Re-conceptualizing the social, environmental, and political hazards associated with conflict-induced displacement in the Republic of Georgia

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Summary

Following the Soviet Union's disintegration in the early 1990s, Georgia entered several ethnic conflicts with its autonomous regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which seek unilateral secession. In total, over 300,000 people – primarily ethnic Georgians – have been forced to flee, finding refuge in other areas of Georgia, and becoming internally displaced persons (IDPs). To date, displacement in the country has largely been framed as a conflict-induced phenomenon tied to several acute periods of violence. Yet, the hazards IDPs face did not end following their initial displacement. Up to 45% of IDPs have found refuge in vacant, non-purpose-built buildings – so-called 'collective centres' (also referred to as organized resettlement facilities for displaced persons, 'დევნილთა ორგანიზებულად ჩასახლების ობიექტები' in Georgian) – including former factories, kindergartens, hospitals, and hotel-sanatoria. There, they are exposed to mold, contaminated soil, sewage, and other environmental hazards. Government mobilization to improve collective centres or relocate IDPs elsewhere has been slow, in part due to weak state institutions and a lack of resources, with the state heavily reliant on international aid. Historically, the state also had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo of precarious IDP housing given that the right-of-return is interconnected with Georgia's sovereign territorial claims. The hazardous environmental conditions of IDP collective centres have, therefore, been politically weaponized by the government, showcased to domestic and international audiences alike as evidence of the urgency in unifying Georgia's territory.

Since the late 2000s—decades after initial displacement—the government has finally shifted its approach and IDPs are incrementally being granted tenure or being re-settled in purpose-built housing. Yet, this, too, has prompted a re-conceptualization of the social, environmental, and political hazards associated with displacement. The environmentally hazardous living conditions of Georgia's collective centres are now being used to justify IDP forced evictions in areas prioritized for urban re-development. The result is secondary displacement and an erasure of IDP's local histories. In these ways, environmental hazards have become deeply entwined with the social and political aspects of internal displacement in Georgia. The loss of collective centres in prime real estate areas links to a different aspect of post-hazard reconstruction, yetone also deserving of attention. IDP identity is embedded within these spaces and should not be simply erased by future development. In such situations, there are socioeconomic and political complexities beyond the acute and pragmatic needs of securing humanitarian shelter away from violence. Thus, the line between displacement-induced hazards, political, and environmental ones is blurred, making distinct categorizations less useful. Understanding these interconnections relative to issues of governance, re-settlement, housing provision, and urban renewal is crucial to effectively supporting Georgia's IDPs.

Keywords:
Internally displaced persons, conflict-induced displacement, development-induced displacement, secondary displacement, humanitarian response, post-disaster recovery, urban renewal, hazard governance, vulnerability paradigm

Introduction

Conflict-induced displacement, and the diverse experiences of those impacted by it, is shaped by distinct social, political, and environmental contexts that shift over time. The vulnerabilities of displaced groups, therefore, relate not only to the initial driver of their movement but also to additional hazards that they may subsequently face. As conflict wears on and displacement becomes protracted, those impacted are confronted with new challenges. The immediate threat of violence is eclipsed by novel concerns of personal security, a sustained livelihood, health, education, and durable housing. As a result, policies anchored to the initial act of displacement and foregrounding return as the only viable solution for these communities at best struggle to hold analytical value and at worst produce institutional structures of discrimination and domination. Internal displacement in Georgia is one example of this where some 300,000 people have fled various waves of violence and spent decades sheltered elsewhere in the country, accommodated by friends and family, renting or owning their own new homes, or inhabiting state-run humanitarian shelters – so-called 'collective centres' (also referred to as organized resettlement facilities for displaced persons, 'დევნილთა ორგანიზებულად ჩასახლების ობიექტები' in Georgian). Those living in the latter increasingly face secondary, development-induced displacement as their shelters' dilapidation is used as justification for area redevelopment. In this context, IDP vulnerability exists on a continuum stretching from the original time of their displacement to the precarious living conditions they face upon resettlement and into their future threat of eviction. To unpack these issues, this research draws attention to the overlapping social, environmental, and political hazards associated with protracted displacement in Georgia.

This work spans several years, conducted intermittently between 2010-2022, and has involved various mixed methodological approaches: secondary data analysis, policy review, site observations and field visits, as well as eight focus groups (total 64 participants) with IDP and non-IDP residents. Focus groups were held in March 2019 in the town of Tskaltubo which has hosted thousands of IDPs since 1993. Groups were divided by age and gender and included both IDPs still living in the town's collective centres and those who had recently been resettled into purpose-built apartments. Focus group discussions were transcribed and coded using NVIVO software. Secondary data analysis sources included government statistics on the number and distribution of IDPs across Georgia. Policy review entailed an analysis of existing policy reports by the Georgian government and various NGOs focused on aid and human rights for Georgian IDPs. Field visits and site observations took place at various collective centres across Georgia and were made on an ongoing basis throughout the research period, taking place during different seasons in order to gain a rounded impression of collective centre conditions and their evolution.

This research is tied to scholarship discussing the lines between nature and culture in disasters and the two's entanglements, also described as the vulnerability perspective (J. Gaillard, 2019; Hewitt, 1983; van Riet, 2021). The environmental hazards considered here are not acute climatological, meteorological, or geophysical events, but rather more mundane and prolonged conditions created by chronic exposure to hazardous living environments. Specific examples of the hazards facing Georgia's internally displaced are provided that indicate how their social, political, and economic entanglements are playing out locally, reinforcing calls for more comprehensive, vulnerability-based perspectives in disaster studies (Finucane et al., 2020; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021; O'Keefe et al., 1976). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the practical limits coming with this approach, and the incredible demands it places on those engaging with these communities—whether through academic research, international aid, or government assistance (Oliver-Smith, 2013).

The following section discusses the challenges of using set categories in describing hazards and displaced populations, arguing for these categories' expansion relative to the diversity of lived experiences and population vulnerabilities. The hope is that this can lead to a more integrated approach to hazard assessments and correlated support. Shared areas of vulnerability across conflict-induced displacement, inadequate humanitarian shelters for those displaced, and the threats of secondary displacement from future development are identified. After this discussion on categories, the specific characteristics of Georgia's internal displacement are charted since the 1990s, alongside the state's evolving policies for their integration and support. The environmental hazards found in ad-hoc shelters across the country are described before going into the particular ways in which these hazardous conditions intersect with their broader social, political, and economic contexts.

Bringing together conflict-induced displacement, environmental hazard risks, and development-induced displacement: Merging categories and blurring definitions

This research is in conversation with a growing body of scholarship in contemporary disaster studies connecting the social, political, environmental, and economic root causes of disaster and displacement, moving toward a multi-hazard approach in both policy and research, and one that considers overlaps and continuations between these categories. For roughly half

a century, scholarship on disasters has moved away from framings of isolated events toward a more holistic vulnerability assessment, or what has been called the 'vulnerability paradigm' (Ball, 1975; Birkmann & McMillan, 2020; J. C. Gaillard, 2021; Hewitt, 1983; Wisner, 2016). The primary aim of this body of work is to capture the socio-political dimensions of disasters more effectively, alongside approaches to managing and researching them. In addition to scholars challenging the notion of individual disasters, there are examples of displaced and migratory communities challenging the static labels assigned to them and their vulnerabilities (Adams & Bloch, 2023; Hamlin, 2021; Sajjad, 2018; Sigona, 2018; Zetter, 1991, 2007). Building on this, this current work joins recent scholarship on intersectionality in displacement and disaster assessments (Cleton & Meier, 2023; Goodling, 2020; Vickery et al., 2023), arguing that there is an opportunity to see risks from environmental hazards, conflict induced displacement, and secondary, development-induced displacement more holistically.

'Conflict-induced' displacement has historically been used as a category to differentiate between those fleeing violent conflict and other types of forced movement, including from natural hazards and imposed development. The result, however, is a risk of this category giving the impression of only short-term impacts directly related to the acute acts of violence. Counter to this, existing scholarship shows the overwhelming likelihood of conflict to be only the first in a series of hazards these populations face, lasting years if not decades (Cantor et al., 2021; IDMC, 2022; UNHRC, 2022). The initial concerns of finding a safe place away from conflict evolve into longer-term needs for adequate livelihood support, including proper shelter with tenure security. The category of 'conflict-induced displacement' therefore risks obscuring how those fleeing conflict go on to face new threats, like environmental hazards in inadequate resettlement areas and secondary displacement when those settlements are earmarked for urban renewal. Put differently, the narrow categorization of IDPs relative to the cause of their flight fails to capture the often interconnected series of subsequent hazardous events. As Miller notes (2020, p. 363), the stakes of such categorizations are high:

> "The concept of conflict-induced displacement is more than just a label. It is a foundation for methods and theories that frame the way scholars, policymakers, practitioners and the global humanitarian and development community at large think about and respond to displaced persons in the short and long-term."

Assessments of IDP livelihood should, therefore, be expanded beyond immediate needs for physical security from violence to better include the chronic environmental hazards of places of resettlement and future secondary displacement risks, ultimately creating a more accurate picture of overall, long-term vulnerabilities. While the humanitarian field has made great strides toward this direction in the 21st century, such was not always the case, as the example of Georgia demonstrates. At the same time, despite the obvious merits of an expansive and integrative approach, one of the larger challenges is that the factors involved can be highly diffuse and long-standing, making it difficult to establish appropriate metrics. When assessing vulnerabilities, zooming out redefines the timeframe under consideration and terms of community engagement, but can also redefine understandings of 'community' itself to include not only those displaced by conflict but also their descendants and others from their host communities. In policy terms, it calls for several ongoing assessments and a longer-term, area-based approach receptive to dynamic needs. In relation to academic research, it also calls for expanded approaches to assessments, alongside greater interdisciplinarity. As Oliver-Smith et. al (2017, p. 473) highlight regarding such a reframing:

> "there are inevitable conceptual questions that emerge such as the epistemological challenges of identifying research questions that multiple disciplines and stakeholder communities can embrace, and which different methodologies can pursue relevant information of different qualitative-quantitative natures across time/space/organizational scales."

To better comprehend these more expansive and dynamic relationships relative to the specific case of internal displacement in Georgia, the background section first describes the case context and then outlines some of the specific hazards from poor living conditions facing Georgian IDPs. How these conditions have been politicized by the state to meet its broader geopolitical and state building objectives is then explained.

Background: Conflict-Induced Internal Displacement in Georgia Since Independence

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in the early 1990s, newly independent Georgia entered several civil conflicts and a full-scale armed confrontation with its Russian-backed separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia[1] seeking unilateral

[1] The term "South Ossetia" is not universally accepted. Many in Georgia refer to the area instead as the 'Tskhinvali Region.' In the Georgian constitution this area is identified only as "the former autonomous district of South Ossetia," referring to the now-obsolete Soviet-era 'South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast.' In anticipation of this area's eventual return, the Georgian state has created a 'temporary administration of South Ossetia' which is considered a

secession. The first wave of displacement from these events was in 1992-1993 when roughly 240,000 people, primarily ethnic Georgians, fled these two regions, relocating to adjacent Georgian territory (Mooney, 2011). While approximately 45,000 of those affected from the Gali Region of Abkhazia have since returned, the majority cannot (Secretary General, 2021).[2] A second wave of internal displacement in Georgia followed in 2008, prompted by conflict between Georgia and Russia in the area around South Ossetia. Additional fighting erupted around the same time in the border regions of Abkhazia. As a result, close to 128,000 additional Georgians were displaced (OCHA, 2008), most of whom have since returned. Roughly 30,000 of those from South Ossetia and the Kodori Gorge area of Abkhazia, however, remain displaced (UNHCR, 2009).

Overall, as of 2022, Georgia's State Agency for Internally Displaced Persons, Ecomigrants, and Livelihood (2022) reports that some 292,000 residents of Georgia—approximately 8% of the population—are considered internally displaced. There are far-reaching governance implications for this internal displacement, including in relation to housing, health, education, social services, and geopolitics (Brun & Thorshaug, 2020; Koch, 2015; Salukvadze et al., 2014; Singh & Robinson, 2010; Smit, 2005; Torosyan et al., 2018). This research foregrounds durable housing solutions, including issues of re-settlement and threats from future urban development, but does so acknowledging that all IDP governance concerns are interconnected and have bearing on one another—one's place of residence has far reaching impacts on access to education and healthcare services, as well as employment opportunities, to name a few (Funke, 2022; Gogishvili & Harris-Brandts, 2019).

Geographically, Georgian IDPs are concentrated in the capital city, Tbilisi, with close to 40% living in its administrative borders, constituting roughly 11% of the urban population (Ministry of Healthcare, 2021). As Figure 1 shows, their proportion in municipalities in the west of Georgia near Abkhazia is even higher, with the second-largest concentration of IDPs being the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti Region, where 30% of IDPs have settled, largely concentrated in the city of Zugdidi (ibid., **Figure 1**). Zugdidi's population is a significant 50% IDP, followed by the town of Tsalenjikha where the share of IDPs is 39% (ibid.). Close to a quarter of the population in the town of Senaki (27%) and city of Poti (25%) are IDPs (ibid.). Although the areas bordering South Ossetia have a smaller share of IDPs in their population, more than one-fifth (21%) of residents in the nearby city of Mtskheta are registered as IDPs (ibid.). The geography of internal displacement in Georgia is thus quite diffuse and urban.

IDPs in Georgia have found shelter either in private accommodations (with or without tenure) or in so-called 'collective centres,' a form of ad-hoc communal housing recognized by the state, yet without tenure. For those who were settled in collective centres, many had to accept shelter in government-determined locations and had little say over their preferred destination. According to various estimates, the share of IDPs residing in collective centres could be anywhere from 42% (Secretary General, 2021) to 45% (Conciliation Resources, 2009). At their peak in the 1990s and into the early 2000s, there were over 1,600 collective centres established across the country (Government of Georgia, 2010). Their inhabitants often belong to marginalized and vulnerable societal groups, including seniors without family support, female-headed households, disabled and severely traumatised individuals (Amnesty International, 2010a).

Collective centres for the first wave of IDPs in the 1990s were mostly located in non-purpose-built buildings, including former schools, kindergartens, hospitals, military facilities, student and worker dormitories, hotels, and factories, none of which were designed for permanent living, examples of which are shown in Figures 2 and 3 (**Figure 2; Figure 3**). A comprehensive assessment conducted by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 2003 estimated that 70 percent of Georgian collective centres were below minimum shelter standards (OCHA, 2003). Many IDPs from the later wave of conflict in 2008 were initially settled in temporary shelters but have since been formally housed in purpose-built settlements in the Shida Kartli, Kvemo Kartli, and Mtskheta-Mtianeti regions in close vicinity to the South Ossetian border (Transparency International Georgia, 2010b). While those collective centres in the heart of downtowns initially had increased access to amenities and employment, over time they have become at greater risk of secondary, development-induced displacement through urban renewal.

The Environmental Hazards of Georgia's Collective Centres

legitimate political entity within Georgia. The term 'South Ossetia' is used here on account of its high use in existing international scholarship and policy documents, yet done so without taking a political stance.

[2] The internal displacement of ethnic Georgians was mirrored by between 20,000-80,000 ethnic Ossetians fleeing Georgia in 1991 and 1992 into neighbouring Russia, something beyond the scope of this current article which is focused more on events within Georgia's territory.

The environmental hazards of Georgia's collective centres are diffuse and chronic in nature. They range from exposure to contaminants for those centres located near industrial sites to the ever-developing health issues facing residents in poor indoor environments, and the threat of fires or building structural failures. As such, these hazards are unlike acute environmental catastrophes like hurricanes, landslides, and earthquakes. Yet, they still have significant impacts on people's lives and warrant consideration for how they amplify this population's existing vulnerabilities from conflict-induced displacement. The everyday environmental hazards faced in Georgian collective centres are numerous, varying greatly by locality. Exposure has persisted for decades and, in the absence of sufficient government intervention, continues to get worse. Consequently, the environmental hazards of Georgia's collective centres result from both these buildings being unsuitable for long-term residential inhabitation and them continuing to fall into greater disrepair, an example of which from Zugdidi can be seen in Figure 4 (**Figure 4**).

For decades, faulty roof structures have been an overwhelming concern at collective centres, both for structural reasons and in terms of protection from the elements. Buildings with damaged roofs allow rainwater to collect indoors, then becoming stagnant, leading to health issues due to mold and dampness while also creating ideal conditions for insect, rodent, and reptile infestations. Scorpion nests have been a common concern (Lois & Tavartkiladze, 2008), as have the presence of snakes (Tedliashvili, 2009). High humidity and moisture levels from water penetration further mean that respiratory infections like Tuberculosis, alongside allergies and asthma, are ongoing risks (Mdivani et al., 2008; Zoidze & Djibuti, 2004). Poorly sealed buildings enable dirt to be carried in by the wind, easily accumulating on interior surfaces and exacerbating indoor air quality. In efforts to survive the cold winter months in uninsulated buildings, residents install their own poorly ventilated wood-burning or fuel-based heating systems, further raising the risks of toxic combustion exposure. Inadequate building enclosures also allow the penetration of extreme heat in the summer months, bringing concerns of heat stroke and dehydration, something particularly challenging in buildings without a functioning water service.

Collective centres with inadequate building enclosures are also at higher risks of fires since high winds cause shaking faulty electrical connections which can arc and ignite nearby flammable materials. After numerous fires broke out in collective centres, IDPs have begun voluntarily switching off their electricity during high winds to mitigate the risks (Lois & Tavartkiladze, 2008). This can be a challenge in areas where electricity provision is already haphazard and limited, resulting in even fewer hours of the day with electricity.[3] The absence of working telephone lines in buildings prevents occupants from calling the fire, police or ambulance services, something that was especially a concern in the 1990s and early 2000s before the rise in mobile phone popularity.

Utility companies have also cut electricity provision to collective centres due to a lack of payment, forcing IDPs to use open flames and fuel-based heat/light sources that pose their own fire and emissions risks. Wood construction and wood-framed interiors are a particular hazard due to their vulnerability to fires, water damage, and rot. At many collective centres, rotting wooden floorboards and staircases harbored insects and posed structural risks, causing residents injuries when their construction collapsed (Lois & Tavartkiladze, 2008). Speaking of her collective centre in Tskaltubo, one middle-aged focus group respondent stated:

> "we are living in very catastrophic conditions. Everything in the building is deteriorating and falling on top of us. I am afraid at night that sometime will fall on top of me while I am sleeping. I cannot let the children pass through the entranceway on their own, I cannot let them play in the corridor, due to the unsafe conditions. We live in very bad conditions. I do not know what will happen in the future as this building deteriorates further" (Focus group with IDP women, aged 18-45).

Absent or faulty drainage, sewage, and water supply systems have exposed occupants to bacteria and disease. For collective centres without basic sewage and water supplies, water needs to be carried by hand, up stairs and sometimes from long distances. It is not always safe to drink. Environmental hazards in collective centres thus come from many directions: from faulty building structures and inadequate enclosures, alongside a systematic lack of basic utilities or their ad-hoc retrofitted installation.

Noise pollution is yet another environmental hazard facing IDPs. In the absence of acoustically separated spaces, noise penetration from both indoors and outdoors makes sleep, study, and other concentration-heavy activities difficult, something exacerbated by cramped living conditions and the use of shared rooms for multiple living purposes (Lois &

[3] It is worth mentioning that in the 1990s and 2000s, the provision of utilities like electricity and water was poor throughout Georgia, rendering many citizens in a situation similar to IDPs (see: Dershem et al., 2002b).

Tavartkiladze, 2008). Problems of noise pollution have persisted for decades, making them particularly insufferable, as described by a 2020 assessment in Poti collective centres by Transparency International (2020). Beyond contributing to noise, overcrowding exacerbated all other hazardous conditions: more people introduced greater building wear and tear, greater water and energy use, greater waste production, and the easier spread of bacteria and disease. There are also psychological impacts of overcrowding, as attested to by one elderly women in a collective centre in Zugdidi:

> "When we moved here some 15 years ago, it was just me, my husband and my daughter. But now that my daughter is married with children, our family grew from three to six persons. I sleep in the same room as my daughter, her husband and their children. I often feel redundant, and think that I am the reason why they do not get privacy, but I have nowhere else to go..." (Amnesty International, 2010a, p. 21).

A comprehensive review of IDP livelihood studies conducted by the World Bank in 2002 showed that, on average, IDPs lived in shelters with living space of less than 10 square meters per person, three times less than the national average (Dershem et al., 2002a). The same study indicated that many IDPs have to share amenities, such as bathrooms and showers.

The environmental hazards facing IDPs also come from their collective centre's nearby contexts. Buildings in industrial areas pose a great threat to inhabitants through chemical exposure. In the western city of Poti, for example, two collective centers are located near the Poti Industrial Zone and the Poti Maritime Port. Here, residents are exposed to toxic chemicals like sulfur, lead, aluminum oxide, copper concentrate, and carbamide, which are loaded and unloaded through the port daily. In 2021, several residents underwent blood testing and were determined to have twenty times higher concentrations in their systems than normally acceptable (Mtisambebi.ge, 2021). Another IDP building in Tbilisi is located close to an oil depot and oil transportation rail line belonging to the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR). Residents have complained about multiple health hazards they feel are tied to the depot's operations and have experienced nausea, dizziness, chemical pneumonia, and thyroid problems (Shermadini & Mamed, 2017). A 2017 audit of the premise by Georgia's Department of Environmental Supervision identified a list of violations including the unregulated release of polluted substances into the air. They issued a minor fine and demanded a new environmental impact assessment, yet the oil depot continues operating without regulation. Here, we can see that IDPs who were initially vulnerable to conflict have gone on to experience many additional vulnerabilities as a result of their environmentally hazardous collective centres.

The issue of contaminated environments further intersects with that of food security since IDPs turn to small-scale agriculture to supplement their diets. Figure 5 shows an example of this from Zugdidi in 2013 (**Figure 5**). Residents face a difficult decision between hunger or eating contaminated food. In light of deficient municipal waste management systems, the grounds surrounding collective centres have also become contaminated by domestic solid waste and sewage, further spread by local birds, pigs and stray dogs that dig up un-collected mounds. Improper waste and sewage disposal increases the risks of exposure to disease.

In addition to navigating all these building environmental hazards and dealing with overcrowding, living in non-purpose-built buildings has meant that IDPs have to undertake a great degree of ongoing repair and renovation to make these spaces habitable. Upon move-in, interiors often required significant initial spatial reconfigurations to create residential dwellings, including the addition or removal of walls and installation of new heat sources. In efforts to establish some semblance of a local life, IDPs have continued to augment their collective centres where possible, better supporting their dynamic needs. The enclosure of balconies, transformation of internal communal spaces, and introduction of agriculture and animal husbandry on the adjacent grounds are very common and are both time and resource intensive. Figure 6 shows this practice at the AIA sanatoria in Tskaltubo in 2018 (**Figure 6)** and Figure 7 shows interior modifications to a building in Tbilisi in 2010 **(Figure 7**). In the absence of tenure security, there is little incentive for IDPs to make such large changes and property investments. IDPs have to balance allocating their precious resources toward building upgrades with other life demands like health and education, decisions often swayed toward other needs by the ever-present threat of eviction and, with it, wasted investment. As one female 65-year old resident of a collective centre in Tskneti stated:

> "we expect to be evicted. It's very difficult to live here in the collective centre. They came the other day to carry out the registration process as they're going to evict us. We held protest meetings… No one knows what's going to happen… We don't know when we'll get thrown out of here. We can't do repairs or anything. Every three months we expect to be evicted. Even changing the wallpaper makes no sense in view of the money wasted" (Lois & Tavartkiladze, 2008, p. 82).

Denying security of tenure can, therefore, be understood as a denial of the right of IDPs to effectively repair, improve, or remain in their current dwellings. The absence of tenure thus further contributes to the environmentally hazardous living conditions of collective centres by not giving IDPs any assurances that their property investments will be sound.

Thinking across the spectrum of Georgia's internally displaced population, exposure to these hazards is not equal and those most vulnerable go on to face the greatest risks in their community. Missing handrails and guardrails on stairs, for example, created especially hazardous falling conditions for small children and those less mobile or with visual impairments.

Carrying heavy water containers up rotting and faulty staircases similarly increased personal risks to those less mobile. Along similar lines, individuals in the most precarious economic situations eat food grown in contaminated soil or drink water from un-sanatory sources.

Manipulating Collective Centre Environmental Hazards for State Geopolitical Gain

Understanding why these hazardous living conditions persisted for decades in the humanitarian spaces allocated by Georgian officials is an important component of working to see IDPs' social, political, and environmental vulnerabilities more interconnectedly. Looking back on the trajectory of IDP resettlement and local integration in the late 1990s, one can see how poor living conditions in collective centres were manipulated for state geopolitical gain, as well as how they were tied to the government's inability to acknowledge that the issue of displacement was not going to be resolved anytime soon (Kabachnik, 2012; Kabachnik et al., 2012, 2015; Tarkhan-Mouravi & Sumbadze, 2006). As conflict in the Russian-backed separatist regions of Georgia entered attrition in the 1990s, government officials showcased the environmental hazards facing IDPs to argue for the increased urgency of the country's territorial integrity. Such officials believed the local integration of IDPs would risk normalizing the country's territorial losses and feared that IDPs would not want to return home if their current living conditions became decent (Kabachnik et al., 2015). Summarized in a speech by Francis M. Deng, Representative of the UN Secretary-General on IDP issues, at a hearing on IDPs in the Caucasus Region and South-eastern Anatolia (2003):

> "[t]here is a situation whereby the political agendas, in particular the ongoing conflicts and the emphasis given on the goal of return, tends to make the IDPs hostages to the situation. The idea being that if the problems are solved, of the displaced populations, the pressure to find a solution so that people can return can be undermined, and as a result, people are left living under deplorable conditions without adequate shelter, no means of livelihood or self-reliance, and all in all having dreadful needs for assistance."

Simultaneously supporting local IDP integration while also maintaining the motivation to return IDPs to their places of origin was a delicate balance for the government. Collective centre environmental hazards thus became entangled with state geopolitics. Exposing this politicization is important because it highlights how the government remained in a position of power over IDPs and their destiny, controlling their fates through inaction and state policies that avoided local integration. There were significant impacts on IDPs, as explained by a 69-year old woman in a collective centre in Tbilisi:

> "I have spent 20 years of my life in this tiny room in terrible conditions. I may have been young when we first came here, but I am not any longer... After all this time, me and my husband are still waiting and no one has told us anything. We do not know if we have to spend the rest of our lives here or if there will be any change" (Amnesty International, 2010a, p. 19).

These actions ultimately hindered the agency of those displaced by not allowing them to properly resettle into their host communities, favouring instead misleading yet geopolitically strategic victim narratives. The state thus choreographed IDP's possible futures by denying them greater local support, delaying the creation of a state strategy for their integration while framing return as the only conceivable solution. These actions are in keeping with scholarship outlining how "the networks, policies, and institutions that seek to govern and manage the displaced are always politicized" (Kabachnik et al., 2015, p. 4). They demonstrate why it is necessary to analyze the social, political, and environmental contexts of conflict-induced displacement more holistically.

For the Georgian government, IDPs became proxies for continuing the land claims of the state, their bodies "conflated with the geobody of the national state" (Kabachnik et al., 2015, p. 187). This was because it was not only IDP living conditions that were at stake following their displacement—a concern feasibly addressed through the allocation of resources and better shelter provision—but also Georgia's sovereign control over its territory. In the government's defence, officials have consistently pointed toward limited governance capacities as a nascent state in the 1990s, which was also a time when the capital city was subsumed in civil war. While this argument is conceivable, its validity faded as the years went on and the civil war ended. In the late 1990s into the 2000s, both the state's resources and capacities increased, yet there remained an absence of effective policy in support of IDPs. Foreign donor support also increased during this time, with several organizations moving faster than the government to come up with durable IDP housing solutions (Kharashvili, 2012). As state inaction went on, so too did the deterioration of collective centres, leading to even higher levels of environmental hazards for IDPs.

The first signs of change in the government's approach to IDP settlement appeared in May 2000, following a high-level UN delegation visiting Georgia to study the situation of internal displacement and promote their Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' 'Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement' (OCHA, 1998; OHCHR, 2000). The Georgian government's subsequent official acknowledgement of these principles instigated programs that took off in the early 2000s, first implemented by a group of international agencies (UNDP, UNHCR, UN OCHA, World Bank, SDC and USAID) and

then transferred exclusively to UNDP in 2003 (Matveeva, 2005). Referred to as the New Approach to IDP Assistance, they included pilot projects concentrated on development and IDP self-reliance.

Still, the government's response took significant time and there was little concrete action in the early 2000s, spurring further international criticism. Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of IDPs, Walter Kälin, for example, was highly critical of Georgia's treatment of IDPs, stating that he was shocked by their living conditions and that Georgia must act on its promises to end the displacement crisis (Kälin, 2006b). He strongly recommended "improving living conditions through measures of local integration" (Kälin, 2006a). Finally, in 2006 amendments were made to Georgia's Law on Internally Displaced Persons, first adopted in 1996 (Government of Georgia, 1996). These amendments were followed by a February 2007 approval of the new 'State Strategy on IDPs,' prior to which there had been no official state document comprehensively disclosing the problems facing IDPs or communicating an overall vision for approaches towards solving them. In light of the August 2008 War in South Ossetia leading to a second wave of internal displacement, additional legislative changes were made, resulting in a subsequent decree in May 2009 finalizing an 'Action Plan for the State Strategy on IDPs', updated in May 2010 (Government of Georgia, 2010). Although this research has been critical of many aspects of this process, it still acknowledges the magnitude and complexity of the issue of supporting IDPs, which is an incredible, ongoing and dynamic challenge for the Georgian government.

When the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation (MRA)[4] finally announced this 2009 Action Plan, it was seen as a welcome paradigm shift, albeit with some subsequent criticism (Amnesty International, 2010a; Kurshitashvili, 2012; Transparency International Georgia, 2010a, 2011). The plan aimed to guide the state's provision of durable housing for 200,000 chronically displaced Georgians by 2012, estimated to cost $1 billion USD (1.6 billion GEL). The plan acknowledged that, almost two decades after initial displacement, there were still close to 100,000 IDPs living in "miserable conditions" in 1,600 collective centers across Georgia. It proposed renovating and then providing tenure to collective centres as one form of durable housing for 60,000 IDPs. This was to be complemented by purpose-built apartment blocks accommodating 84,900 IDPs, alongside the construction of individual houses for 11,150 IDPs, and one-off financial assistance or housing vouchers for close to 45,000 (Transparency International Georgia, 2010c). This plan was then updated in May 2010 following international organization consultations. The new version had a broader scope, folding in social and economic rights for IDPs and aiming to provide enhanced government accountability (Government of Georgia, 2010). While a step toward more humane shelter options for IDPs, the Plan crucially lacked community input and provided only three working days to receive public comment before moving toward implementation (Transparency International Georgia, 2010c).

Between 2013 and 2021, ~$260 million USD (693 million GEL) were spent by the state on the improvement of IDP living conditions and resettlement (Transparency International Georgia, 2022). Both prior to and during this timeline, international donors also stepped in to improve the physical conditions of collective centres, in addition to residents' own investments and repairs. For example, the ICRC upgraded water supplies and sanitary systems, as well as reconstructed roofs at 77 collective centres in western Georgia between 2002 – 2005, home to some 10,500 people (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2006). Similar support came from the Norwegian Refugee Council (Williams, 2011), USAID (Chemonics International, 2015), the World Bank (World Bank, 2008), and the Danish Refugee Council with funding from the German government (KfW Development Bank, 2019), amongst that from other NGOS and INGOs.

Well into the first decade of displacement, however, the government continued to frame a solution to the issue of IDPs relative to conflict, viewing return as the only viable solution. As a result, many collective centres remained hazardous and over-crowded living environments. In 2004, approximately 40 per cent of the IDPs who fled a decade earlier between 1991 and 1993 were still living in collective centres awaiting improved living conditions (IDMC, 2004). In 2022, two full decades after their initial displacement, 716 households were still deemed to be living in 35 collective centres with "conditions that jeopardize the health and lives of IDPs" (Public defender of Georgia, 2022). It is estimated that at the current rate of accommodation, it will take the state roughly 26 years to provide all of Georgia's IDPs with adequate

[4] The administration of IDPs in Georgia has taken place through several ministries. Initially, in 1996, the Ministry of Refugees and Resettlement was established. The ministry of disbanded in 2018 and its functions were transferred to the State Agency for Internally Displaced Persons, Ecomigrants, and Livelihood, under the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Regions, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia.

housing (Sukhiashvili, 2019). Such chronic and ever-increasingly deleterious environmental conditions at collective centres then also introduced new problems for IDPs tied to their relocation.

Manipulating Collective Centre Environmental Hazards for Economic Gain: The Threats to IDPs of Secondary, Development-Induced Displacement

Since the late 2000's introduction of the Action Plan, the Georgian government has finally shifted its approach and IDPs are incrementally being granted tenure, offered financial compensation, or being re-settled into purpose-built housing. Yet, this, too, has prompted a new re-conceptualization of the social, environmental, and political hazards associated with displacement. The environmentally hazardous living conditions of Georgia's collective centres are now being used to justify IDP forced evictions in areas prioritized for urban renewal. The result is secondary, development-induced displacement and an erasure of IDP's local histories. IDPs are not being properly consulted as a part of the state's re-development efforts, which primarily see collective centres being vacated, privatized, and returned to the real estate market.

According to the Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Protection of IDPs from Occupied Territories of Georgia (2017), their procedures for IDP eviction and resettlement include considering the collective centre's physical conditions (prioritizing the closure of those posing an increased threat to life and health), alongside taking into account the number of available new accommodation spaces for relocation, so that a facility can be fully decommissioned and vacated in its entirety. Yet, a 2018 Parliamentary Report by Georgia's Public Defender determined that some evacuated collective centres were in superior condition to those still inhabiting IDPs (Public defender of Georgia, 2018), raising concerns over the Ministry's assessment processes and their validity. NGOs have also voiced concerns, as Amnesty International notes:

> "[T]he authorities did not carry out a genuine consultation process with the displaced people; they failed to provide reasonable advance notice about eviction, and failed to provide adequate housing. In some cases, the residents were not offered any accommodation at all and the authorities evicting them told them to find shelter with relatives and friends" (Amnesty International, 2010b).

The processes of IDP eviction, re-settlement, and area regeneration have been ongoing across Georgia for years. The early 2000s saw a large wave of evictions as a part of the state's property privatization plans, including many Tbilisi hotels accommodating 1990s IDPs. One of the most publicized examples was the forced eviction of IDPs from Tbilisi's iconic Iveria Hotel in 2004, a building home to 767 IDPs, 220 of whom were children (UNDHA, 1996). Their removal from this 22-storey building was partially argued by the government on the grounds of its environmental hazards. Yet, as Manning (2009) and Theodorou (2003) demonstrate, the public visibility of IDP austerity in what was previously the finest hotel not only in Tbilisi but all of Georgia rendered this site a "highly visible reminder of the war, the increasing permanence of the status of IDPs, and thence all that was wrong with the post-socialist condition" (Manning, 2009, p. 2). Evicting IDPs and redeveloping the site was, therefore, a political response as much as an environmental hazard one. Two year's later, after the Hotel Iveria had been privatized and transformed into a new five-star facility, it was opened as the Radisson Blu hotel, showcased as an emblem of Georgia's successful post-independence transformation. The evicted IDPs were offered $7,000 USD in compensation, an amount that many argued was insufficient for finding comparable downtown accommodations (IDMC, 2007; Patsuria, 2004). To encourage their departure, the state amplified their hazardous living conditions, cutting water and electricity services after the two-month eviction notice period (Civil Georgia, 2022). The loss of collective centres in such prime real estate areas therefore links to a different aspect of post-hazard reconstruction, loaded with social and political complexities. It left many IDPs living near Tbilisi concerned about their future, as expressed by a 38-year-old woman in a collective centre in the district of Vashlijvari:

> "It's not easy to live here. We live under constant pressure, we're afraid that we will be turned out of here; we don't know what will happen next. You can see what's going on in different places; they're turning people out everywhere. Nobody has said anything officially, but generally people are [talking about the issue of privatisation]. People are afraid that they will be deceived, that the documents they're given will be fraudulent, and things like that" (Lois & Tavartkiladze, 2008, p. 56).

Another example of the politicization of environmental hazards can be seen in the spa resort town of Tskaltubo in the west of the country, which became shelter for some 7,000 IDPs from the 1990s who, throughout the 1990s and into to 2020s, have lived in the town's hotel/sanatoria converted into collective centres (Harris-Brandts & Sichinava, 2021). Figure 8 shows the transformed Gelati sanatoria housing IDPs (**Figure 8)** and Figure 9 shows the transformed Tskaltubo sanatoria **(Figure 9**). A feasibility study for the town conducted in 2014 suggested revitalizing the local tourism economy tied to health and leisure, rebranding Tskaltubo as "Eastern Europe's premium spa destination" (JSC Partnership Fund & Kohl & Partner Ltd., 2014). The government planned to allocate $90 million USD (200 million GEL) from the state budget for this urban renewal (Sukhiashvili, 2015), further supplemented by a World Bank project to "improve infrastructural services…to support increased contribution of tourism in the local community" (World Bank, 2012), done in cooperation with Georgia's

Municipal Development Fund. Since then, several revised proposals have been put forward for the town's redevelopment (Chubinidze, 2020).

Tskaltubo's re-branding plays up its heritage past as a balneological destination, avoiding more recent references to its history as a centre of humanitarian shelter for IDPs. Topics like conflict and displacement stand in opposition to ideas of relaxation, restorative health, and wellness, particularly for local Georgian tourists, who would be reminded of the country's geopolitical instability. Therefore, in fabricating a new image of Tskaltubo's heritage tourism offerings, the state, tour operators, and property developers have carefully branded the town only in relation to its historic provenance as a scenic spa resort destination, leaving out its painful IDP history. Beyond not properly acknowledging IDPs' historical presence, the feasibility study makes little mention of the fate of IDPs in the urban renewal processes shaping their futures. The town's redevelopment proposal acknowledges that "[t]he *problem* with the IDPs has to be resolved" (emphasis added) and that "[t]here are different possibilities in town or more outside of the resort" (JSC Partnership Fund & Kohl & Partner Ltd., 2014, p. 198). Yet, it does not suggest how this will be accomplished or if IDPs will have an opportunity to be consulted during the process. In focus groups, already re-settled IDPs described the process as challenging since "you have to get used to new neighbors again, you have to start a new life again, and it can be quite bad. How many times do we have to become displaced over and over again? It is the same situation. We were in a Tskaltubo collective centre, we lived there, we got used to it for 25 years, and then we are moved to another place" (Focus group with IDP women, aged 18-45). In these ways, environmental hazards have become deeply entwined with the social and political aspects of internal displacement in Georgia. Considering these concerning trends, it is worth reiterating the need for the government to develop comprehensive, forward-looking policies that do not merely manage the poor living conditions of IDPs through imposed resettlement but that consider the broader contexts and wide range of past and present community vulnerabilities, implementing reforms alongside IDP input that can create a visionary institutional framework for the country.

Conclusion

As of 2023, the dire conditions of Georgian IDPs remains an ongoing problem, both in terms of inadequate support for those living in collective centres and relative to the procedures for resettlement into new purpose-built housing. As Transparency International Georgia states, "the fact that a part of IDPs still remains in buildings dangerous for their life and health indicates that the process of resettlement has been mismanaged for years" (Transparency International Georgia, 2022, p. 1). The problem is underscored by the low number of IDPs to have received state-provided accommodations as of February 2022, with only 44,060 families given housing or compensation (Civil Georgia, 2022). Still, this research acknowledges that the Georgian government faces immense structural challenges, economic volatility, and political instability, making addressing this issue all the harder. State targets for the end of 2024 include providing 3,300 new apartments for IDPs in Tbilisi, 1,700 in Zugdidi, 1,700 in Kutaisi, and 833 in Rustavi, amounting to a 230 million USD (700 million GEL) state investment (Civil Georgia, 2022).

The more protracted displacement becomes, the more its vulnerabilities risk overlapping with environmental hazards from poor living conditions and threats of secondary displacement caused by urban renewal. With thousands of Georgian IDPs still living in urban collective centres as of 2023, the cumulative impact and toll on society is considerable. This research discussed how, despite the official categorization of IDPs relating back to an experience of conflict-induced displacement, many in this community are also the victims of chronic exposure to environmental hazards, leading to a need to reconsider such categories. Drawing attention to the overlapping risks clarifies the ongoing hardships experienced by IDPs long after their acute exposure to conflict. Still, merely identifying the environmental hazards facing IDPs in their collective centres is not enough. It risks equating the solution to IDP integration with providing better housing. While improved shelter is a crucial component of improved livelihood, it does not constitute full societal integration, particularly when settlements are in remote geographic locations. Adequate access to social services and transportation connections to urban cores must also be ensured. Along similar lines, tenure security alone is not enough. In the rush to resettle IDPs in the 2010s, construction shortcuts were taken and new environmental hazards introduced, like poorly insulated, cold, damp, and leaking new dwellings (Amnesty International, 2010a). Construction efficiency, therefore, cannot come at the expense of safety and durability.

The environmental hazards facing IDPs can also be exacerbated when they are politically manipulated for state geopolitical aims or used as an excuse to justify IDP eviction for area redevelopment. Because of this, the physical and psychological effects of conflict-induced displacement need to be considered holistically alongside longer-running social, political, and environmental hazards, ultimately foregrounding a nuanced reading of what constitutes IDP vulnerability and security. Supporting IDP decision making on their own terms remains an important component of local integration. Involuntary resettlement—even to less hazardous environments—should be avoided in all instances. In areas formerly housing IDP collective centres then undergoing redevelopment, additional work is needed to consider the socio-cultural legacies of local

humanitarian response. Beyond including IDP voices in decision making, IDP legacies should be considered as a form of national heritage during future redevelopment and urban recovery. There is an absence of IDP voices in urban recovery efforts, and a lack of acknowledgment of the value of IDP's local histories. We can therefore ask: What is the heritage of a life lived in exile for IDPs? And, how should society preserve such legacies? These discussions warrant greater academic research and need to be a part of government redevelopment proposals and feasibility studies.

Moving forward, more research is needed on the overlaps between the social, environmental, and political hazards associated with protracted internal displacement in a broad range of global contexts. The environmental hazards facing Georgia's collective centres unfortunately mirror those emerging in other places around the world, including in Ukraine following Russia's February 2022 invasion, where former schools, kindergartens, hotels, dormitories and religious buildings are alsobeing used to accommodate Ukrainian IDPs (REACH, 2022). We additionally need a deeper understanding as to how the legal designation of IDPs might better encompass their exposure to ongoing environmental threats, acknowledging the solid foundation of scholarship established on the topic, discussed in the section 'Bringing together conflict-induced displacement, environmental hazard risks, and development-induced displacement: Merging categories and blurring definitions.' Longitudinal studies tracking the dynamic environmental hazards IDPs face in their areas of settlement would complement well with those looking into access to health services. The hope is that sooner rather than later, special designations for Georgian IDPs will become obsolete and they will be able to again feel as equal citizens in society.

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Figures, Tables, and Multimedia (*All by authors)

Figure 1: Map of IDP Distribution in Georgia, data based on Ministry of Healthcare. Photograph by Suzanne Harris-Brandts (2021).
Figure 2: Collective Centre in Gori, Georgia. Photograph by Suzanne Harris-Brandts (2012).
Figure 3: Collective Centre in Zugdidi, Georgia. Photograph by Suzanne Harris-Brandts (2013).
Figure 4: Collective Centre in Zugdidi, Georgia. Photograph by Suzanne Harris-Brandts (2013).
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Figure 6: Collective Centre in Tskaltubo, Georgia. Photograph by Suzanne Harris-Brandts (2018).
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Figure 8: Collective Centre in Tskaltubo, Georgia. Photograph by Suzanne Harris-Brandts (2022).
Figure 9: Collective Centre in Tskaltubo, Georgia. Photograph by Suzanne Harris-Brandts (2016).