

Potential and Actual Environmental Migrants in Georgia

The Baseline Study: A Brief Outline

According to official information and independent experts' assessments, thousands of families in Georgia became victims of environmental disasters in the last decades. Landslides and similar problems have threatened their safety, forcing them to leave their homes and become environmental migrants. In addition, there is a sizable number of families of potential environmental migrants whose dwellings have been damaged as a result of natural disasters, but they continue to live in those homes.

Despite the severity of the problem, the legal status of the population displaced due to environmental disasters (environmental migrants) has not yet been established in Georgia; there are no reliable statistics on the number of current and potential environmental migrants; there is no assistance program for such families, including regular needs assessments; studies of their living conditions are extremely rare.

This Baseline study was conducted by Europe Foundation (EPF). Its goal was to study current conditions and needs of current and potential environmental migrants in Georgia, as well as to provide recommendations on how to tackle effectively their problems and improve their socio-economic and living conditions. The study was conducted within the framework of the EU funded project, *Advocating for the Rights of Environmental Migrants*. The project is implemented by Institute of Democracy (IOD) together with Europe Foundation and Young Scientists' Union INTELLECT.

Fieldwork has been conducted between September and November, 2015 in three regions of Georgia: *Adjara* (potential environmental migrants), *Kvemo Kartli* and *Kakheti* (current environmental migrants). Empirical data has been collected using qualitative methods: along with in-depth interviews with current environmental migrants, focus group discussions have been conducted with potential environmental migrants and with the representatives of the local population in the resettlement sites of environmental migrants, in order to create a comprehensive picture of how environmental migrants are received by host communities and how their integration process proceeds.

The general findings of this Baseline study show that representatives of each studied group (current environmental migrants, potential environmental migrants and local population) lacks information about the process of environmental migration. Specifically, potential and current environmental migrants are not informed about their rights and responsibilities; neither the migrants nor host communities are involved in decision-making process on resettlement; deficiency of legal framework and lack of reliable lists of potential and current environmental migrants challenges the process and effective problem-solving. Property rights and resource distribution are important challenges that might hinder sustainability of the process of environmental migration and migrants' integration in the host communities, and lead to return of environmental migrants to their native settlements.

This report presents findings covering needs of each studied group, focusing on problems as seen from the perspective of potential environmental migrants, current environmental migrants and local population.

Potential environmental migrants continue to live in deteriorated homes and, due to economic hardship and insufficient income, often continue to cultivate land that is no longer suitable for cultivation. They show strong attachment to their homes and land. Potential environmental migrants are not ready to give up their current property after resettlement and express strong willingness to keep it. When it comes to actual resettlement process, potential environmental migrants anticipate state support in this process with provision of housing and agricultural land (including ownership rights), access to low-interest or long-term loans, and employment after resettlement.

Current environmental migrants' narratives indicate at certain variability of how the resettlement process has been handled by the state authorities in various regions of the country, creating a sense of 'unfairness' in provision of state support and services among current environmental migrants. Although they are being called 'environmental migrants,' they cannot use this status for improving their wellbeing or housing conditions, since it is not legally bounded and recognized. The problems related to property ownership, and lack of resources in the host communities sometimes encourage environmental migrants to return back to their home communities and continue to live in a dangerous environment, which also questions sustainability of resettlement as a whole.

Local population indicates that prior to resettlement of environmental migrants, local population had no information on the process that could potentially contribute to better integration of the migrants. Among other challenges, resource distribution and religious differences might cause tension in the long run, if the sound evidence-based programs are not developed to pro-actively work on solving problems related to resettlement and integration in the local communities.

Based on the finding of the baseline study and complexity of the process of environmental migration, there for it to be successful, it is important to elaborate comprehensive social and economic programs in order to effectively plan and manage the process of environmental migration.

The recommendations elaborated based on the baseline study suggest three major directions on how the conditions of potential and current environmental migrants and local communities could be improved with the involvement and support of the Government of Georgia and international and local non-governmental organizations working in the field:

1. Develop respective legislation, specifically – define legal status of environmental migrants; also, create a reliable database of potential and current environmental migrants.
2. Undertake comprehensive information campaigns to increase awareness of potential and current environmental migrants, as well as representatives of the local population, on the process of environmental migration – it is recommended that the state authorities conduct the targeted campaign together with experts and various stakeholders; and

3. Increase effectiveness of the management of the process of environmental migration through establishment of transparent and fair procedures on all stages of the resettlement, involvement the target groups in the decision-making process, elaboration of assistance programs not only for the environmental migrants, but also for the host communities in order to create enabling environment for the newcomers to integrate successfully in the community life and eliminate potential sources of tension.