactions to it signalled the apparent weakness of those among the internally displaced (and beyond) opposed to the use of the force to resolve Georgia's conflicts. The outbreak of renewed violence demonstrated the weakness of non-violent approaches to conflict resolution when these are not adopted by decision-makers, while the outcome of the war brought home the risk and cost involved in violent approaches to 'resolving' the conflicts. It also showed that expressed commitment to non-violent approaches can, in practice, be shallow. Finally it suggested that for many conflict resolution might not be about regaining territory, but about an entirely different set of options and compromises.

Recent years have seen a significant transformation in perceptions of internally displaced people from an undifferentiated, passive and easily manipulated group to one of the more mobilized and politically active social groups in Georgian society.

A key lesson is that despite many obstacles, displaced communities do have the potential to become a constituency of national political significance. Releasing this potential, however, has so far been closely related to the relationships between the displaced community, government-in-exile institutions dedicated to it and central government. Displaced communities have been vulnerable to exploitation by both other points in this triangle. Government-in-exile institutions have sought to monopolize the displaced community's voice as a bloc of votes deliverable to patrons higher up in the state. Meanwhile central government has sought to exploit the displaced community in order to gain both electoral dividends and leverage in peace processes.

Central to these patterns of manipulation has been an overriding emphasis on return as the sole option available to the displaced. This emphasis posits a zero-sum relationship between return and integration, whereby the latter is perceived as the rescinding of the right to return. Outright rejection of integration in any form denies displaced communities the chance to address serious socio-economic and political inequalities arising from displacement.

The lack of progress in Georgia's peace processes, not to mention the resumption of hostilities in South Ossetia in 2008, indicate that the Georgian government's ability to make return a reality remains for the moment distant and hypothetical. There is therefore a serious ethical question over justifying the encouragement (or indeed enforcement) of a separate communal identity for the displaced. While this strategy has long been seen – and continues to be seen – as an opportunity for electoral dividends by politicians playing to mass desires for the return of territories to Georgian control, it necessarily implies continued inequalities and discrimination against the displaced community in whose interests this strategy is supposedly pursued.

There are strong pressures in early phases of displacement to afford political space to residual government institutions from the pre-displacement era. These institutions are widely seen as the 'legitimate' continuation and successor to the pre-displacement government, particularly when they are defined in contrast to 'illegitimate' *de facto* authorities in control of seceded territories. Depending on the surrounding political environment, however, government-in-exile institutions can rapidly become

completely divorced from any genuinely democratic representational function for the displaced community.

In the Georgian case government-in-exile institutions effectively became a hangover from the pre-displacement period, removed from any democratic principle of re-election and absorbed into mainstream politics as one of many self-serving interest groups. Ostensibly 'representing' the displaced community, these institutions monopolized the displaced community's entry point into mainstream politics and actively blocked alternative choices or strategies among displaced persons.

At the same time the government-in-exile provided the government with the appearance of a large, militant constituency opposed to the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and indeed any approach predicated on mutual compromise. Over time government-in-exile institutions, purportedly speaking for the displaced community, became an instrument for that community's continued exclusion from politics and a significant obstacle to the conflict resolution process. In the Georgian context of near-total political and social breakdown in the mid-1990s there is the caveat that government-in-exile institutions provided a modicum of political voice and, perhaps at the time more importantly, a conduit for resources. However, it is evident that the government-in-exile rapidly outlasted this function.

Framed in provisional and non-final terms, integration provides a vital framework for empowering displaced people to address their immediate problems. This is not to accede to policies of forced displacement on the basis of ethnic identity, but to recognize that displaced communities should not have to endure ongoing violations of their rights in displacement as well as the original trauma of being displaced. Integration must always remain a strictly voluntary concept fully compatible with return (or restitution). Ultimately it must be for displaced people themselves to decide on their own options, which underscores the importance of projects assisting their capacity to make those choices in an informed way.

Integration, and the dissolution of dedicated bodies representing the displaced community, necessarily implies providing direct links between the community and the mainstream of national politics, from which it has been estranged. This is, emphatically, a long-term process requiring considerable investment on the part of NGOs and central government. Governments, however, attribute more significance to the elaboration of formal strategies on internal displacement than their implementation. The adoption of a formal strategy should not be seen as a goal in itself and governments need to be vigorously lobbied to adopt corresponding action plans and to implement

them in an accountable and transparent way, with due consultation with 'beneficiaries'. Here international bodies and organizations can support local NGOs through consistently reminding national governments of their obligations as the primary agency responsible for fulfilling the needs of displaced communities.

Work to enhance the political participation of internally displaced people needs to be conducted in tandem with raising their capacity to contribute to national debates on approaches to conflict resolution. The Georgian experience shows that far from being characterized uniformly by aggression and anger towards societies on 'the other side', displaced communities have a range of attitudes including positions more disposed to conciliation. The expression and public pursuit of these positions may ultimately provide a resource far more likely to assist in the conflict resolution process than misleading portrayals of the displaced community as aggressive and vengeful.

The Georgian experience also shows, however, that there are limits to the kind of influence that displaced communities can achieve. While the displaced community has been able to influence policy affecting its primary social problems, and to achieve significant change in this area, it (and civil society more generally) has not been able to impact significantly on overall policy towards the conflicts. In the Georgian case prospects for return in the near future, especially for the 'first-wave' displaced in the early 1990s, were shattered by the resumption of large-scale hostilities in 2008. During the course of the August war the Georgian ethnic community in South Ossetia was specifically targeted for displacement. Thus ended the precarious but nonetheless functional co-existence of Georgian and Ossetian communities in South Ossetia, and a further 20,000 people were displaced. This makes any eventual re-uniting of these communities seem all the more distant and unlikely.

While forcing many to relive the trauma of displacement in the early 1990s, the resumption of hostilities and the second wave of displacement in 2008 also provided both a kind of closure and a new sense of purpose. The August war offered release by simultaneously shutting off prospects for imminent return and creating an arena for the displaced community to assist those newly undergoing the same trauma. Those displaced in the early 1990s were able to authoritatively advise government policy for the newly displaced, and to criticize that policy when necessary. However, this process of empowerment came at the cost of a new war, hundreds killed and thousands of others displaced. Furthermore the August war has brought home a dual realization that non-violent agendas in conflict resolution were unable to avert renewed violence, while agendas supporting the use of violence were invalidated by the outcome of the war. Both advocates of non-violence and advocates of 'military solutions' have much to ponder. Debates on what conflict resolution can or should mean have never been more urgent in Georgia.

These outcomes, and the general state of peace processes in the South Caucasus at large, only underline the long-term nature of displacement. This is a stark reality that governments must confront. In doing so they must avoid the temptation to exploit both the displaced community and the issue of displacement itself for electoral or other dividends relating to peace processes. Long-term, gradualist approaches to integration, coupled with the introduction of mechanisms of accountability between displaced and those representing them, will both safeguard the rights of those living in displacement and provide greater resources for them to influence the conflict resolution process.

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