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**Resettlement of Ecological Migrants  
in Georgia:  
Recent Developments and Trends in  
Policy, Implementation, and  
Perceptions**

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# Resettlement of Ecological Migrants in Georgia: Recent Developments and Trends in Policy, Implementation, and Perceptions

*Since the early 1980s, climate change has exacerbated a trend of migration from densely populated mountainous areas in Georgia, chiefly in the Svaneti and Adjara regions, where the livelihoods of the mountain populations have increasingly been threatened by natural disasters. Over the past thirty years, tens of thousands of people have been made homeless as a result of flooding, landslides, and avalanches. However, the needs of so-called ecological migrants, or eco-migrants, i.e., people who have been displaced from their homes due to natural disasters, are a severely neglected issue in Georgia.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Various Georgian government administrations have attempted to respond to natural disasters in these mountain regions, from the Soviet authorities in the 1980s through to the present Saakashvili administration. Although in the early and mid 1980s, the process of resettlement was fairly well organised, the late 1980s brought a serious increase of natural disasters in Georgia's mountain regions, which coincided with the breakdown of Soviet structures to address the growing needs. The government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia used eco-migrants as tools in an agenda of "demographic balancing", resettling eco-migrants to minority-inhabited and border regions of the country in order to 'Georgianise' them. Under Shevardnadze the eco-migration issue was literally ignored. Following the 2003 'Rose Revolution', the Saakashvili government has taken several meaningful steps to address the problems of eco-migrants, but a consistent and coherent policy supported with adequate resources to address eco-migration is still out of sight.

Based on research and field work conducted from October 2010 to March 2011, this paper starts with a brief overview of the legal basis for addressing the needs of ecological migrants in international and domestic law, and then summarises the limited

activities of international organisations in this emerging field of humanitarian work. From here it introduces government approaches and efforts to address the needs of eco-migrants from the early 1980s to the 'Rose Revolution,' before presenting initiatives under the Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili in more detail. Building on an in-depth 2007 monograph on ecological migration of the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI),<sup>1</sup> the paper then focuses on the assessment and resettlement procedures followed by the responsible division within the State Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees (MRA), followed by the local-level example of the municipal authorities in Khulo district in Adjara. The next section presents case studies of eco-migrant resettlement from Adjara to the Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kakheti regions of Georgia. The research consisted of qualitative interviews with two members of staff from the Department of Migration, Repatriation and Refugee Issues at the MRA, and with between five and

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<sup>1</sup> Trier, T. and M. Turashvili.: *Resettlement of Ecologically Displaced Persons: Solution of a Problem or Creation of a New? Eco-Migration in Georgia 1981 – 2006*, Monograph #6, Flensburg: ECMI, August 2007, <[http://www.ecmicaucasus.org/upload/publications/monograph\\_6\\_en.pdf](http://www.ecmicaucasus.org/upload/publications/monograph_6_en.pdf)>.



ten heads of household, who had received state resettlement assistance, in each resettlement case study location. These eco-migrants, interviewed in Khulo district of Adjara, Marneuli district of Kvemo-Kartli, Ninotsminda district of Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Lagodekhi and Akhmeta districts of Kakheti, were asked to explain their experience and perceptions of the state resettlement process, from the occurrence of the natural disaster through to final resettlement and reception in the host community. These cases offer concrete examples of resettlement policy in action and the ongoing problems associated with it. The final section provides policy recommendations for the immediate future and the long term, to enhance the eco-migration resettlement process in Georgia.

## II. THE LEGAL AND OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

### *Ecological Migrants in International and Domestic Law*

The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR distinguishes ecological migrants from refugees by the fact that, unlike refugees, ‘environmentally-displaced persons’ can usually count on the protection of their own state. Since ecological migrants usually remain within the borders of their own state, rather than crossing a state border – a key criterion for refugee status in international law – ecological migrants are generally grouped with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Indeed, the legally-non-binding but normative landmark 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, presented by the UN Secretary General’s representative for displaced persons, includes victims of natural disasters in its definition of internally displaced persons:

(...) internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.<sup>2</sup>

This clearly situates the issue of ecological displacement within the international normative

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<sup>2</sup> See the full text of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement at <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/resources/GPEnglish.pdf>.

framework that governs IDPs. However, Georgia’s domestic legislation on Internally Displaced Persons does not include natural disasters among the admissible grounds for IDP status.<sup>3</sup> This definition leaves ecological migrants with no protection in Georgian national law. This lack of legal status in turn implies no legal obligation on the state to offer the same protection to eco-migrants that it does to IDPs.

This shortcoming needs to be addressed. One means of securing robust obligations in law for state protection of eco-migrants in Georgia would be to extend the domestic law definition of Internally Displaced Persons (in line with the 1998 UN Guiding Principles) to include natural disaster as an admissible criterion for IDP status. Alternatively, a new law dedicated exclusively to regulating eco-migration could be adopted.

### *International Actors and Ecological Displacement*

International organisations such as the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR are not currently involved in addressing eco-migrant issues. The UNHCR mandate for refugees and IDPs does not at present include persons displaced by ecological disasters. UNHCR is, however, concerned about the environmental implications of refugee and IDP resettlement, and is, most importantly, increasingly considering ecological displacement itself as a future area of its work.<sup>4</sup>

Ecological migration in Georgia today receives little attention from international donors, including large donor agencies such as the European Union and USAID. At present only the relevant national ministry (MRA) and a small number of NGOs are active on the eco-migration issue in Georgia.

## III. ECO-MIGRANT RESETTLEMENT AND GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMES IN GEORGIA

### *Soviet-Era Resettlement*

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<sup>3</sup> See the law at <http://www.unhcr.org/home/RSDLEGAL/44ab85324.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR Policy Paper: Climate change, natural disasters and human displacement: a UNHCR perspective, Environment, 14 August 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/4901e81a4.html>.



During the early 1980s Soviet state resettlement of eco-migrants in Georgia was relatively well organised, with adequate resources committed to the issue. Between 1981 and 1990 the dense minority-populated Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions received the majority of eco-migrants, with around 3,000 families resettled to villages there.<sup>5</sup> From 1981-1983 a total of 1,010 families were resettled from Adjara to Kakheti, Samegrelo, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Shida Kartli regions.<sup>6</sup> 1987 brought a disastrous winter to the mountainous Svaneti region, leading to the evacuation of 16,000 people and the resettlement of 2,500. Amid the decline of Soviet state structures towards the end of the 1980s, significant corruption problems hampered the allocation of resettlement entitlements and the distribution of land to eco-migrants. In April 1989, 5,657 families (24,287 people) were resettled from Adjara to the regions listed above. Although construction of 5,000 houses in 17 regional districts was planned, only 3,000 were finally built.<sup>7</sup>

### *From Independence to the 'Rose Revolution'*

During the immediate post-Independence period in the early 1990s the issue of eco-migrant resettlement became embroiled in the ethno-political conflicts that overtook the country from 1991-93. Under Georgia's first President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, ethnic Georgian eco-migrants were often resettled to regions compactly populated by minorities – such as Abkhazia, Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti – as part of a campaign to 'Georgianise' these regions. Alongside state actors, influential political organisations such as the nationalist 'Kostava Foundation' and 'Rustaveli Society' bought houses abandoned by departing minority populations and gave them to ethnic-Georgian eco-migrants. Relations between resettled eco-migrants and recipient communities in these areas were often extremely tense, and many eco-

<sup>5</sup> Trier, T. and M. Turashvili.: *Resettlement of Ecologically Displaced Persons*, Tables 2 and 3, pp. 61-62. Numbers of eco-migrants per village according the official registration by the recipient municipalities in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, 2005-2006.

<sup>6</sup> Tamaz Putkaradze, *Acharis mosakhleobis migraciis*, p 72, cited in ECMI Monograph #6, p.9.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Nizharadze, *Svanebis migracia da misi...*, pp 13-17, cited in ECMI Monograph #6, p.9.

migrants either sold or abandoned their new houses to return to their native regions.

Under Shevardnadze the issue of eco-migrants was almost completely ignored. During the privatisation process of agricultural land in Georgia from 1992-8, resettled eco-migrants received land on an equal basis to other residents. The funds provided for house purchases by Shevardnadze's administration between 1997 and 2002 were subject to significant corruption problems. In 1998 a Decree on Eco-Migrants introduced a monitoring process for eco-migration, but there was no follow-up action after the initial monitoring of ecological migration trends had been conducted.

### *Resettlement under Saakashvili*

After the 'Rose Revolution' brought Saakashvili to power, in 2004 several new initiatives on eco-migration were launched. The relevant state ministry (MRA) collected assessment data on housing conditions in the mountain regions, and from 2004 the government initiated programmes providing houses to eco-migrants. In June 2004 a Presidential decree established a Commission for Regulation of the Eco-Migration Process in Tsalka, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts, in response to violence between ethnic-Georgian eco-migrants and the ethnic-Armenian recipient population. Aiming to confine eco-migration within a legal framework and to generate new approaches to resettlement the Commission formulated suggestions, but no action followed.

In 2005 Georgia ratified the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, article 16 of which forbids measures that alter the demographic balance of regions populated by national minorities.

In March 2006 a programme was launched to create an official database of families affected by natural disasters and in need of immediate resettlement. An evaluation system for eco-migrant entitlements was introduced based on assessments involving geologists, with the following assessment categories:

1. House destroyed
2. House damaged
3. House damaged but restorable
4. Only lands around house destroyed

Only those people placed in category 1 were entitled to state resettlement.

In summer 2006 a ministry assessment of housing conditions of Adjara eco-migrants in Tsalka district



was conducted. A monitoring group was established, including representatives of the ministry, local administration, and recipient community representatives in Tsalka.

Although the aforementioned steps taken by the Saakashvili administration offer some positive signs of governmental will to address eco-migration, these efforts have remained sporadic and have not been integrated into a coherent, comprehensive and well-funded state policy.

#### IV. ASSESSING CURRENT RESETTLEMENT NEEDS

According to interviews with MRA officials, from 2004 to January 2011 a total of 1,064 families were resettled by the state, and today 37,000 families are registered as needing resettlement, with 11,000 in assessment categories 1 and 2 (urgent resettlement needs).<sup>8</sup> The ecological problems in Adjara are exacerbated by the combination of rapid population growth and land shortage. The increasing needs of the large (predominantly Muslim) families there have led to deforestation and agricultural use of higher hillside land, which increases the risk of natural disasters. In the long-term, the shortage of land will produce a wave of ‘demographic migrants’ from the highland Khulo and Shuakhevi districts of Adjara to lowland areas. Until now government house purchasing has taken place very slowly, and a great many resettlement needs, including those resulting from disasters in Adjara and Svaneti in 2005, remain unmet.

The present and future resettlement needs of ecological migrants today are difficult to quantify precisely due to major reported flaws in the evaluation process applied so far. In particular, needs assessments are generally made on the basis of visual observations rather than expert geological analysis. In some regions, considerable discrepancies are reported between assessments made by geologists and the related entitlement figures held by the ministry. In an effort to address this shortcoming, a needs assessment pilot project is currently underway in Veckatkhevi village, Dusheti district, Mtskheta-Mtianeti region. The ministry (MRA) has delegated responsibility for preparing the applications, including relevant geological reports, to the district administration concerned. Proponents hope that this procedural model, if successful, will be applied to other affected villages, as such discrepancies are likely to be widespread.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with MRA staff member, 23 March 2011.

#### V. THE OFFICIAL PROCESS

##### *Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees (MRA)*

According to interviews conducted in February and March 2011 with responsible officials in the Department for Migration, Repatriation and Refugees of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Refugees and Accommodation (MRA), a team of five staff (the ‘Accommodation Division’)<sup>9</sup> works exclusively on resettlement of eco-migrants. While one staff member lives in Javakheti, where she oversees house purchases and serves as a contact person for eco-migrants resettled there and in neighbouring Tsalka, the remaining four staff members are based in Tbilisi, from where they make visits to resettlement communities.

From 2004 to 2009 state funds were allocated for house and land purchases to resettle ecological migrants. According to the interviews, whereas in 2009 a budget of roughly 1 million GEL (420,000 Euro) was allocated for resettlement of eco-migrants, in 2010 and 2011 no funds at all have been committed to resettlement.

According to the MRA staff, all the beneficiaries of state resettlement have been provided with a house and at least 0.5 ha of land. According to the Head of the Accommodation Division,<sup>10</sup> ministry house purchases for eco-migrants during his tenure (since 2006) have been as follows:

- 2006 - 216 houses
- 2007 - 187 houses
- 2008 - 44 houses
- 2009 - 127 houses
- 2010 - no houses (no budget)
- 2011 - no houses (no budget)

The procedure followed by the Ministry from the receipt of assistance requests to the final resettlement varies according to local circumstances and other considerations of convenience. Below is an outline of how this process was described by the MRA staff.

<sup>9</sup> See organisational chart at:

[http://mra.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG#index/170/ENG](http://mra.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG#index/170/ENG).

<sup>10</sup> Interview with MRA staff member, 11 February 2011.



### *From assistance request to resettlement, step by step*

- People hit by natural disaster apply to their municipal authorities, or directly to the MRA on an individual basis;
- Local authorities generally conduct the needs assessment, referring to the 4-point categorisation system detailed above. Families in categories 1 and 2 (houses totally or irreparably destroyed) are generally entitled to resettlement, though allocations vary according to available resources;
- Local authorities provide this information to the MRA, which holds all of the paper applications;
- In most cases, an assessment form is filled in based on visual evidence; i.e. an assessment of existing damage to houses and land;
- The MRA asks the local authorities to identify families with priority needs (usually those in assessment categories 1 and 2);
- The ministry uses its budget to purchase houses and land (usually two hectares per family), and some furniture if required;
- In some cases families are given a choice of resettlement destination and in some cases they can visit proposed destinations in advance;
- The beneficiaries sign a statement of their willingness to resettle;
- The Adjara authorities provide compensation of 1,000 GEL (420 Euro) per family;
- The municipality of origin of the eco-migrants provides vehicles for their transportation to the resettlement destination (only in Adjara);
- Once resettled and registered as residents at their destination, eco-migrants stop being the responsibility of the MRA, and should address any concerns to the recipient municipal authorities;
- There is usually no regular contact person with whom eco-migrants can raise concerns.

### *Main Shortcomings*

While officials of the MRA are concerned that the budget is too low (zero in 2010 and 2011) to cover existing resettlement needs, the MRA has not yet formulated any proposals for policy improvement. The

following weaknesses have been revealed by research conducted in Spring 2011 by ECMI and Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN), however.

- The MRA Accommodation Division (the Eco-Migration Division within the Department for Migration, Repatriation and Refugees) manages the assessment and resettlement processes without a comprehensive policy or long-term strategy;
- The lack of a comprehensive policy on eco-migration means that the MRA focuses narrowly on purchasing of houses and land for eco-migrants, without providing ongoing resettlement assistance to ensure successful integration;
- This system also leaves many decisions to individual discretion without oversight, opening up a potential for corruption and abuse of public resources;
- Inadequate financial resources (no resettlement budget at all in 2010 and 2011) leave the ministry unable to address the most urgent needs;
- The assessment procedure is unsystematic and not always undertaken rigorously by local authorities;
- The MRA eco-migration division does not possess geological assessment data of affected regions. Although staff of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources have claimed to possess relevant geological assessments, the MRA does not currently have access to this information;
- The MRA eco-migration division has no prognosis of future resettlement needs, meaning that ministry resettlement policy can only be reactive;
- Municipality attitudes to the assessment process vary considerably. While some municipal administrations have commissioned geological assessments to inform their needs assessments, this is not standard practice. Most local authorities assess resettlement needs by filling in a form on the basis only of visual evidence. Major inconsistencies and discrepancies are reported in this needs assessment procedure in various municipalities;
- Coordination between the MRA and the eco-migrants' municipalities of origin and destination during the ongoing resettlement process is limited, resulting in inconsistencies



- and an accountability gap for addressing eco-migrants' ongoing needs;
- Resettled eco-migrants generally have no contact person with whom to raise concerns after resettlement itself, when they cease to be considered the responsibility of the MRA. Recipient municipal authorities are often unresponsive to eco-migrants' needs;<sup>11</sup>
- The eco-migration division of the MRA is not obliged to justify its selection of particular regions as targets for resettlement;

### *Khulo District Administration, Autonomous Republic of Adjara (13 December 2010)*

In collaboration with the MRA staff in Tbilisi, the municipal administrations in the regions of origin and destination of eco-migrant resettlement should play a crucial role in the resettlement process; whether in the identification of needs and beneficiaries, or in the integration of eco-migrants into their destination community. The following interview with the head of the district administration was conducted in Khulo district, in which natural disasters have endangered and continue to threaten many people and homes, in order to ascertain attitudes to resettlement and the procedures followed in collaboration with the MRA on the issue.

The recently appointed head of Khulo district administration had not yet participated in an eco-migrant resettlement process, but introduced an official who had worked on the issue. Asked to explain step-by-step the response of the district administration to a landslide or other ecological disaster, the official acknowledged that there was no formal policy in place, but outlined the following steps:

- Receipt of assistance request from the residents of the disaster-affected area
- Dispatch of a letter to the Ministry of Health and Social Security of Autonomous Adjara;
- Visit of geologists to the affected village to make an assessment of damage and needs;
- Direct allocation of 1,000 GEL (420 Euro) resettlement compensation from the Adjara authorities to a bank account for

each beneficiary family upon resettlement.

The official could not specify which institution sent the geologists to make the assessment or the body responsible for allocating the financial compensation for resettlement.

## **VI. CASE STUDIES OF ECO-MIGRANT RESETTLEMENT (OCTOMBER-DECEMBER 2010)**

Beyond the opinions and attitudes of civil servants involved in the state resettlement process, explored in the sections above, another key perspective on the issue must be that of resettled eco-migrants themselves. The responses of the eco-migrants interviewed in Adjara, Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kakheti regions provide direct feedback on the state resettlement process as it currently functions, offering evidence of successful aspects but also obvious areas for improvement.

### *Attitudes of Resettlement Beneficiary Population in village of origin, Kvemo Tkhilvana, Khulo District, Adjara*

The people interviewed in Kvemo Tkhilvana had already received organised state resettlement to the Marneuli district of Kvemo Kartli, and the following section details the experience of members of the same community in the village of resettlement. Due to poor conditions in Marneuli, the men interviewed in Kvemo Tkhilvana village, Khulo district, Adjara have returned to their original houses, despite the facts that these have been judged unsafe by geologists, and are generally without access to a road. Many of those whose houses have already been destroyed are now staying at the houses of relations and neighbours.

From spring 2007 onwards, several landslides destroyed houses and agricultural land and led to the collapse of a road bridge connecting Kvemo Tkhilvana to neighbouring villages. Deforestation of the hillside over recent years has gradually damaged the land, but the main cause of the landslides is an underground river running beneath the village. Today the village is divided in two by a deep ravine, and parts of the village flood each time heavy rain falls. More and more of the village has collapsed gradually, and today it is only half its original size. This destruction of houses and agricultural land makes it increasingly

<sup>11</sup> Interview with eco-migrants in Khikhani village, Marneuli District, Kvemo Kartli, October 2010



difficult for the local population to sustain itself through the traditional agriculture.

After the municipal authorities had been informed of the first major landslide, geologists visited to make an assessment of the terrain during the spring of 2007, and discovered that the river running beneath the village made all of the houses there unsafe. Villagers were informed orally of this fact, and at a meeting in the village school roughly 18 months later it was announced that each family in the village had been awarded the status of category 1, meaning that they were entitled to state resettlement assistance. Altogether 70 households in the village accepted the offer of resettlement, whereas around ten households refused it. The villagers were not provided with written documentation detailing their entitlements or any other information concerning the resettlement process, and they are not aware which institutions were responsible for dealing with them.

Resettlement to Khikhani village the Marneuli district of Kvemo Kartli took place in December 2008 and February 2009. The following section details the experience of members of this same Tkhilvana beneficiary community in their village of resettlement, Khikhani, in the Marneuli district of Kvemo Kartli region.

### *Resettlement conditions in Khikhani village, Marneuli district, Kvemo Kartli region*

The village of Khikhani has been a destination of state resettlement of eco-migrants from Khulo district of Adjara in two rounds: the first in the early 1990s, when approximately 100 eco-migrant families from Adjara were resettled here; and the second between December 2008 and February 2009, when seventy families were resettled from Kvemo Tkhilvana village, Khulo district, Adjara (featured in the previous section). People from this latter round of resettlement were interviewed.

The villagers did not have the chance to visit Khikhani to inspect conditions before being resettled here. Trucks were provided to transport furniture and other belongings of the eco-migrants. Houses were distributed on the basis of family size, with villagers drawing their future house number in Khikhani (written on a piece of paper) from a hat. In addition to rudimentary houses (described below), the MRA provided each resettled family with a fridge, a cupboard, beds with low-quality mattresses and a television. The authorities in Adjara, meanwhile,

provided 1,000 GEL (420 Euro) in a dedicated bank account and some basic supplies (flour, fuel). Houses were not equipped with basic necessities such as wood-burning stoves, which the eco-migrants bought themselves for 200 GEL (83 Euro). The eco-migrants are sceptical about whether even this money was spent on the refurbishment.

The houses provided to the eco-migrants had been partially constructed before the break-up of the Soviet Union, but were never completed. Planned as two-storey houses, today most have two storeys but lack several external walls. Immediately before the arrival of eco-migrants here, very basic refurbishment was undertaken. Cheaply improvised roofs let rainwater in; of the 70 houses inhabited by this wave of eco-migrant arrivals, only eight are watertight. The houses in the worst condition are low-lying single storey (planned as two-storey) buildings, which lack several external walls at ground level, exposing them to flooding during heavy rainfall. Immediately before the arrival of the 2008-2009 eco-migrants, each of these skeletal houses was equipped with two furnished rooms and an improvised roof in a cheaply executed refurbishment process. Apart from the inadequate roofs on the houses, the ceilings are poorly fitted, and are in many cases falling apart.

Since the breakdown of a pump drawing water from a small nearby river to the village distribution system in August 2010, the whole of Khikhani has relied on a well located at one end of the village. Family members including young children make the 2-4 kilometre round trip there several times each day, often waiting in line for up to an hour to fill a container of water for domestic use. Following the breakdown of the water pump, the state reportedly allocated 12,000 GEL for the purchase of a replacement. Each household additionally contributed money to the municipal administration in Marneuli to buy the new pump. Residents complain that the district authorities have been unresponsive, and they remain without a working water pump. A government programme to connect villages in the Marneuli district to gas supply has brought gas pipes to the village. Although residents are convinced that this programme should bring gas to each house free of charge, the villagers have been informed by the Marneuli district administration that they must pay an additional 300 GEL each to connect their houses. The houses are equipped with electricity, but the residents are concerned that the installation was of dangerously low standard, and the poor insulation of the buildings against rain makes this particularly dangerous. One man whose house was destroyed by an electrical fire



within six months of his moving in now lives with neighbours, and blames the fire on poorly installed electricity cables.

The 2 hectares of agricultural land promised to each household as part of the resettlement process has still not been allocated, two years after resettlement. The eco-migrants have access to common grazing land for their cattle, which enables them to generate a small income, but they have no land of their own to cultivate, and complain that attempts to rectify the situation with the municipal authorities have had no effect. This is the main reason why so many of the eco-migrants have returned to their native village in Adjara. Most eco-migrants are skilled only in agricultural work, and without land have limited employment options. The new arrivals generally rely on selling their own dairy products locally, with a few working as low-paid wage labourers on nearby land.

The eco-migrants complain that responsible officials in both the ministry and the district administration are ignoring their concerns. They report only one visit to the village by a ministry official since resettlement. During this visit in 2009 they explained problems including the condition of their houses and their lack of agricultural land. No response and no visits followed. The elected community head reports several unsuccessful efforts to raise the housing and land issues at the Marneuli district administration. Officials there reportedly denied responsibility for the eco-migrants, advising them to seek support from the authorities in Adjara. The resettled eco-migrants perceive the local administration as corrupt and indifferent to their needs.<sup>12</sup> They complain of the apparent disappearance of funds intended for them, but generally lack either a clear enough understanding of their entitlements or documentary evidence to substantiate such claims.

The recent eco-migrants also strikingly report an effort they made to communicate a petition to President Saakashvili, when he was visiting a nearby IDP resettlement village. The eco-migrants planning to approach the president were arrested by police just hours before his arrival, and were abandoned in a remote location in woods some distance from the village, from where they had to walk home. This incident instilled in the eco-migrants both a fear of repercussions for speaking out about their situation, and a sense of suspicion towards certain neighbours. Relations between eco-migrants and their new neighbours are not generally problematic. The

immediate neighbours are also eco-migrants from the Khulo district, who were resettled here more than two decades ago. The new arrivals coexist peacefully with these longer established residents of Khikhani, though their standard of living is considerably lower. A small trade in dairy products and other foodstuffs runs between the eco-migrants in Khikhani and the neighbouring ethnic-Armenian populated Shaumiani village.

The eco-migrants resettled here are also exposed to poisonous snakes. A neglected Soviet-era snake farm near the village was home to a snake farm led to many poisonous snakes being released into the long grass on the hillside next to the village. In the past year a woman has died as a result of a snake bite, and a young boy has lost a finger. A chemical treatment for the surrounding hillside is needed.

### *Resettlement to Gorelovka village, Ninotsminda district, Samtskhe-Javakheti*

Since 2004 68 eco-migrant families from Adjara have been resettled by the state to Gorelovka village, located in the 95% ethnic-Armenian populated Javakheti region. This village and several others around it had been home to the ethnic-Russian Dukhobor community since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Following the gradual departure of this group to Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s and their departure en masse in the last few years, the uninhabited Dukhobor houses in Gorelovka have been bought up by both the Georgian state and Armenian interests groups. During the 1990s, resettlement of eco-migrants to this minority populated region provoked firm resistance and even violence from the local ethnic-Armenian population. Today, eco-migrant resettlement takes place at a low rate and has not been so controversial.

The former Dukhobor houses in Gorelovka now inhabited by sixty-eight Adjaran eco-migrant families are generally in good condition. Unlike in the Marneuli case (above), all of these houses were until recently inhabited by other families. Each resettled family also received 1,000 GEL (420 Euro) from the Adjara authorities. Eco-migrants were not provided with furniture directly, but received whatever furniture remained in the houses they moved into. The houses have electricity but no gas connection, as the state programme providing gas to villages has not yet reached this area. The water needs of most houses have traditionally been served by individual or shared wells. Although a current state programme should connect

<sup>12</sup> Interview with eco-migrants in Khikhani village, Marneuli District, Kvemo Kartli, October 2010



each house with water free of charge, district authorities have required families to contribute 400 GEL (166 Euro) themselves to be connected.

While some eco-migrants have received land allotments of two hectares some distance from the village, many remain without land, despite repeated promises from the local administration. Those eco-migrants without land are forced to take on poorly paid work as wage labourers where they can find it. Unemployment is widespread in the region, with the general population commonly subsisting on their own crops. Although the district administration has at various times promised to provide more support to the eco-migrants, including land, work and supplies, there is still no sign of this taking place. The eco-migrants struggle to raise the credit they would need to launch agricultural enterprises.

Unlike the neglected resettlers to Khikhani in Marneuli, eco-migrants resettled in Gorelovka have regular contact with an official employed by the ministry in Tbilisi. This member of staff is responsible for buying the houses for resettlement and supervising their allocation, as well as for representing the concerns of the eco-migrants at the district administration and reporting to the ministry eco-migrants division in Tbilisi. This regular communication with a member of staff who is resident locally makes it much easier for eco-migrants to raise concerns. Still, this support has not enabled the eco-migrants to secure agricultural land, and the municipal authorities have been largely unresponsive to their concerns.

Relations between the eco-migrants and the local ethnic Armenian population are marked by mutual suspicion. Most eco-migrants socialise and collaborate with the small remaining Dukhobor community more than with the ethnic Armenian population.

The eco-migrants complain about the apparent dominance of ethnic Armenian interests in crucial issues such as land ownership, and are sceptical about opportunities for redress through a district administration they perceive as deeply corrupt. Many of the local ethnic-Armenian population, meanwhile, tend to consider the Muslim Adjara eco-migrants to be “Turks”, and thereby as a threat to the identity of the district, even if they remain very few in number.

### *Resettlement to Arashferani village, Lagodekhi district, Kakheti region*

Thirteen families were resettled to this village and in late 2007, and a further twenty families were resettled here in December 2009, under the same conditions. The eco-migrants arrived from the Shuakhevi, Khulo and Khelvachauri districts of Adjara. Three days after a request was lodged by the affected residents at their district administration, this request had reached the MRA in Tbilisi, the authorities of Autonomous Adjara. Geologists arrived to make an evaluation. The residents were made aware of the categorisation system, and those listed in categories 1 and 2 (house destroyed; house damaged beyond repair) were resettled. Residents generally considered the evaluation fair, and resettlement took place two months later.

The state provided cars for transporting the eco-migrants, and each family also received a bag of flour and 20 litres of fuel. The Adjara administration provided compensation of 1000 GEL (420 Euro). The houses were in good condition, but without furniture, except that left behind previous inhabitants. These houses previously belonged to the now departed Ossetian people, among others. All houses have electricity. Residents rely on private or collective wells for water supply. The state gas provision programme in the region is underway, but the remote Arashferani is not included in this plan at present. Each family has half a hectare of land for crops and there is a common grazing plot for cattle shared by all village inhabitants. If there is not adequate land immediately by the house, it has been provided elsewhere. Some families produce enough to sell some.

The eco-migrants resettled are generally very satisfied with their new living conditions, in this fertile region of Georgia. Following the departure of many Ossetians from the village since the early 1990s, today roughly half of the 552 families in the village today are Ossetians and half are ethnic Georgians. Relations between the groups are generally unproblematic.

### *Resettlement to Qoreti village, Akhmeta district, Kakheti region*

The Eco-migrants living in Qoreti village were unwilling to meet for interviews, when contacted by telephone. They indicated that recent interviews with visiting researchers had aggravated violent tensions with the local ethnic-Kist population. According to eco-migrants, the general criminal situation in the village has forced some eco-migrant families to return to Adjara. They are staying in a house in a village near



Batumi loaned to them temporarily, without any source of income or plan for the future.

## VII. SUMMARY OF ONGOING PROBLEMS IN STATE ECO-MIGRANT RESETTLEMENT

These cases of state eco-migrant resettlement make it clear that although some progress has been made since 2004, major shortcomings in the process continue to prevent eco-migrants from establishing themselves and integrating into their resettlement destinations. Apart from the generally slow pace of state resettlement assistance and the overall inadequacy of the resources allocated to meet today's needs, the absence of written documentation and official contact persons leave eco-migrants confused about resettlement entitlements and timetables, stimulating speculation about corruption in the resettlement process and dangers they may face after resettlement.

In many cases, eco-migrants remain without land despite promises made during the resettlement process. Without land they cannot earn a decent living or establish themselves solidly in the resettlement location. The quality of housing is in some cases even dangerously poor. Meanwhile, those families who have been provided with a decent house and land, even without furniture or other support, are satisfied with the assistance provided and are now building lives in the new communities successfully.<sup>13</sup> Following the resettlement itself, many municipal administrations have been reluctant to support the integration of eco-migrants, often leaving them isolated, with no way to raise practical concerns. Relations with the recipient populations in some locations are difficult, as eco-migrants find themselves in hostile environments (eg. the Qoreti case), or are perceived as outsiders and are marginalized (eg. the Gorelovka case).

On the basis of these examples, the following structural shortcomings of the state eco-migrant resettlement process can be identified:

- The lack of a comprehensive policy and resources dedicated to resettlement of eco-migrants has left thousands of people stranded in dangerous or unsustainable conditions;
- The lack of geological assessment data and prognoses of future ecological

<sup>13</sup> Interview in Areshferani, Lagodekhi district, Kakheti region, December 2010.

migration needs leave the real needs of eco-migrants unclear and untreated;

- The absence of clear, documented communication with beneficiaries of state resettlement has left them unaware of their rights, fuelling speculation about misuse of funds both before and after resettlement;<sup>14</sup>
- The lack of oversight over resettlement assistance allocations has left many eco-migrants without land or adequate housing;
- Poor coordination of activities between the ministry eco-migration division and relevant local authorities in resettlement destinations has left a responsibility gap, leading to inconsistent provision for eco-migrants and their neglect by recipient host authorities;
- The lack of planning of resettlement choices has led to eco-migrants being resettled to materially difficult and unwelcoming environments;
- The absence of a dialogue mechanism between local communities, eco-migrants and local and ministry officials has fuelled uncertainty and anxiety in inter-group relations, making integration more difficult;<sup>15</sup>
- The absence of dedicated contact persons to attend to eco-migrants' concerns (excluding in Javakheti) have left them voiceless and vulnerable in places of resettlement, and has left ongoing concerns unaddressed.

## VIII. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Establishing the working group on ecological migration at the State Commission on Migration Issues*

The State Commission on Migration Issues<sup>16</sup>, which is based at the Ministry of Justice of Georgia and brings together representatives of several concerned

<sup>14</sup> Interview with eco-migrants in Kvemo Tkhilvana, Khulo district, Adjara, December 2010

<sup>15</sup> Interview with eco-migrants in Gorelovka, Ninotsminda district, Samtskhe-Javakheti, November 2010

<sup>16</sup> [http://justice.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=146&info\\_id=2918](http://justice.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=146&info_id=2918)



Ministries, including the MRA and the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources, was established on 10 December 2010. The founding documents for this Commission include a mandate to establish a working group dedicated to eco-migration. This working group should be established as soon as possible, to bring together officials from the MRA, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources and other relevant state bodies. Once established, this working group can plan and oversee development of legislation to protect ecological migrants, action to address urgent ecological migrant resettlement needs, and the long-term strategy development process. In particular, eco-migration should be a prominent issue on the agenda of the Commission's international conference on migration, planned for Autumn 2011.

### *Legislation on ecological migrant protection*

Legislation on ecological migration should be drafted and adopted, ensuring protection for eco-migrants equivalent to that provided to IDPs. This legislation is an important foundation for a successful resettlement policy, and could take the form either of a new law dedicated specifically to ecological migration, or of an amendment to the existing IDP law<sup>17</sup> to include displacement as a result of natural disasters as an admissible criterion for IDP or similar status and protection.

In close collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, a parliamentary working group should be established to prepare and process draft legislation on eco-migrants. Civil society organisations active on this issue, particularly those specialising in legal issues, should be consulted in the drafting process.

### *Addressing Urgent Needs*

The eco-migration working group to be established under the government Inter-Agency Commission on Migration, outlined above, should prepare a plan for addressing urgent ecological migration needs, including detailed consultation with NGOs, particularly the Civil Society Coalition on Migration, whose members are already actively involved in studying eco-migration resettlement and existing needs. The Civil Society Coalition on Migration was

established in March 2011 for the purpose of sharing research findings and raising important issues related to eco-migration with the relevant authorities, as well as helping to promote coordination of action on eco-migration by the various actors and donors involved.

A comprehensive assistance programme, detailing the intended beneficiary communities and specific resettlement destinations, as well as specific financial information on the intended assistance allocations, could be presented to interested international donors in a programme proposal for immediate action. The implementation of this programme should be based on a start-to-finish collaboration with the Civil Society Coalition on Migration to ensure optimal effectiveness. This collaborative experience could generate excellent lessons-learned to inform the development of a long-term strategy to address eco-migration.

### *Development of an Ecological Migration Strategy*

The Eco-Migration Working Group at the Inter-Agency Commission on Migration, bringing together high-ranking officials from the MRA, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources, the Ministry of Agriculture, and other relevant executive bodies, with regular structured civil society consultation, should oversee the formulation of a long-term strategy on ecological migration.

Civil society organizations, including the Civil Society Coalition on Migration, and representatives of eco-migrant communities and recipient communities should be involved in the strategy development process in a structured way. Formal consultations at several stages of the strategy preparation process, including at the start and before finalization, are crucial for an informed and effective policy.

In addition, the central government should work with national and international organizations (including UNHCR, International Organization for Migration, Council of Europe and international NGOs), as well as with donor organizations, in order to obtain financial and informational support for the formulation and subsequent implementation of a long-term strategy on ecological migration.

For the elaboration of the strategy, further studies of the current situation and needs of ecological migrants would be crucial. Moreover, potential host communities would need to be studied and consulted before any resettlement. Environmental issues, economic conditions, ethnic and demographic factors,

<sup>17</sup> Law of Georgian on Internally Displaced Persons (Georgian language) [http://mra.gov.ge/files/01-IDPs\\_kanoni\\_devnilTa\\_Sesaxe.pdf](http://mra.gov.ge/files/01-IDPs_kanoni_devnilTa_Sesaxe.pdf)



and cultural differentiation are the main determining factors for a successful adaptation and integration process.

The strategy should include the following distinct, yet inter-related elements:

### *Emergency Response Action-plan*

Central and local self-government bodies need a specific strategy on how to act when sudden natural disasters emerge. Special action plans should be formulated which will address the needs of those people who will suffer from the disasters. Temporary shelter for temporary accommodation may be constructed in low lands; specific funds should be reserved for medical and humanitarian aid, etc.

### *Resettlement Aid Programme*

An aid programme to support ecological migrants during the first difficult period of resettlement would help them to become self-sustainable. Eco-migrants should be encouraged with financial support at the time of resettlement. Starting a new life in an unfamiliar location is extremely difficult for eco-migrants without the help of the government. Based on the experience of internally displaced persons in Georgia, whether ecologically or war displaced populations, it appears that even after 10, 15 or 20 years, displaced persons are poorly adapted to the place where they have settled. Displaced persons remain among the poorest segments of society.

### *Integration Programme*

An integration programme should cover all aspects of socio-economic, cultural, and educational integration. The programme must take due note of local specificities in the host communities, and must devise a practice for systematic assessment and consultation in the process of selection of new host communities.

### *Facilitation Programme for Eco-Migrants Resettled since 1987*

Such programme should be directed towards assisting eco-migrants still facing problems with formal ownership of houses and access to land and land ownership, as well as other ongoing concerns.

## **IX.CONCLUSION**

The issue of ecological migration in Georgia is acute, with at least 11,000 families in urgent need of resettlement, and many more families already suffering from damage to their homes or living in great danger of future natural disasters. The government should pay more attention to ecological migration, and work together closely with international actors and civil society organizations to develop and implement structured programmes for eco-migrant resettlement.

Establishing a clear legal basis for state protection of ecological migrants is an important foundation for sustainable eco-migration policy. Developing a more systematic and transparent approach to eco-migration and resettlement, which can be implemented coherently at central and municipal administrative levels, will enable the government to prevent social crises, and in the long run reduce financial expenditures, while at the same time promoting integration and development processes in the country. The government, in collaboration with civil society organisations and international actors, should design and implement both a short term programme for addressing urgent needs, and a long-term strategy on ecological migration. In the long run, such measures will both alleviate the needs of eco-migrants and enhance the government's capacity to uphold stability and security in the country.

#### **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION SEE**

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