

IDPs in the face of COVID-19



Author: Gvantsa Sakanelashvili
Editor: Khatuna Kviralashvili
Designed by LTD "Biarti"

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has had an impact worldwide, although it has manifested itself differently in different countries or groups. Pandemic had a particular, disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups.¹ Victims of humanitarian crises, IDPs, especially those living in collective settlements, often face challenges, including vulnerabilities different from the general population, which have been exacerbated by the impact of Covid-19 on health and socioeconomic status. If proper measures are not taken, persons affected by displacement and IDPs who are already experiencing inequality,² will face even more problems.

The purpose of this document is to identify the challenges facing IDPs during the Covid-19 pandemic, to study the effectiveness of measures taken by government agencies, and to develop recommendations aimed at improving the situation of IDPs, taking into account international approaches.

For the purposes of the report, the recommendations of international organizations working on the rights of IDPs, the Government's Socio-Economic Anti-Crisis Plan, reports of local organizations are analysed. GYLA held focus group meetings to conduct an in-depth study of the impact of Covid-19 on IDPs.³

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS FOR THE PROTECTION OF IDPS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As one of the most vulnerable groups, IDPs have been in the spotlight of international organizations since the beginning of the pandemic. They have actively begun to develop guidelines and recommendations for states, taking into account the needs of IDPs.

The International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, based on a Resolution of the Council of Delegates of the same movement of December 8th, 2019,⁴ identified the causes for the high risk of spreading the virus among IDPs during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁵ Among them were named:

- 5 Densely populated living environment;
- 5 Inadequate sanitary/hygienic conditions;
- 5 Poor nutrition and health problems;
- 5 Impact of the imposed state of emergency restrictions on the economic situation, etc.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has developed special recommendations⁶ to protect the rights of internally displaced persons, refugees and migrants and to alleviate the problems caused by Covid-19, according to which:

- 5 States should take concrete measures to involve migrants, IDPs and asylum seekers in the prevention of Covid-19, which should include ensuring equal access to information, testing and health care;
- 5 States should ensure equal access to food, health care and other essential services for IDPs, refugees and migrants.

According to the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, international assistance must be provided to states to implement the recommended measures. However, each state is directly responsible for taking measures to prevent Covid-19 and provide appropriate assistance to those affected by the pandemic.



OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Report "OSCE Human Dimension Commitments and State Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic", 2020. Available: <https://bit.ly/33AxiNF> [last viewed: 03.12.2020].

Dan Jezreel A. Orendain & Riyanti Djalante, Article „Ignored and invisible: internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the face of COVID-19 pandemic”, 06.08.2020. Available: <https://bit.ly/3qogwLK> [last viewed: 03.12.2020].

Representatives of the following organizations participated in the focus group: Charitable Humanitarian Center "Abkhazia", Institute of Nationalism and Conflict Studies, Association of Internally Displaced Women "Consent".

4. Council of Delegates of the International Red cross and Red Crescent Movement, Draft zero resolution, "Strengthening implementation of the Movement Policy on Internal Displacement: Ten years on", 08.12.2020. Available: <https://bit.ly/3ouyScj> [last viewed: 03.12.2020].

5. Red cross and Red Crescent Movement, „Reducing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Internally Displaced People (IDPS). 05.2020. Available: <https://bit.ly/33DxLij> [last viewed: 03.12.2020].

6. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, „COVID-19 Guidance", 13.05.2020. Available: <https://bit.ly/2JK18Z8> [last viewed: 04.12.2020].

IDPS IN THE GOVERNMENT'S ANTI-CRISIS PLAN

According to the Government of Georgia Report,⁷ following the widespread of Covid-19 around the world in April 2020, the government presented an Anti-Crisis Plan to combat the pandemic and its aftermath.⁸ Specifically, an aid program for internally displaced persons has not been developed by the government.

In parallel with the anti-crisis plan, the government presented a report on the measures taken against Covid-19. According to the report, in addition to preventing the spread of the virus, pandemic mitigation measures included social support for citizens, assistance to entrepreneurs, economic support, as well as intensive work with international partners to attract financial flows. The report, in particular, provides for the one-time purchase of real estate property to help IDPs, which means the purchase of residential real estate worth 150 million GEL in the period 01/06/2020 - 01/01/2021.⁹ Providing IDPs with adequate housing is not a direct measure designed to assist this group in the context of the spread of Covid-19. The rules and criteria for their provision of long-term residential area have been defined since 2013¹⁰ and, for years, the state has been implementing various programs for this purpose. Specifically, in August and September 2020, a total of 152 IDP families were provided with residential housing¹¹.

COVID-19 AND AGGRAVATED PROBLEMS OF IDPS

For an in-depth study of the impact of Covid-19 on IDPs, GYLA applied the focus group method to representatives of organizations working on IDP issues.¹² As a result, it was revealed that IDPs' already severe socio-economic background has worsened since the spread of Covid-19 in the country. According to the focus group participants, there is mainly only one member employed in IDP families. Most of them work in the service sector. Due to the declaration of a state of emergency in the country and the termination of business activities, the IDPs working there were left without any source of income.

"The Anti-Crisis Plan did not envisage assistance to IDPs".

"What is intended for others, the same is for IDPs - that was the policy of the state."

"The economic situation has worsened at the Enguri due to the closure of the so-called border. The population engaged in small business (used to moving to Abkhazian side for trade) was left without access to the market."

"You can not imagine how difficult is the situation in the collective settlements of IDPs."

When I get to the place, I can not manage to visit more than 2-3 collective settlements because they have such difficult living conditions."

"People living in collective settlements do not have their own washroom - bathrooms, toilets."

It became even more important during the pandemic to provide adequate housing for IDPs, especially those housed in collective settlements. Half of the buildings need urgent repairs, and some are virtually unfit for residence and impossible to stay there. It isn't easy to follow the World Health Organization recommendations regarding adherence to hygiene in such conditions.

According to focus group participants, the state did not have a plan to prevent the spread of the coronavirus directly to IDP settlements. People living there did not have adequate access to medical services. Some of the settlements did not have a family doctor's office, and where the doctor was, he/she did not have the proper equipment to provide assistance.¹³ Also, IDPs did not have proper access to disinfectants and protective equipment.

7. Government of Georgia Report, May 2020, p. 5. Available: <https://bit.ly/2loabyA> [last viewed: 07.12.2020].

8. Statement of the Administration of the Government of Georgia "Giorgi Gakharia presented an Anti-Crisis Economic Plan", 24.04.2020. Available: <https://bit.ly/3ovnbZ5> [last viewed: 07.12.2020].

9. Government of Georgia Report, May 2020, pg. 76. Available: <https://bit.ly/2loabyA> [last viewed: 07.12.2020].

10. Internally Displaced persons, Eco-migrants and Livelihood Agency, „IDPs issues“, available: <https://idp.gov.ge/idps/> [last viewed: 07.12.2020].

11. Statement of the Government of Georgia "115 IDP families have been provided with the residential area ownership." 13.08.2020. Available: <https://bit.ly/3lOuiDO> [last viewed: 07.12.2020].
Statement of the Government of Georgia "37 more families were given apartments in Gori and Khashuri", 13.08.2020. Available: <https://bit.ly/33SWb7B> [last viewed: 07.12.2020].

12. Representatives of the following organizations participated in the focus group: Charitable Humanitarian Center "Abkhazia", Institute of Nationalism and Conflict Studies, Association of Internally Displaced Women "Consent".

13. The opinion expressed in the focus group.



" There was a terrible panic at first. The women, who had a sewing machine, started sewing face masks. I know that non-governmental organizations were assisting the population with such means."

During the pandemic, access to education became a challenge for IDP children and students. Some of them did not have a computer at all. In some cases, there were not enough devices in the family to get an education online (for example, when there are 2-3 young people in the family). Internet access was also a challenge. Neither the Ministry of Education nor the IDP Agency had any specific plan to deal with these problems.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has had a particular impact on the situation of IDPs who do not have adequate access to essential housing services, decent income and hygienic means for virus protection. The consequences of a pandemic on them can be critical. Although it is probably too early to fully assess the impact of the coronavirus crisis on IDPs, in the absence of a plan to fight the pandemic, IDPs' vulnerability and emergence of new risks may increase. The direct impact of Covid-19 on the long-term social and financial consequences means that IDPs need more help than ever before.

Movement-related restrictions and other measures imposed by countries in response to a pandemic directly affect IDPs' daily lives. Livelihood is reduced or lost altogether. Access to health care is limited. Many IDP communities do not have adequate investments in health, water and sanitation infrastructure. The deterioration of the social background increases the humanitarian need and intensifies the search for ways to solve the problems of IDPs.¹⁴

14. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Situation Report „COVID-19: Impact on IDPs“, 16.10.2020. Available: <https://bit.ly/3qrPsvc> [last viewed: 03.12.2020].

Recommendations

To improve the situation of IDPs and reduce the damage caused by Covid-19, the state needs to consider the following recommendations:

- 1** The Agency for Internally Displaced persons, Eco-migrants and Livelihoods should develop targeted programs for improving the difficult socio-economic situation created for IDPs as a result of Covid-19;
- 2** Accelerate (especially from dangerous buildings for housing in collective settlements) the placement of IDPs in adequate housing;
- 3** Ensure adequate access to education for IDP youth through the coordinated work of relevant ministries;
- 4** The Ministry of IDPs, Labor, Health and Social Affairs should ensure that IDPs living in collective settlements have access to health services;
- 5** The Ministry of IDPs, Labor, Health and Social Affairs should include IDPs in the list of citizens in need of periodic testing and vaccination as persons at special risk (poor hygienic conditions, dense settlement).