



December, 2023

Project: “Rebuilding Trust between Georgians and Abkhaz”

Mikheil Jakhua

Participation of Internally Displaced Persons from Abkhazia in the Conflict Transformation Processes¹

The present document aims to assess the prospect and importance of IDP engagement in conflict transformation processes based on the study of various open sources and the observation of peace processes. It is an attempt to ascertain how important transformative approaches are, and the extent to which these approaches are or might be acceptable to IDP communities residing in Georgia.

Acceptance of the conflict transformation approach among IDP communities

The transformation approach to resolving conflicts is an emergent theme in the Georgian reality and, therefore, it is important to understand whether this approach could gain traction in Georgian society and the potential extent of engagement of interest groups. Persons displaced from Abkhazia in the early 1990s constitute one of these interest groups.

Traumatic experiences associated with displacement, such as disruption to the daily routine, losing one’s home and threats to family ties, make IDPs one of the most vulnerable

groups.² According to IDPs themselves, they find it difficult to draw a line between conflict resolution and/or transformation as a public process on the one hand, and their individual, personal needs and interests on the other. This very difficulty is one of the factors shaping IDPs’ attitudes towards transformative peace processes.

IDPs are often portrayed as a non-collaborating group inclined to disapprove of any solution except for their return home. They are not perceived as a valuable resource for achieving peace, even though this very group has the biggest stake in and need for the peaceful

¹ The paper was prepared within the frame of the project “*Rebuilding Trust between Georgians and Abkhaz*” implemented by the Levan Mikeladze Foundation. The arguments and opinions expressed in the article belong to the author and may not coincide with the position of the Foundation.

² [Housing Challenges faced by persons displaced internally as a result of territorial conflicts in Georgia, Regional Dialogue \(http://regional-dialogue.com/idp-housing-23/\)](http://regional-dialogue.com/idp-housing-23/)



transformation of the conflicts.³ The goal and expectation of the IDPs with regard to peace processes, as perceived by the wider public, boils down simply to their desire to go home. At the same time, “the return” has a psycho-emotional meaning attached to it, that is, the restoration of justice. At the early stage of displacement, this was linked to addressing IDPs’ socio-economic needs. Therefore, for IDPs whose social condition has not improved and/or those who are poorly integrated into their host communities, the above-mentioned goal has remained of high importance and continues to shape their attitudes towards peace processes.

Research undertaken by the Social Justice Center reveals the attitudes of IDPs towards conflict resolution and ‘parental homes,’ indeed, respondents often mention their future plans – what they plan to do first after they go back home.

Every research respondent has strong faith that they will get to go back to their homes. Even in light of the changed reality and the fact that many of the IDPs have, by now, spent longer as displaced persons than they did living in Abkhazia, their memories, and their desire to go home, have not faded. Each and every one of them knows that what they will see upon their return will be nothing like what they left – changed attitudes, changed people, and

changed names. They also acknowledge that by returning to Abkhazia, they will have to give up everything that they have “built” in the time since leaving. Yet, this does not deter them from dreaming of that return to Abkhazia. For IDPs, their “Abkhazian homes” are an ideal not as much in the material sense of the word, but in terms of their social value. Therefore, the idea of the lost home representing the past and being associated with nostalgia prevails over material aspects.⁴

The attitudes of the IDPs with regard to conflict resolution and transformation are often shaped by expectation and public opinion prompted by the political elites of different times. Key promises made by Georgia’s political parties over a period of many years, especially before the August 2008 war, were to restore the country’s territorial integrity and to help IDPs return home in the foreseeable future. These promises generated the feeling among the IDP communities that the conflict related processes, whether political or otherwise, would soon lead to the restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity, and give them the chance to go back home. Such a blue-print and abstract vision with regard to the return of the IDPs led to unrealistic expectations towards the conflict resolution process in general, coupled with emerging nihilism towards peace processes.

³ Eliko Bendeliani, “Aspects of socio-economic challenges experienced by internally displaced persons in Georgia,” *in*: Transforming conflicts in Georgia: Strive for lasting peace, Caucasus House, 2021, pp.41-42

⁴ [Losing a home and living in “someone else’s home”: The experience of internally displaced persons from Abkhazia living in Tbilisi](https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/sakutari-sakhlis-dakargva-da-tskhovreba-skhlvis-sakhlshi-tbilisi-mtskhovrebi-afkhazetidan-devnilebis-gamotsdileba) (<https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/sakutari-sakhlis-dakargva-da-tskhovreba-skhlvis-sakhlshi-tbilisi-mtskhovrebi-afkhazetidan-devnilebis-gamotsdileba>)



Considering these dispositions, it is important to understand what the transformative approach stands for, and what it offers the IDP communities. According to the commonly held definition, conflict transformation implies changes to the relations between conflict affected individuals/groups, which leads to collaborative interrelations between them. Based on this definition, efforts aimed at transformation encompass work within the society (Georgian, Abkhazian, Ossetian), as well as changes that are necessary during interactions between the parties.⁵

This interpretation of transformative approaches is based on the understanding that peaceful and long-term resolution of the existing conflicts is unrealistic. In the long-term perspective, peaceful resolution of conflicts requires a change to the status quo, with consideration of the existing reality and redistribution of people across either side of the divide in order to contribute to establishing a civilized relationship between them, which in turn should overcome the total isolation. Therefore, the objective of conflict transformation is not short-term and does not envision changing the existing arrangement of how people are settled.

The interest in IDP engagement in transformative approaches, and the latter's support for this process, also depends on whether the conflict transformation is understood as a mutual, proportional process, or as an inherently disproportional approach; in

other words, as an attempt to bring about breakthrough only on the Georgian side and within Georgian society.

The Georgian side - the “stronger” of the parties in the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, has a greater stake in conflict transformation. At the initial stage, Georgian society has greater resources to allow acceptance of the benefits that the communities residing in the conflict zones (Abkhazians and Ossetians) will receive from accessing and using opportunities and resources available in Georgia proper, without opening up equal windows of opportunity for interest groups (including IDPs) on both sides.

Therefore, for IDPs to become interested in transformative approaches, it is important that they see opportunities for changes in the not-so-distant future which will create a sense of restored justice, and which underscore their positive role and importance in relation to this process. Without providing in-depth information about the transformation process, many IDPs might come to think that this approach represents an alternative, exclusive solution to resolving the problem of their return, which implies acting only within the existing status quo with consideration to the reality.

Skepticism towards the transformative approach might have been beefed up by the lack of vision in political promises made at various times as to what shared life might look

⁵ Natia Chankvetadze, Conflict Transformation in the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian Context: from Idea to Action, the Levan Mikeladze Foundation, 2020, p. 8.



like upon the IDPs return to their homes, either before and/or after the resolution of the conflicts. Therefore, the role and responsibility of the IDP communities is not well understood in the context, seeing the latter perceived more as the object of peace processes rather than as resources for transformation by the wider public, political elites and even by the actors of internal dialogs.

Obviously, IDPs are far from being a homogenous community, which means that their engagement in peace processes will be shaped by the level of their integration into host communities and their socio-economic standing. Even though some representatives of the IDP community have been routinely participating in peace formats, they continue to be underrepresented in the conflict resolution processes.⁶

Conflict transformation means forging changes, including at the individual level. Changes at the individual level require intra-societal work. More specifically, discourse and information available to the public about the conflicts and other parties to the conflict need to be critically revised, analyzed and changed.⁷

Working on the violent past remains one of the most important issues with regard to normalizing relations between the Georgian and Abkhazian sides. In the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, both parties maintain their own

narratives when it comes to assessing the past. These conflicting narratives pose significant challenges to the reconciliation process. The Berghof Process is a good example of the conflict transformation process at the individual level, providing a venue for different generations to engage in discussions about the history and the past (on both the Georgian and Abkhazian sides), with participants critically reviewing and questioning deeply rooted conventional and stereotypical narratives.

Discussions held within the frames of the Berghof Process were based on biographical interviews recorded on both sides of the conflict. The majority of respondents were conflict-affected individuals, including IDPs. Analysis of these interviews suggests that the portrayal of history is less rigid and accusatory. Often, the respondents tried to avoid damaging the process and sought to be more supportive of the transformation, so much so that it is clear that whenever a space was made available to engage, IDPs, as stakeholders with a vested interest in conflict transformation, have tried to support this process and have demonstrated a sense of responsibility.

The IDP approach towards transformation as a stand-alone process, the extent to which their views can be transformed, and their ability to maintain neutrality, varies across age groups. The elder generation of the IDPs tends to display a rather nostalgic attitude towards the

⁶ Eliko Bendeliani, "Aspects of socio-economic challenges experienced by internally displaced persons in Georgia," *in: Transforming conflicts in Georgia: Strive for lasting peace*, Caucasus House, 2021, pp.41-42

⁷ Natia Chankvetadze, *Conflict Transformation in the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian Context: from Idea to Action*, the Levan Mikeladze Foundation, 2020, p. 13.



conflict regions. As eyewitnesses to the lead-up to the conflicts, they often maintain assertive and confrontational stances, finding it difficult to pursue neutrality which, to a certain extent, makes it difficult to engage them in peace processes. On the other hand, their personal contacts and experience of peaceful coexistence with the other side make them an invaluable resource in the process of attaining sustainable peace. The younger generation of IDPs are bearers of secondary trauma and tend to be more susceptible to pseudo patriotic radicalism. However, it is also true that they are more likely to get engaged in a manner that is more pragmatic and less emotionally charged.

The findings of a survey carried out by CRRC Georgia and the Caucasian House about youth civic and political engagement and their participation in peace building, suggest that the young people of Georgia support peace policies. The overwhelming majority of the respondents (95%) said they are for conflict resolution through negotiation and that they oppose the use of force. Such attitudes makes the youth a valuable resource.⁸ Sadly, there is body of research which suggests that young people, including IDPs, have no social contacts within the communities on the other sides of the divide, and as such they are less aware about the core of the conflicts.

Factors hampering IDPs' greater engagement in conflict transformation processes

➤ Stereotypes surrounding IDPs

IDP communities are often perceived as a traumatized, conflict-affected group, with stereotypes against them remaining unchanged over the course of decades. Despite their integration into host communities, and the improvements to socio-economic conditions observed among some groups of IDPs, media coverage often portrays them as squatters taking over dilapidating buildings, a group always complaining about their problems, people who are ostensibly unable to engage in rational discussions and see beyond their personal interests.

Stereotypes and prejudices targeting IDPs are further cemented by footage and media products made over different periods of time. One example is a music video of propagandistic intent titled *Gamarjoba, Abkhazeto Sheni* - Hello to You, Abkhazia⁹. One of the scenes shows IDPs returning to their homes, however, in reality, what was shown in the video was IDPs moving out of their temporary accommodation, a fact as charged with gravity and destitution as their fleeing Abkhazia in the 1990s. The same refers to the recent movie *Lisa, Go On*, released 16 years after that music video, which again portrays IDPs as a troubled group (traumatized characters who are always fighting and shouting at each other) whining

⁸ Young Georgians are against resolving the Abkhazian and Ossetian conflicts through military interventions, Regional Dialogue (<http://regional-dialogue.com/geo-youth-22/>)

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wn-7WXjG6uw>



only about their problems, rather than as a people interested in conflict resolution.¹⁰

As such, these deeply rooted stereotypes towards IDPs have shaped the relationship with them, creating barriers to their personal transformative journey and their meaningful participation in peace processes.

➤ *Instrumentalization of the traumatic experience of IDPs and a failure to rethink the past*

The engagement of IDPs in efforts supporting transformation processes has been hampered by the lack of initiatives aiming to address their personal traumas, as well as by frequent misuse of their tragic experiences and traumatic memories to demonstrate the severity of problems and scale of the tragedy, rather than their support of transformational processes. Instead of coping with traumas, such practices are occasionally employed for political purposes and are aimed at cultivating anger towards the other side of the conflict among IDPs and the wider public, appealing to the lived experiences of the former.

➤ *Perceiving IDP transformation as an impediment*

Sometimes, IDPs are referred to as a barrier to transformation due to a common prejudice about IDPs' expectation towards peace and said transformation processes (i.e. "returning

home") on the one hand, and the absence of a vision about conflict resolution on the other. Therefore, IDPs, as stakeholders, are used to either shun the transformative approaches (alleging that IDPs might be against such approaches), or are portrayed as rivals to it, seeing them excluded from these processes. The situation of the IDPs and their numbers are often used as a ruse to undermine bolder steps towards transformation.

➤ *Socio-economic conditions of the IDPs*

The extent to which transformative approaches are condoned by the IDPs has been shaped by their everyday and social needs. According to the official data, there are 286,444 individual, or 92,079 households of, registered IDPs in Georgia.¹¹ According to the 2022 data, approximately 50% (45,903) households have yet to be provided with long-term housing.¹²

These circumstances have pushed the state institutions and political actors to take measures to resolve the social problems faced by IDPs and support their integration in places of temporary residence, but in doing so hampering part of the IDP communities from actively participating in peace processes and failing to stress the importance of their engagement.

At the same time, the participation of IDPs is not considered in reconciliation policy making. As representatives of the IDP community

¹⁰ The movie was premiered in September 2023 stirring an outcry in the traditional and social media.

¹¹ <https://www.moh.gov.ge/ka/703/>

¹² IDP households awaiting accommodation: The 2017-2021 state policy, IDFI, https://idfi.ge/ge/idp_families_in_georgia_and_state_policy_in_2017_2021



argue, unlike IDP strategy development, the prospect of their engagement in peace policy development is rather uncertain. The engagement of IDPs in ongoing peace processes, including the Geneva talks, remains low, as is their awareness about these processes.¹³

In addition, day-to-day challenges have a significant bearing on priorities, including those of the IDPs. There is a likelihood that they might link conflict transformation to an opportunity to improve their social condition which, in turn, may lead to negative attitudes towards conflict transformation, a long-running and time-consuming process.

➤ *Nihilism and lack of information about conflict transformation*

Protracted conflicts, and failed attempts to resolve them, have fueled nihilism towards peace processes among the IDP communities. Earlier, we mentioned the false and unrealistic promises that first created exaggerated expectations, followed by frustration and dismay, which, in turn, undermined IDP willingness to engage in the transformation processes and generated negative attitudes towards these processes.

Lack of publicity around the dialog processes ongoing at the state and public levels triggers mistrust towards these processes among the public, in particular, among IDPs, who often

perceive closed processes as damaging to their own interests.

The reasonability of IDP engagement in transformation processes

It is true that IDPs are not a homogenous community. However, the common denominator that they share is that they are often considered as objects, and rarely as subjects, of conflict transformation; as a community with vested interests in these processes, and at the same time representing a unique source for the transformation due to their first-hand experience of a shared peaceful life, as well as existing as living consequences of errors made in the past.

IDPs have the experience of sharing life with the Abkhazians and Ossetians and continue to maintain social ties with communities residing on the other side of the boundary lines. They also have living memory of the peaceful coexistence of Abkhazians and Georgians, and therefore, they are best positioned to understand the sensitivity of these issues.¹⁴

Transformation cannot achieve its goal unless the IDP communities are engaged meaningfully, since this particular group of the Georgian public is perceived as having the largest stake by both sides of the two societies on either side of the divide.

¹³ Eliko Bendeliani, "Aspects of socio-economic challenges experienced by internally displaced persons in Georgia," *in: Transforming conflicts in Georgia: Strive for lasting peace*, Caucasus House, 2021, pp.41-42

¹⁴ Eliko Bendeliani, "Aspects of socio-economic challenges experienced by internally displaced persons in Georgia," *in: Transforming conflicts in Georgia: Strive for lasting peace*, Caucasus House, 2021, pp.41-42



Experience suggests that the public discourse pays its due to the views, engagement, and stances of IDPs with regard to various initiatives. Those who are most interested in security issues, in both Georgian and Abkhaz societies, act upon their own interests. Therefore, views held by the IDP communities about the conflict, and their engagement, should be the driver for others to support and promote conflict transformation.

The lack of IDP involvement in peace processes has come as a result of a combination of several factors: The first is the false perception about the alleged discomfort that the other party might experience due to IDP engagement in dialog formats; the second is the fear of the process being jeopardized as a result of said IDP involvement.¹⁵

It is important to note that not engaging IDPs in transformation processes is likely to have negative consequences and deter representatives of Abkhazian society. It seems logical that IDPs, together with the Abkhazians/Ossetians, are the actors who have the biggest stake in moving this issue forward from its standstill and in creating a safe environment in the conflict zones. Without IDP participation, transformation processes may well create the perception among communities on the other side that these processes are supported only by part of society, while the most important stakeholders – IDPs, maintain the conventional stereotypical image

imprinted in deeply rooted Abkhazian and Georgian narratives and discourses.

As such, it is critical to ensure IDP engagement at the very onset of the introduction of transformative approaches and to promote their role as unique resources for the transformation.

Recommendations for Ensuring IDP Engagement

The following steps are recommended in the work toward the positive engagement of IDPs in transformation processes:

To the state agencies:

- Ensure the engagement of IDP communities in the process of strategy development, including through facilitating discussion and meetings at the community level;
- Ensure the development of a stand-alone policy with regard to defining the role of IDPs in conflict transformation efforts, and their delimitation from humanitarian processes;
- Develop an accountability mechanism for reporting on the progress of conflict transformation related peace processes to IDP communities;
- Facilitate public awareness raising campaigns (as social advertisement or in other forms) to debunk prejudices and stereotypical perceptions about IDPs among the wider public.

¹⁵ Ibid.



To NGOs operating in Georgia:

- Organize public campaigns to deconstruct the pervasive stereotypes and prejudices existing within society about IDPs;
- Incorporate work regarding the traumatic experience of IDPs as part of the internal societal dialog;
- Ensure awareness raising about transformative approaches which will

contribute to perceiving transformation not as alternative, but as a precondition to perspective resolution of the conflicts;

- Develop a strategy to ensure the integration of IDPs as a resource in the peace processes, including bilateral dialog processes.

About the author

Mikheil Jakhua is a peace activist and lawyer. He has enjoyed many years' experience participating in peace dialog processes. His sphere of interest is primarily conflict transformation and rethinking the past.