

# **ACROSS THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONFLICT DIVIDE:**

**ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF LOCALS  
IN SAMEGRELO-ZEMO SVANETI**

**ASPECTS OF PUBLIC POLICY: AN OVERVIEW**

Tbilisi  
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საგარეო საკითხებისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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# INTRODUCTION

This public policy document is based upon the study implemented by the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) within the framework of the Across the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict Divide: Addressing the Needs of Locals (Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti) project funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

The research work was carried out under the guidance of two experts, Manana Gabashvili and Ana Diakonidze, whose reports have served as the primary basis for this text prepared with the participation of George Tarkhan-Mouravi. Continued support to the research team was provided by the Project Coordinator, Dr Archil Gegeshidze, and Project Assistant, Ketevan Emukhvarv.

The work aimed at producing an analysis of the current situation and elaborating recommendations regarding an optimal strategy for the development of the area of the Georgian region of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti located along the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) dividing this region from Abkhazia. The project was originally conceived as part of a programme consisting of two parallel research projects aimed at exploring liveability on both sides of the ABL. The specific objective of the study was to examine the socio-economic conditions and the standard and quality of life of the residents of settlements in the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region located along the ABL as well as the past (following the year 2008) and expected changes in this area. Special attention was given to determining the impact and effectiveness of governmental and non-governmental social programmes and projects aimed at improving the welfare and quality of life of the population.

In addition to the analysis of existing data, two basic empirical research tools were utilised: a quantitative tool, implying a population survey (500 respondents) using a standard questionnaire and subsequent statistical processing of the results of the survey, and a qualitative tool, based upon the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts supplemented by several focus groups. The work with experts also focused upon identifying key social problems and difficulties experienced by the residents of the study area. In addition to general topics raised within the survey work, more specific questions addressing regional social policy and targeted programmes were also posed and discussed whose responses were later used to evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of the individual policies and programmes.

General recommendations intended to enhance the effectiveness of social policies and development programmes in the region have been developed based upon the data collected. The level of life satisfaction amongst the target groups was simultaneously used as the principal indicator of the success or failure of the current and past programmes and approaches. The principal recipients of the recommendations are Georgian authorities at both national and regional levels.

## OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION

The post-conflict situation continues to impact the living conditions of both IDPs and all local residents of border areas and settlements. The current political and economic processes taking place in the country have an additional influence upon the living conditions of the population as well. The parliamentary elections of 1 October 2012 radically changed the political situation in Georgia. It is assumed that there will not only be a softening of the rhetoric directed at Russia and the Abkhaz leadership in the near future but also the emergence of real changes such as freedom of movement across the ABL, the expansion of economic relations and inter-community dialogue. The signing of an agreement on the non-summption of hostilities with Abkhazia is not ruled out. It should be emphasised, however, that the above changes resulting from the elections came after the implementation of the study and so could not be considered by the respondents or affect the results of the survey.

Although the Georgian economy is still poorly integrated into the global economic system, the worldwide economic crisis will inevitably exert further pressure upon the country's already fragile economy. Georgia was hit hard by the effects of the economic crisis which coincided with the need to restore its economy after the armed conflict with Russia in August 2008 although the generous assistance of the West played a very important role in mitigating the consequences of the hostilities. Notwithstanding the significant macroeconomic achievements even before August 2008, however, mass poverty has diminished only slightly, if at all, and unemployment and social inequality remain high. Poverty is largely associated with low employment and labour productivity, especially in agriculture. Despite economic growth, the majority of the population still works mainly in agriculture and although this occupation generally ensures livelihoods, few people have a chance to improve their economic and social status. Whilst rural residents constitute more than half of the population and with 55% of the labour force employed in agriculture, this sector creates no more than 8-9% of GDP.<sup>1</sup> Unemployment remains a grave social problem which continues to grow (allegedly under-reported official data showed an increase from 12% in 2004 to 16% in the 2009 and have been fluctuating around this value since then<sup>2</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Appleby, SWOT Analysis of the Georgian Agribusiness Sector: A Foreign Investor's Perspective, ISET, 2009. Accessible at <https://www.yousendit.com/download/WUJiMWZEY1NwaFF3anNUQw>

<sup>2</sup> Employment & Unemployment Trends in Georgia, Economic Policy Research Centre/OSGF, November 2011. Accessible at [http://www.osgf.ge/files/publications/2011/EPRC\\_Georgian\\_Economic\\_Outlook\\_II,\\_Nov\\_2011\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.osgf.ge/files/publications/2011/EPRC_Georgian_Economic_Outlook_II,_Nov_2011_ENG.pdf)

Against the background of widespread poverty, the national social security system has assumed particular significance. Accordingly, social security—in the form of pensions and pension supplements for specific groups, child benefits, disability benefits and the most recently introduced (2006) targeted social assistance—traditionally consumes a significant share of the state budget. Joint pension payments remain the largest subsection of the budget allocated for social assistance due to the large number of retirees (by 2010, approximately 838,000 pensioners resided in Georgia). The provision of housing to vulnerable persons remains unsatisfactory. The construction of new housing has been almost completely taken over by the private sector with the government having virtually ceased to intervene in housing construction, except for the rare case of housing for displaced persons (particularly, in the fall of 2008), following a hasty privatisation of the housing stock in the early 1990s.

Emigration is still a popular way to resolve economic and social problems. Since the early 1990s, the continuing economic crisis and political instability have forced hundreds of thousands of Georgian citizens to travel abroad in search of security, improved livelihoods and broader opportunities for self-realisation. At the same time, it should be noted that for the first time after a long hiatus, 2010 was marked by the growth of the population of Georgia resulting from both natural growth and a positive migration balance.<sup>3</sup>

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE REGION

The Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region is located in the central north-western part of Georgia. The territory of the region occupies 10.6% of Georgia's total area which amounts to 7.4 thousand sq km. According to these data, the region ranks as the country's second largest. According to the 2002 census, the population of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti comprised 466,100 persons accounting for 10.67% of the total population of Georgia. Georgians constitute 98.6% of the region's population. The Georgian population of the region of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti is divided into Mingrelians (approximately 90%), speaking the Mingrelian language, and Svans (approximately 10%), using the Svan language and residing predominantly in the north of Svaneti – the Mestia Municipality. In confessional terms, the vast majority of the population of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti—462,435 people (99.2%)—belongs to the Georgian Orthodox Church. The

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<sup>3</sup> "Georgia's Population 4.469 million – Geostat," Civil Georgia, 30 June 2011. Accessible at <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23687>. See also: "Georgia's Population 4.497 million – Geostat," Civil Georgia, 1 June 2012. Accessible at <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24835>

region also has a small number of followers of Islam (1,015 persons) and the Armenian Apostolic Church (190 persons). Cities: Zugdidi (68,894 residents<sup>4</sup>), Poti (53,149), Senaki (28,082), Tsalenjikha (8,945), Abasha (6,400), Martvili (5,600), Khobi (5,600) and Jvari (4,800) as well as the urban settlements of Chkhorotsku (5,900 residents<sup>5</sup>) and Mestia (2,600<sup>6</sup>).

The region investigated within the framework of the project is a strip of territory along the edge of the ABL, dividing Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti and Abkhazia, and includes, as noted above, the following settlements: Zugdidi, Tsalenjikha, Anaklia, Khurcha, Khaishi, Potskho-Etseri, Rukhi, Ganmukhuri, Tskoushi, Kalagani and Chuberi. The social situation in the region is very difficult especially given the fact that the region has the second largest concentration of IDPs (after Tbilisi) at 34% of their total number. In this regard, the region is constantly in the spotlight of various humanitarian organisations.

## QUALITY OF LIFE AND NEEDS OF THE POPULATION

The observable region has experienced a very difficult past two decades with research results pointing to a rather poor economic situation of the population living along the ABL and in the entire region. Approximately 75% of respondents identified themselves as “poor” or “lower middle class” and, in general, this subjective self-evaluation is consistent with other more objective empirical data. According to their own estimates, approximately 63% of the respondents received an average monthly income of less than GEL 300 per month which is hardly enough to afford food and clothing.

There is a clear urban-rural divide when it comes to economic prospects. Most of the households belonging to the “well-off” group reside in Zugdidi and Tsalenjikha. The principal sources of income in urban areas are regular/monthly salaries, revenues from business and trade activities—as opposed to the income of rural residents collected from the sale of agricultural produce—or in the form of social allowances/benefits.

Unemployment was cited as one of the most urgent problems of the region. According to official data, the overall employment rate here amounts to 59% although most of these “working” individuals are self-employed, mainly in agriculture (77%), whilst a small part is engaged in the so-called tourist industry (es-

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<sup>4</sup> 2002 data.

<sup>5</sup> 2007 data.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rec-caucasus.org/Flash/PDF/GE/GE2.pdf>

pecially in Svaneti). Most of the respondents consider themselves as belonging to the poor and middle class (75%) but the group that indicated the economic situation of their families as “average” declares that income is sufficient only to purchase food and clothing.

Results show that the economic situation of the respondents is also strongly influenced by the geography of their place of residence and a significant statistical correlation between the place of residence and economic status could be observed. When it comes to the percentage of people in the “moderately affluent” and “wealthy/ rich” categories, Zugdidi is the clear leader. The situation deteriorates slightly in Tsalenjikha and Chuberi/Khaishi where there are two relatively poor individuals for each affluent person (1:2). In Anaklia, Khurcha and Ganmukhuri, this ratio is even more striking and amounts to 1:3. According to this criterion, the poverty-stricken settlements are as follows: Rukhi (seven “relatively poor” for each “affluent” respondent), Potskho-Etseri, Kalagani and Tskoushi. In the last three locations, only about 1% of the population belongs to the “affluent” category and the corresponding ratio is catastrophically high at 1:54. It should be noted that the general picture of poverty is also affected by the large number of IDPs, poorer as a whole, as they are unevenly distributed amongst the settlements.

Respondents cited three predominant sources of income: pension (approximately 20% of respondents), wages (about 19%) and a special allowance received by IDPs (almost 17%). Other important sources of income are the production and marketing of agricultural produce (10%) and the earnings gained from the implementation of irregular/temporary work (10%). When comparing the income of displaced persons and residents, there are three main areas where the differences are significant. Obviously, a special allowance is received upon a massive scale only by people with official IDP status with this allowance as the only major source of income for this group as a whole under conditions of high unemployment and the frequent lack of land. In the city of Zugdidi, which is a leader in terms of the socio-economic status of the people, the main sources of income are wages for permanent work and pensions. In the lowest-income settlement - the village of Rukhi-residents must mainly rely upon public assistance such as pensions (29%) and the allowance for IDPs (43%).

The survey clearly showed that the difficult economic situation, coupled with unemployment, is a major problem for the population in the region. Apart from the general poverty, however, the problem of access to quality education and health services was also noted. In the health sector, in addition to poor access to diagnostics and treatment, the outbreak of certain chronic diseases aggravated by poor access to health care— namely, the high cost of prescription drugs, special medical treatment and operations as well as the lack of a streamlined health

insurance system - is identified as a serious problem. Illness in the family is often the reason for the sale or mortgage of property to cover the cost of medical treatment.

The survey revealed an ordered hierarchy of social and other problems in the subjective perception of the respondents. Respondents note the following amongst the main problems identified in their community: 1. lack of social security/poverty – 30%, 2. economic crisis – 18%, 3-5. a) failure to resolve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, b) the harsh living conditions of IDPs and c) limited access to quality health care (12%, 11% and 10%, respectively). Economic difficulties, together with concerns about political stability and poor living conditions of internally displaced persons are key issues regardless of the geography of the region. The population living along the administrative border is less concerned about topics such as corruption, the state of democracy in the country, underdevelopment of infrastructure and limited access to quality education.

In general, people living along the ABL are dissatisfied with their lives. A large part of the respondents is dissatisfied with their income (86%), work (65%) and living conditions (67%). If we consider the life satisfaction in the territorial context, the largest proportions of respondents dissatisfied with their lives are in Potskho-Etseri – 80% (almost all of them are IDPs), Ganmukhuri – 78% and Kalagani – 83%. The last two villages are almost adjacent to the ABL and, therefore, are under the combined stress of poor living conditions and political tensions. On the other hand, about 70% of the population in Zugdidi, Khurcha and Khaishi are satisfied with their lives in their place of residence.

In general, the population living along the administrative boundary is not expecting deterioration in terms of certain aspects of life – whether it is the crime rate, discrimination on ethnic grounds, the development of infrastructure or the protection of citizens from abuse by law enforcement agencies. Against the background of a rather gloomy perception of life by many of the respondents, it is surprising to observe their optimism about the future. The vast majority (93%) believes that things will go for the better within the next several years, 65% believe that the economic situation of their families will improve in the next three years, 40% do not plan any major changes in their life and only 27% are thinking about changing their profession.

Upon the basis of data obtained as a result of a survey, an attempt was made to allocate several categories or clusters of respondents, grouped according to the similarity of basic opinions and values. The cluster analysis allowed for the identification of three main clusters as follows: “happy people” (28%), “depressed optimists” (31%) and “confused” (40%). A major factor in determining the clusters appeared to be the level of income/poverty.



All of the respondents belonging to the first cluster feel comfortable in life. About 60% of them claim that they have found their place in life and generally feel good about themselves and their lives. When looking at the demographics of the “happy” cluster, it turns out that gender and marital status are not significantly related to belonging to the cluster with an approximately equal number of men and women comprising the first cluster and about 40% married. Average age, however, is an important factor which differs in the cases of the first and third clusters. For the first cluster of “happy” respondents, it is mostly represented by the younger generation (aged 25-37 years). Sixty five per cent of respondents in the first cluster have a median income above GEL 400 per month with 54% of them falling under the “moderately affluent” and “wealthy/rich” categories with as many as 98% of these individuals looking to the future with hope. The respondents from the first cluster either do not plan to change anything in their lives (40%) or wish to change their profession (23%). The vast majority of people in this cluster are local residents (86% as compared to 14% of IDPs). More than half has a university degree. The employed and unemployed are more or less equally represented. In summary, the first cluster is a group of mostly wealthy, educated local residents (not IDPs), aged 25-37 years, who are comfortable in life and look to the future with hope. Generally, they have no plans to radically change anything in their lives.

The second largest cluster is the complete opposite of the first. The respondents in this cluster can be legitimately labelled “depressed.” In this cluster, there are no people who feel comfortable and are classified either in the group feeling “constant discomfort” (45%) or “not too comfortable” (54%). The absolute entirety of the respondents from this cluster complained that they were unable to find their place in life with more than 60% of them not satisfied with life in general. There is a slightly higher proportion of women in this cluster but the difference is not statistically significant. Age also plays no role in this group since it is a mixture of people from different age groups. Almost 80% have a monthly income of less than GEL 300 which puts them into the category of “poor” according to the Objective Poverty Index (OPI). Eighty seven per cent of the cluster members, however, are pinning their hopes on the future (and this trend is present in all clusters). The proportion of people who want to change their profession or place of work is slightly higher as compared to the first cluster (40%). The proportion of displaced persons and local residents is about equal in this cluster. Sixty one per cent of respondents in this cluster have a secondary general and vocational education and the absolute majority is unemployed (85%). It can be concluded that this cluster is a group of mostly unemployed poor with a predominantly secondary-level education (vocational or general) who do not feel comfortable in life, have yet to find their place and are generally dissatisfied with life. This notwithstanding, cluster members overall are quite optimistic about their future.

The vast majority of people in the third cluster feel “not too comfortable” (75%). They are confused and do not know if they have found their place in life. In terms of life satisfaction, this factor is likely not a defining feature since both groups of those satisfied and dissatisfied with life are represented in equal measure. Respondents in the “confused” cluster are mainly characterised with a rather low income (50% below GEL 300 and 20% lower than GEL 100 per month). They are, however, in a better economic position than those in the second group and belong mainly to the category of “moderately well-off/at risk of poverty” according to the OPI. The rate of unemployment is also lower amongst them as compared to the second cluster (65%). As in all other clusters, the majority (95%) is also looking to the future with hope. Nearly one-in-five, however, is undecided regarding plans for the future and has no answer when it comes to planning. Sixty per cent of these respondents are locals with a secondary or higher education. The average age is over 42 years. It can be assumed that the third group consists mainly of middle-aged individuals with an average socio-economic status. They are in a state of confusion and unable to find their place in life or to plan for the future. This can be referred to as a mid-life crisis but due, rather, to the difficulty of adaptation of individuals in this group to the rapidly changing conditions of life and the requirements of the current period which are so different from the times of their youth.

## SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC POLICY

The main objectives of the Georgian Government, local civil society and the international community in terms of the development of the region and the support of IDPs have not always been consistent and effective but, nonetheless, have played an important role in the transformation of society and the improvement of living conditions. In general, there is an overall objective and subjective improvement in many areas of life which is reflected in the results of both a public opinion poll and in-depth interviews with experts. According to the majority of respondents (87%), people have begun to feel much more secure than they did previously in the last three-to-four years. The general assessment of the changes in a wide range of public life in the past three years is also positive. Respondents identified a number of aspects in which they believe the situation has improved within the past three years. These items relate to various aspects of life in the region and include the following: political stability (67%), improvement of physical infrastructure (77%), law enforcement agencies (77%), the social security system (62%) and the fight against crime (89%). The only area in which the majority of the respondents indicated a deteriorated situation is within Georgian-Abkhaz relations although, in this area as well, the vast majority believes that little has changed. All other areas are dominated by the share of those who highlight improvements.

Given the specificity associated with the proximity to the conflict zone and the high concentration of IDPs, a number of existing response programmes are being implemented in Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti that involve addressing the major needs of the region—unemployment and poverty, specifically—and which, at the same time, are relevant to the country as a whole. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for example, is supporting the Georgian Government primarily in the areas of economic development along with democratic governance, crisis prevention and environmental protection as the four main areas of co-operation between UNDP and the Government for 2006-10 and which to this day remain as the top priorities for co-operation.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Georgian Government has recognised the need for a strategic shift from rehabilitation programmes (humanitarian programmes aimed at emergency or post-emergency situations) to long-term development programmes in all regions of Georgia, including Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti. In order to promote regional development, the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure was established with the support of international organisations (2009) and the National Strategy for Regional Development was approved. The Action Plan for 2011-15 encompasses the key priorities of the environmental, economic and social sustainable development of the regions, including Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti. The relevant areas of focus are already included in the current response programmes and supported by international organisations. These programmes share a common ultimate goal of enhancing human development which, in turn, can be associated with development assistance given specific tasks such as: a) promoting the establishment and development of livelihoods and b) facilitating the process of integration of IDPs and the local population. An important component of the solution to the problems in the region, including those that are the focus of current projects, is the involvement of the media in the process.

The following is a brief assessment of the current programmes in terms of their capacity to respond to the problems that affect the quality of life in the region. The programmes were considered according to the following parameters:

- 1) Relevance to the needs and priorities of the region (primarily the improvement of quality of life – employment, jobs and reduction of poverty, access to quality education and health care).
- 2) Integration of IDPs into local communities (process and results).
- 3) Strengthening the capacity of particularly vulnerable representatives of the following groups: IDPs, the disabled, the elderly, children, single mothers.
- 4) Increasing of gender sensitivity of the population and local authorities.

- 5) Co-operation between the authorities and civil society, co-ordination with other stakeholders.
- 6) Building peace and trust amongst different groups, promotion of tolerance.

Information obtained in the framework of the project allows for the drawing of the following conclusions:

- With varying degrees of explicitness, all the above projects directly or indirectly indicate that their goal is to contribute to the well-being (in other words, the improvement of the quality of life) of their target groups through appropriate and effective response measures to the current needs of these groups.
- Most documents openly declare or, at least, imply the need to shift from the humanitarian response and post-emergency activities to development assistance programmes. In this regard, some of the emergency assistance organisations have even reduced their presence in the country (for example, in accordance with the strategic development plan for 2010-11, the Norwegian Refugee Council closed its programmes on education and housing in Georgia in 2011 and is terminating its presence in the country).
- Most of the projects are aimed at psycho-social and socio-economic integration of IDPs into local communities and, in general, at assistance for IDPs.
- Almost all donors require the consideration of gender issues but the most effective action in this regard is taken by those organisations which include gender sensitivity in their mandates and missions.
- Co-ordination between different governmental agencies as well as various levels of government still requires effective fine-tuning. The same goes for co-ordination and partnership in a number of programmes; there is, however, a tendency to improve co-operation between the parties concerned.

At the current stage, it is premature to assess the long-term effects of the programmes but their strengths and weaknesses, as well as certain obstacles restricting their development, can be identified.

The strengths of the programmes include the following:

- Focus upon the transition from emergency and post-emergency (humanitarian) assistance to development assistance programmes.
- Tendency to adapt projects to local circumstances.
- Relatively long-term (four-to-five years) projects (continuity).
- Multi-sectoral approach, consolidating interest simultaneously on different areas in need of support in development.

- An integrated approach that includes, in addition to IDPs, other important target groups.
- Encouragement of authorities in achieving greater transparency and public accountability.
- Partnership with regional and local administrative bodies.
- Focus upon capacity-building through education (vocational education, human rights education, information technology, project management).
- Focus upon youth capacity-building.
- Focus upon adult re-training (acquisition of new knowledge and work skills).
- Increased attention to a healthy lifestyle.
- Involvement of the media in the process of project implementation.

The weaknesses and gaps of existing programmes and projects include the following:

- Insufficient attention to groups that are still in need of emergency assistance.
- Lack of differentiation in the approach to the needs of different vulnerable groups.
- Insufficient attention to the long-term, “post-programme” situation and needs (for instance, the employment of graduates of vocational training courses).
- Inadequate coverage and inclusion of all relevant target groups (e.g., lack of proper attention to the needs of older persons).
- Failure of efforts to empower “ordinary people,” encourage civic engagement and volunteer activism amongst all age groups.
- Insufficient efforts to raise public awareness in the field of environmental protection, gender equality, tolerance and democratic and civic activism.
- Lack of co-ordination between different levels of local government, even those that are directly involved in the same programmes, which is due both to a lack of skills and motivation and frequent rotation of personnel.
- Lack of strategic, long-term efforts to improve relations between the Georgian and Abkhaz communities.
- Lack of reliable sources of economic, demographic and social information upon the basis of which it is possible to compile high-quality action plans.
- Absence or obsolescence/inefficiency of existing policy documents and national action plans and, in some cases, inconsistency of legislation.

General constraints to effective implementation of development projects and programmes:

- The absence of a clear perspective and vision of development priorities of the country as a whole and in individual regions, including conflict areas.
- The scale of poverty and vulnerability in the country, including the problem of IDPs.
- Not always adequate qualifications, motivation and commitment to professional ethics of public officials and public servants.
- Weak traditions of dialogue between the state and society.
- Weak democratic and administrative institutions, particularly the judiciary and local government.
- Inadequate systems of health care and education: primary, secondary, vocational and higher.
- Extremely low productivity, especially in agriculture, compounded by an underdeveloped land market, small allotments and unavailability of appropriate collateral.

Specific factors impeding the effective implementation of development projects and programmes in Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti:

- Proximity to the zone of conflict and traffic isolation which significantly limits the ability to attract investment for development.
- A large number of IDPs living in difficult conditions and often entirely dependent upon state aid which contributes to the development of dependency syndrome and inhibits economic initiative.
- The dominance of low-productivity agriculture in the region with limited (and non-uniform distribution) land resources with a focus on monoculture (hazelnuts, tangerines) and the need for large-scale investment for the rehabilitation of obsolete plantations (tea, tung, etc.).
- Despite repeated attempts, no strategic plan for the development of the region supported by public and civil society.
- Strong politicisation of the public with the suppression of civic initiative and the syndrome of fear of the powers that be.
- Conservatism of the society based upon patriarchal values and a deeply rooted system of informal relations and clan patronage.
- Weakness of the local education system, especially higher education, leading to a constant outflow of the most capable personnel from the region.

## CONCLUSION

In the past two decades, the population of the region has experienced many dramatic events. It is clear, however, that the biggest problem in the region to date is the widespread poverty and the unemployment which causes it. This is reflected in a purely materialistic value orientation of the respondents for whom the most significant aspect of life is economic prosperity, as well as order in the country, whilst democratic freedoms are side-lined.

The economic situation is not the same everywhere; in the cities it is much better and in some locations (populated by a large number of IDPs) the situation is catastrophic – the residents are entirely dependent upon state social assistance which is hardly enough to make ends meet. This position is reflected in the psychological state of people with persistent discomfort noted in these settlements causing heavy damage to psychological development and personal fulfilment.

The second group of people, which can also be attributed to the “lost generation,” comprises older people who are unable to keep up with the course of events, adapt to change and find their place in life. In this, they differ from the younger and more dynamic generation whose members are ready for change and do not feel lost.

Given the fact that the majority of respondents does not live an easy life, their optimism, trust in people and institutions, their feeling of overall improvement, a certain degree of tolerance and sometimes even friendly relations with both ethnic Abkhaz and religious minorities (although this is true upon a much smaller scale in relation to the so-called “non-traditional” religions and, as we know from other studies, sexual minorities) is surprising.

Often respondents themselves are not able to determine the extent of their deprivation and problems with various aspects of quality of life. They are little concerned, therefore, with issues of their participation in decision-making at the local or national levels or environmental protection. Amongst the main problems related to social infrastructure, the remoteness and inaccessibility of health services has been noted. Particularly difficult is the situation of households which have chronically ill or disabled family members as there are virtually no social services which would facilitate their lives.

Despite the fact that there is a sense of improvement in many areas (except Abkhaz-Georgian relations), respondents are seldom aware that behind many of the changes for the better is the activity and support of international organisations whose contributions are clearly underestimated.

At the same time, the review of existing programmes in the region has shown that there is significant room for improvement in their performance which primarily concerns strategic planning and co-ordination of programmes, including between different departments and levels of local government. Especially important is the fact that some vulnerable groups (especially the elderly and the disabled) are deprived of adequate support from both the state and non-governmental agencies and organisations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**B**ased upon the results of the study and consideration of expert opinion, the Georgian Government is proposed a set of recommendations which should also be taken into account by the non-governmental organisations operating in the region:

- Experience has shown that existing strategic documents and action plans (in those cases where such are available) need to be revised and updated taking into account the accumulated experience and the analysis of errors. This particularly concerns documents on the integration of IDPs, regional development, activities in the conflict zones, gender equality, development of self-government institutions, education, health care and public service.
- After decades of mismanagement, a rapid improvement of the socio-economic background will not be a simple task. It is necessary to openly admit that there are many challenges to the successful development of the region. The issue of public participation, however, is perhaps the most important factor in the initial stage since, otherwise, the process of implementing the necessary reforms and changes can cause some degree of public resistance, especially in view of the continuing political instability, external threats and economic hardship in Georgia. The growth of negative attitudes to reform can be caused by a combination of misinformation, lack of media coverage, the nature of political discourse, the lack of dialogue between the public and the authorities and the real disadvantages of planning and management.
- Many difficult problems are also related to further socio-economic integration of IDPs into society as, in the nearest future, prospects of their return to Abkhazia are not visible. Especially, IDPs living in remote villages and without independent means of livelihood should receive assistance in adapting to the requirements of their economic reality and establishing useful social connections and contacts as well as understanding the specifics of the law, business ethics (or lack thereof), the requirements of the labour market, ed-



educational opportunities and, sometimes, career development. In the field of human rights and jurisprudence, there is also a number of important issues associated with the rights of IDPs (as individuals and as a group) and methods for ensuring the full realisation of these rights.

- In view of the fact that the Georgian State does not have sufficient financial and other material resources to address the needs of the population and, often, the required managerial experience, the success of the process is largely dependent upon international aid. It is the State, however, that must clearly define its own goals and priorities and take responsibility for the success of the reforms. The present period is crucial for the building process of the Georgian State and solving the social and economic problems of the population whilst improving their quality of life and eradicating the poverty which offends human dignity, especially along the administrative border with Abkhazia, as major steps in the direction of the formation of the Georgian statehood.
- Within a very short time, the Georgian political landscape has changed dramatically. Political events that have occurred over the past two months are crucial for the formation of both Georgia's relations with its past and defining the future. Georgia's development as a stable democratic country, increasingly integrated into the global economy and the international community of states, is still dependent upon the achievement of its main tasks in the field of economic and social development and in the area of democratisation at all levels – and especially the re-establishment of lowest-local/rural community level self-governance structures which are particularly relevant in the case of the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region due to its large size and diversity.
- To ensure a smooth and efficient process of development for both the region and the country, the government needs to develop a well thought-out long-term strategy which will not only be detailed but flexible. This planning tool is to be developed in a transparent manner and taking into account existing and potentially available resources. The development of such a strategy should bring together the interests of different stakeholders of the process, take into account the expected impact upon society and the possible difficulties and include mechanisms for monitoring, feedback and control in a changing reality.
- As for the specific problems of the region of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti and, in particular, the strip of territory along the ABL, they are directly related to the specific characteristics listed above – geography (proximity to the conflict zone, traffic isolation), economy (domination by inefficient and capital-intensive agriculture, shortage of land), social situation (a large number of IDPs, mass migration and brain drain), inefficient social services (education,

health care), the politicisation and clannishness of the local government and the conservatism of society. This means that the geographic factor must be considered whilst planning.

- The study demonstrates a need for pre-calculation and evaluation of the effects of any activity or public policy; otherwise, as it was most clearly determined in the example of the resettlement of IDPs to Potskho-Etseri, the result will not coincide with the plans (almost all IDPs relocated to the village from urban areas have left). In general, it can be noted that in the case of an absolute majority of the IDPs, it is preferable to settle them in an urban, rather than rural environment, as it is in an urban setting where a much wider choice of employment opportunities is available and where it is easier for them to adapt and provide livelihoods for their families. Otherwise, a spontaneous and uncontrolled flow of IDPs to large cities is inevitable, as is observed. At the same time, it is necessary to develop a strategy for the development of small towns to stop the out-migration from these areas.
- Clearly, any programme of effective development in the region should be based upon an operative plan, utilising reliable data and promoting dialogue with the public, and seen as a natural part of the national development strategy. But even before the development of such a plan and the provision of adequate resources for its implementation, certain priorities requiring attention are obvious. These are, primarily, the diversification of the regional economy, overcoming the traffic isolation, the radical improvement of higher education, the promotion of economic co-operation of communities on both sides of the ABL and an urgent successful solution to the issue of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including IDPs.
- However, even the understanding of these priorities underscores the need to develop public discussion and, most importantly, consistent implementation of a strategic development plan for the region which was often neglected in the past. The presence of such a plan and commitment to its continued implementation will assist international organisations, governmental agencies and other actors to better plan, co-ordinate and implement their projects and programmes aimed at the development of the region, undoubtedly deserving more targeted attention than it has today.