That the internally displaced are, after twenty years, still poorer and more vulnerable on average compared to the general population is surprising for at least two reasons. Firstly, they are ethnically Georgian and therefore ought not, on the basis of purely ethnic considerations, to have been so excluded. Secondly, the overall economic conditions of the general population in Georgia was also very poor; thus, the starting points of the displaced and the general population would not have been substantially different.

This article uncovers the question of why those who have been internally displaced in Georgia as a result of the ethnic conflicts of the early 1990s remain poor and marginalised and also, in discussing their survival strategies, shows what have been their solutions for survival. It investigates the specific circumstances that have affected the formation of coping mechanisms to fight poverty and vulnerability, and also describes what types of mechanism have been developed by internally displaced people throughout the last twenty years of displacement.

Observing the constraints on successful integration and the solutions adopted by the internally displaced has two values. On the one hand, it contributes to the literature studying poverty and the consequences of ethnic wars in the region. The current paper shows that ethnic tensions are not the only ones which have caused social conflict and the exclusion of vulnerable groups.

On the other hand, it should be instructive both for the Georgian government and for civil society organisations working in the area of displacement. In the last three years, in sharp contrast to much of the 1990s, there have been greater governmental efforts, as well as extensive donor aid given to Georgia, in order to resolve the long-standing problems of the internally displaced. However, comprehensive data on, or in-depth research into, their socio-economic circumstances are, respectively, both poor and rare,[1] and qualitative research like this should be of great value to policy-makers as a means of identifying the needs of the internally displaced.

Data and limitations of the research

In this article, I rely on in-depth qualitative interviews conducted during August and at the beginning of September 2011 in Tbilisi, Georgia.[2] I talked to representatives of from the Ministry of Internally Displaced People from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia, as well as international and national non-governmental organisations, experts and researchers on the issues facing internally displaced people. Half the respondents I interviewed were themselves internally displaced. They shared their personal stories as well as their observations concerning the group of internally displaced people in Georgia. In addition, numerous reports and current research studies have been used to complement the qualitative data I obtained.

1 Interview with a representative of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia, 11 September 2011. The representative explained in the interview that numerous reports and studies are usually conducted when government or NGOs receive money from donors to identify the needs of the displaced; however, these studies are mostly focused on specific problems and do not research in a comprehensive manner the overall socio-economic circumstances of IDPs.

2 The translation of the interviews from Georgian into English were made by the author.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

The article aims to identify the trends and tendencies concerning the occupational patterns, income-generating activities and level of integration of internally displaced people. These trends and tendencies might not apply to a majority of individuals from the heterogeneous group of the displaced, but it concentrates on that part of the group that remains socially and economically vulnerable.

Transformation and socio-economic developments

Georgia has been undergoing a post-communist transformation since the 1990s. The country has only a short experience of independent state-building in modern times, declaring independence in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992. The transformation has proved to be highly troublesome:

> *The process of state building in the South Caucasus has been much slower than expected by Western States.*[3]

Political transformation, much like most post-Soviet Union countries, has been problematic. Georgia remains classified as a transitional-hybrid system, but its democratic score has been deteriorating steadily during the last decade (4.33 in 2001 to 4.93 in 2010).[4]

In terms of economic development, Georgia has been slow to make progress in structural reforms compared to its near neighbours. In the second decade of transformation Georgia has, subsequent to the 2003 Rose Revolution, pursued revolutionary reforms, drastically liberalised the economy, removed regulations, invested heavily in infrastructure, cut and re-organised public administration and significantly reduced levels of corruption compared to neighbouring states. A radical increase in state capacity has been underway, which has also meant a higher capacity of the state to deal with the informal sector and extract greater taxation revenues.

High growth rates (peaking at 12 % annual growth in 2007) were experienced between 2004 and 2008, although economic growth was then hampered by war and economic crisis. Positive growth resumed in 2010, however, and further recovery is expected.[5] Nevertheless, improvements in poverty and the rate of inequality have not been impressive.

Indeed, despite substantial economic growth rates over several years, positive changes in terms of poverty reduction have not been that apparent. The World Bank registered a figure for absolute poverty of 54 % in 2003, and 23 % in 2007. However, the data is based on national estimates and is disputed:

> *As an alternative indicator, initial estimates published by the IMF suggest that absolute poverty has increased marginally, from 27 percent in 2004 to 31 percent in 2007… In addition to the*

3 Hille, Charlotte (2010) *State Building and Conflict Resolution in the Caucasus* Lieden, Boston: Brill.

4 Aphrasidze, D (2010) *Nations in Transit 2010* Freedom House.

5 European Training Foundation (2010) *Labour Markets and Employability, Trends and Challenges in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine* European Training Foundation.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

IMF assessment, the European Commission's assessment for 2007 reports that, 'No progress can be reported as regards poverty reduction and social welfare'.[6]

Internally displaced people and continued vulnerability

After this brief presentation of the overall characteristics of the country, I turn to the issue of internally displaced people – the group on which this research is focused. The cause of displacement was the ethnic conflicts that erupted simultaneously with, or shortly after, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence by Georgia. Georgia experienced ethnic conflict with two secessionist regions: South Ossetia and Abkhazia. From Abkhazia, 300 000 ethnic Georgians fled:

Primarily to the region on the Georgian side of the administrative border with Abkhazia, and to the Georgian capital, Tbilisi,[7]

while 60 000 were displaced from South Ossetia. By 2009, there were between 220 000 and 247 000 people displaced from the conflicts in 1990s and, after the Russia-Georgian war of 2008, around 37 000 more people were displaced.

This article focuses on those people displaced as a consequence of the conflicts of the 1990s. The first, and biggest, caseload of people who left Abkhazia and South Ossetia have now been displaced for almost twenty years, and they are referred to as the 'old' displaced.

According to various reports and data sources, after almost twenty years of displacement internally displaced people remain disadvantaged compared to the rest of Georgian society. Indeed, they are a segment of the population that has stayed extremely vulnerable:

Compared to the rest of the population, internally displaced people remain more vulnerable to poverty. Unemployment among the displaced population is extremely high, as only 20 percent of the displaced are employed and earn regular wages.[8]

Statistical analysis of the Georgia Household Survey in 2009 shows that noteworthy differences continue to persist between the general population and the internally displaced in terms of economic status, living conditions and educational attainment. Significantly more internally displaced people describe themselves as 'poor' or 'extremely poor' than do the rest of Georgian citizens.

The most recent survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) in 2011 also indicates that living conditions and access to employment are highly unsatisfactory among 'old' displaced people. In the CRRC survey, only 18 per

6 UNDP (2008) *Georgia Human Development Report 2008: Reform and Beyond* UNDP Georgia, pp. 34-35.

7 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2009) *Georgia: IDPs in Georgia still need attention. A profile of the internal displacement situation* Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.

8 Global IDP Database (2003) *Profile of Internal Displacement: Azerbaijan* compilation of the information available in the Global IDP Database of the Norwegian Refugee Council, Geneva, Switzerland: Norwegian Refugee Council/Global IDP Project, p. 7.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

cent of all displaced people said that they had a job, compared to 30 per cent nationwide.[9]

The persistent vulnerability of internally displaced people, and their relatively poor socio-economic recovery, indicates a need for attention to the issue from policy-makers and researchers. The main questions that need to be discussed are: Why are displaced people in a worse socio-economic situation after twenty years of displacement? And what are the constraints on the successful integration of displaced people? In order to respond to these (and many other) questions, we need to identify what solutions internally displaced people have been pursuing during their displacement, what occupational choices have been available and used by them, and what have been the coping strategies deployed to overcome their social and economic problems.

Fortunately, there are numerous quality surveys, studies and reports concerning internally displaced people. Many studies are available which describe the gaps and the achievements of the national and international responses to the needs of the internally displaced and which assess the effects of public policies and aid made available to displaced people, or the lack thereof. However, most researchers and respondents among those NGOs which are working on displacement issues continue to complain about the lack of comprehensive data on the socio-economic conditions of Georgia's nationwide population, as well as of those facing its internally displaced population.

The current paper aims to ask the essential research questions from a different angle. Instead of asking what has been done for internally displaced people, I intend to ask what internally displaced people have themselves done in search of solutions to their problems. I align with the perspective that rejects perceiving the poor and marginalised as 'passive', or as 'victims' and 'excluded' people.[10] I will rather adopt an approach which focuses on the differing exposures of poor and marginalised groups and their solutions as a 'creative and resistive process of everyday practice'.[11]

The research-reporting aspects of this article proceed in two parts. In the first part, I discuss the circumstances that have affected and shaped the formation of the coping strategies implemented by those who have been displaced. The second part of the articles discusses the solutions that have been pursued by the displaced in their quest for survival.

Coping strategies of internally displaced people

Circumstances which shape coping strategies

The objective reality of there being over 200 000 internally displaced persons has not been a favourable one as regards their socio-economic well-being. The group was characterised by a lack of physical and financial resources, and the national response to their needs was weak or non-existent. At the beginning of the 1990s, they were

9 Frichova, G. M (2011) *Displacement in Georgia: IDP attitudes to conflict, return and justice* CRRC, Conciliation Resources: Tbilisi.

10 Bayat, A (1997) *Poor Peoples Movements in Iran, Street Politics* New York: Columbia University Press.

11 Burawoy, M and K. Verdery (1999) *Uncertain Transition, Ethnographies of Change in Post-Socialist World* Boulder, New York: Lanham/Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

entitled only to a marginal degree of assistance and were allowed to use state buildings that were out of use after the transformation. It was only in 2007 that, for the first time, a nationwide strategy was formed to handle the issues of displacement in a systematic manner – and the implementation of this started only after the August war of 2008. Throughout the 1990s and much of the 2000s, internally displaced people did not receive adequate support, and that can be named as the most obvious, objective reason for their continued problems.

However, the way that people found solutions to their problems was also influenced by the perceptions of their own reality and those of the societies they entered. When we are talking of the solutions that these people found at a time when governmental support was lacking, we should also take into consideration the other types of factors that influenced their solutions. This includes the dominant political discourses concerning conflict, return, displacement status, the perceptions of the displaced about the role of the state and the barriers to integration in the rest of Georgian society.

Hope of return

For many years after displacement, people retained a belief that they would return back home shortly after the conflict. That encouraged passivity as well as a lack of motivation to think of long-term solutions and of integration into the local communities that they entered. Most of the interviewees for this research underlined that, for many years, displaced people did not start searching for solutions and tried to cope with unbearable living conditions in the hope that it was only a short and temporary condition before their return. One of the interviewees, herself displaced from Sokhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, who had been working on issues of displacement and conflict resolution since 1994 with local and international non-governmental organisations, described the situation flowingly:

> *The main message [from the government] was: 'Please bear the situation for a little while, live as you are living now and we will return you home.' And I think people believed.*

After observing numerous collective centres where internally displaced people were residing, she concluded that people were 'sitting on their bags', always ready to leave and not thinking of any personal strategy other than waiting to depart:

> *I realised how destructive was the message that promised return. People believed. As it is easy to believe in this type of positive message, one can put aside plans and hope that life will continue after return.*[12]

The emphasis on return that was reinforced by the government over many years discouraged integration. Integration was perceived by the internally displaced as to entail giving up on their right of return. For politicians, avoiding integration was, on the one hand, favourable to feed that sentiment in society that hoped for the restoration

12 Interview with a representative of a Georgian non-governmental organisation working on conflict resolution and displacement, 31 August, Tbilisi.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

of *de facto* power over the breakaway regions;[13] on the other hand, the promise of return silenced dissatisfaction with the quality of life and the lack of assistance, and suppressed channels for the political participation of the displaced people.[14]

Only after 2004 did the Georgian government start gradually to consider integration as a solution and, after the 2008 war, to acknowledge that return would not be possible in the foreseeable future and that long-term solutions for the displaced had to be found.[15]

The hope of return has faded away throughout the years. In the survey conducted by Caucasus Research Resource Centre in 2009, a small portion of respondents (26 per cent) indicated that they believed that the breakaway regions would be re-integrated in the coming decade, although overwhelmingly the largest group (49 %) was composed of those who responded that they did not know. The CRRC report indicates that different interpretations of this figure are possible: it may mean that displaced people who have been waiting for a return to be possible over nearly twenty years simply felt that 'do not know' was the most realistic answer at that point; members of networks of displaced people have suggested that it may reflect a degree of denial and the difficulty among some respondents of accepting a situation that was currently not in their favour.[16] However, this figure also shows that a majority of people are no longer living with the illusion of foreseeable return, and that this had hindered the development of coping mechanisms in the initial years.

Expectations of the government

Another important aspect affecting the formation of coping mechanisms has been the high expectations that the internally displaced carry concerning governmental support. The poor in many developing countries have never been entitled to state welfare, but communist societies were, for decades, living under regimes that provided deficient, but still generous and universal, social welfare. Studies researching welfare systems in post-socialist countries have concluded that, compared to the rest of the developing world, societies in post-socialist countries tend to put high expectations on the government.[17]

Most of the interviews conducted with the displaced and with international observers, as well as with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia, showed that displaced people in Georgia have always expected, and continue to expect, help and support for accommodation from the Georgian government as well as monetary transfers. The representative of an international NGO, the Norwegian Refugee Council, underlined that even

13 Conciliation Resources (2009) *Out of the margins. Securing a voice for internally displaced people: lessons from Georgia* Tbilisi, p. 4.
14 Interview with a representative of a Georgian non-governmental organisation working on conflict resolution and displacement, 31 August, Tbilisi.
15 Tarkhan-Mouravi, G (2009) *Assessment of IDP Livelihoods in Georgia: Facts and Policies* UNHCR and DRC, Tbilisi, p. 17.
16 Frichova (2011) *op. cit*. p. 6.
17 Haggard, S and R. Kaufman (2009) 'How Regions Differ' *Journal of Democracy* p. 65.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

those internally displaced people who are no longer dependent on state aid and who are economically self-sufficient, still want to continue receiving the little state aid that they get.[18] She explained that some of the displaced still retain a 'dependency mode' and that those who have become successful and who have recovered economically see aid not as much as support for the needy but as an entitlement for having been displaced.

In interviews with displaced people themselves, throughout my current and also previous research,[19] it was apparent that interviewees talked of state aid many times. Even if they had found individual solutions, they would not just speak of their own recovery path but constantly mention that they did not get any help from the state, or they would mention a dissatisfaction with the aid they received. This approach seems somewhat paradoxical as the internally displaced have received absolutely marginal support throughout many years, and one would thus expect that their expectations about welfare provision would have been lowered. However, what has happened is that the internally displaced feel frustrated and disillusioned many times over; they have almost given up hoping for help, but still consider their hopes to be just and, therefore, expect to receive state support and compensation.

We need once more to underline that the heterogeneous group of displaced people would not be similarly affected because of expectations about state-provided assistance and welfare; however, these expectations have slowed people down on the path of finding individual solutions, as regards at least a part of the group, and have encouraged a passivity.

Attitudes towards internally displaced people and the problems of integration

Integration and the establishment of social networks is one part of a coping strategy that leads to an opening up of educational and occupational opportunities. The lack of integration is one of the major explaining factors for the still-remaining socio-economic differences between internally displaced people and the general population of Georgia. Studies conducted to discover how well internally displaced people have integrated show mixed results. On the one hand, they illustrate that a majority of the displaced – and one-half of the respondents in the CRRC survey – consider themselves as part of Georgian society:

> *Nearly half reject the widespread assumption that internally displaced people are discriminated against because of their status. But the fact that 27 % say they feel discriminated against and nearly as many chose to answer inconclusively, suggests there is much room for improvement in terms of the integration of the internally displaced.*[20]

18 Interview with a representative of an international non-governmental organisation, 5 September, Tbilisi.

19 Rekhviashvili, L *Limits of Civil Society: Response to the Needs of Internally Displaced Persons in Georgia After the War of 2008* CEU eTD collection, Budapest.

20 Frichova (2011) *op. cit.* p. 4.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

Furthermore, network analysis shows that the internally displaced mostly interact within the group of displaced people rather than with the wider population.[21]

Internally displaced people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia are ethnic Georgians, so one would not expect barriers to integration on the basis of ethnicity. However, the in-depth interviews that I conducted for the current study give greater insight into a discussion of the problems surrounding integration.

One barrier, for some part of displaced people from Abkhazia, has been a language one. Interviews indicate that, in the initial years, integration was most problematic for children, who went to schools and who were confronted with hostility due to their status, poverty and language difficulties. Most of the Georgians displaced from Abkhazia are from Mingrelia, a region that speaks a different language. Even though Mingrelians are, ethnically, Georgian and they usually speak both Georgian and Mingrelian, for many people, and also for many displaced children living in Abkhazia, Mingrelian and Russian were the languages in primary use. Some of my respondents remembered the hardships of the first years of schooling during their displacement as they were excluded and isolated on many occasions because of language barriers. They also remember being excluded for simple things like poor clothing, poor availability of books or notebooks at school and also, sometimes, simply because of their status as displaced.[22]

The general poverty of the Georgian population at the beginning of the 1990s contributed to a hardening against the process of integration in several ways. After independence, the Georgian population experienced two ethnic wars and one civil war, and a drastic deterioration of socio-economic standards. The caseload of displaced people (over 200 000 people) was perceived, on many occasions, as competitors in the absorption of the already-shrinking level of public resources. In addition, the Georgian government was unable to provide housing, so the displaced were officially allowed to enter public buildings that were not in use. The way this happened was that the displaced were searching for, and entering, empty buildings on their own initiative, and only afterwards would the government approve and legitimate their stay. In the media and among the population, this process was called ‘invasion’ and carried negative connotations.

The displaced have frequently been perceived as a burden on the already-suffering Georgian population. Some interviewees mentioned the word *chamotreuli*, which is a derogatory word for someone immigrating, while the displaced are still referred as *chamotreuli*; even the somewhat neutral Georgian word for refugee *itolvili* carries a negative connotation for displaced people as well as for the rest of the population. On top of this, my respondents also explained that the non-displaced Georgian population neighbouring the living spaces of displaced people frequently expressed dissatisfaction that international humanitarian aid covered only displaced people:

21 Mayorova, Olga, Beth Mitchneck and Joanna Regulska (nd) *“Post” Conflict Displacement: Isolation and Integration in Georgia: the case of IDPs from the Abkhaz Conflicts* Arizona University.

22 Interview with IDP activist, 3 September, Tbilisi.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

We are also in the same poverty, why should they get aid and not us?[23]

These are painful and sensitive aspects in the interaction between the internally displaced and the rest of the Georgian population. However, one cannot discuss the problems of integration without discussing these types of conflict.

Moreover, we should also mention patterns of displacement as a constraint on integration. In terms of place of residency, there are two large groups of the internally displaced: those who live in collective centres, around 40 per cent of the overall displaced population; and the rest, who are privately accommodated.[24] In general, the data concerning privately-accommodated internally displaced people is less available, but they are considered to be the ones who have managed to find individual solutions and are better integrated in society; consequently, researchers often conclude that:

Internally displaced people in collective centres are much more vulnerable than the privately-accommodated displaced.[25]

Inhabitants in collective centres integrate mostly with other displaced people and the probability of their widening their social networks is very low. In order to build social capital and networks, studies have suggested the development of:

Relationships between collective centres so that individuals and groups can share resources, information and social ties.[26]

These are time- and group-specific problems that might not arise in another country and, in addition, neither have some of these problems arisen for the newly-displaced (as a consequence of the August War in 2008) within Georgia.

Existing coping strategies

Occupational choices and income generation and social networks

Data on the occupation and sources of income of internally displaced people is the most scarce, and is frequently non-existent. Studies are available comparing poverty and employment opportunity among the internally displaced and the general population; however, much less in-depth knowledge exists concerning the variety of income-generating activities among the displaced.

According to the recent CRRC data, only 18 per cent of the displaced reported themselves to be employed. The survey, conducted in private and collective accommodation:

23 Interview with a representative of a Georgian non-governmental organisation working on the issues of displacement, 31 August, Tbilisi.
24 Interview with the Ministry.
25 Frichova (2011) *op. cit.* p. 25.
26 Singh, N and C. Robinson (2009) *Support systems among urban IDPs in Georgia* Urban Displacement, Tbilisi.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

Found that 69 per cent were unemployed and that 83 per cent of households described their economic situation as 'hard', 'very hard' or 'extremely hard'.[27]

This and other sources of data do not differentiate between formal and informal employment, and also do not show on what income sources displaced people are dependent.

Based on the interviews I conducted with experts and researchers, I discuss here the coping mechanisms and income generation activities that displaced people are believed to be pursuing. Based on this kind of qualitative observation, it is hard to talk of numbers and proportions, but we can identify the trends that are observed by people working on displacement issues.

There are three major income generation activities associated with the survival strategies of the displaced. First, small-scale informal trade and services has been the solution for many; second, emigration; and third, for a small portion of the internally displaced, access to international aid has been vital in developing human capital as well as in acquiring jobs.

Trade and services

The previous section described how the formation of coping strategies was shaped by displaced people's hopes of return, high expectations of welfare and the constraints on integration. The occupational patterns of the displaced reflect these problems. These patterns reflect the exclusion of displaced people from positions requiring high-skilled workers, in combination with feelings of temporary stay and instability among the displaced themselves.

My respondents observed that the solution for the displaced has been, and frequently remains to be, to pursue small-scale and, most of the time, informal trade opportunities. The grocery markets of Georgia, called *bazari* in Georgian,[28] have been a shelter for many internally displaced people. One of the displaced female interviewees commented:

The easiest thing was to buy little things and sell for a slightly bigger price. Even today half of our collective centre trades in bazari.

Besides street vending, some have managed to open small shops for second-hand clothes, pastry shops and little cafes. Selling services and working at unstable, informal jobs in construction have also been widespread.

Emigration

Emigration and a dependence on remittances is another widespread solution for displaced people. Statistical data here is also not available, but most reports of internally

27 Walicki, N *The Default Option: Local Integration of IDPs in Georgia* Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), prepared for the 2nd Expert Seminar on Protracted Internal Displacement.

28 The word originates from the Persian *bāzār*.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

displaced people mention that many families are split, with some members living and working abroad.[29]

According to reports and interviews, the primary emigration destination has been Russia and other CIS countries. People displaced from Abkhazia (relative to those displaced from South Ossetia) have, in particular, migrated to Russia. The representative of a Georgian NGO explained that Abkhazia, being a seaside resort, was heavily visited by Russians during communist times and that Georgians living in Abkhazia had strong networks in Moscow and other Russian cities that defined their places of destination. Recently, after the political situation between Russia and Georgia grew tense, many Georgians had to move back, but many of them fled to Europe and the US shortly after their return.

Even though labour migration might be a solution economically, it might also affect the vulnerability of families:

> *A migrant family member may help improve the economic situation of a household, but those left behind often acquire additional vulnerability due to a lack of physical capacity in the family.*[30]

International aid and civic activism

For a relatively small proportion of internally displaced people, the capacity building projects of international organisations have served as a window of opportunity. Vocational training and educational camps for displaced people have been vital in the development of necessary human capital among displaced young people, many of whom have established various movements and non-governmental organisations that are continuing to work on conflict and displacement issues and which are receiving national and international grants for their activism.[31]

Social networks

The use of previously-existing social networks, which have further evolved after displacement, has been one of the major solutions to the problems of internally displaced people. However, for displaced people living in collective centres, integration into wider society and the establishment of social networks has been an obstacle to economic recovery, as pointed out above: in-group integration in collective centres has been more intense. At the same time, it seems like those who are privately accommodated also initially had better social networks, since they frequently were able to live together with relatives or otherwise access better income-generating opportunities. Partially, it was this which allowed them to avoid living in collective centres.

29 Walicki, *op. cit.*

30 Tarkhan-Mouravi (2009) *op. cit.* p. 26.

31 This information might suffer from a problem of selection bias, since it is based on interviews with displaced people that have themselves benefited from capacity building activities and who are part of civil society organisations. It is hard to estimate how widespread has been the coverage of beneficiaries by international and national civil organisations, but at least a small group of people have certainly based their survival on these resources.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.

The interviewees discussed one peculiar aspect concerning collective centres: some collective centres are, on the whole, more successful in terms of economic well-being than others. They pointed out that, if several people, or families, in one collective centre managed to find occupational solutions then, because of enhanced networking inside the centre, the rest of the population of that centre was also relatively successful.

Therefore, collective centres are, overall, heterogeneous as there is not much networking between them, or between centres and the general population. However, networking is high inside collective centres, so centres seem to be individually more homogeneous regarding socio-economic circumstances.

Conclusion

After twenty years of displacement, internally displaced people remain poor and vulnerable compared to the Georgian population. Following displacement, they have suffered for many years from a lack of government aid and scarce private resources. The reason for their continued marginalisation is that the group and individual solutions of the people concerned have been hampered and constrained by problems of integration, the hope of return, high expectations of state aid and a feeling of temporary stay. Their survival strategies have, for the most part, been based on finding shelter within the large informal sector of the Georgian economy, as well as in emigration and social networking which have, in turn, been restrained because of the issue of hampered integration.

Knowledge and a deep understanding of the current coping mechanisms of internally displaced people are necessary tools in understanding the socio-economic problems of one of the most vulnerable groups in Georgia. In order to address the needs of the displaced, it is important to understand the sources of their vulnerability. It becomes apparent from the research that shelter within informal networks and the informal economy has been one of the major solutions for internally displaced people. In recent years, the Georgian government has formulated a strategic plan which aims at the social and economic integration of the internally displaced, so both the specific problems and the solutions which these people have established need to be taken into consideration. In addition, the state capacity of Georgia is increasing, while the informal sector is coming more and more under attack and, consequently, the government should take into account the effects of the formalisation of the economy on the poorest and the most vulnerable.

Ultimately, further research is needed to identify how the fight against corruption and the shadow economy has affected the survival strategies of internally displaced people. Further research also needs to focus on the peculiarities that the government needs to take account of to achieve their successful integration into Georgian society and to help their dependency on the informal sector via the offer of durable solutions.

https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2012-1-123 - Generiert durch IP 216.73.216.36, am 19.01.2026, 03:41:07. © Urheberrechtlich geschützter Inhalt. Ohne gesonderte Erlaubnis ist jede urheberrechtliche Nutzung untersagt, insbesondere die Nutzung des Inhalts im Zusammenhang mit, für oder in KI-Systemen, KI-Modellen oder Generativen Sprachmodellen.