

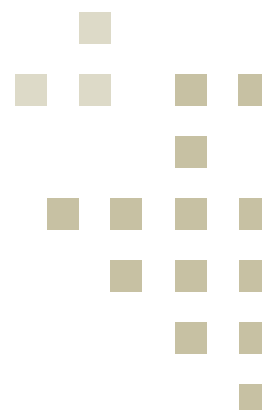
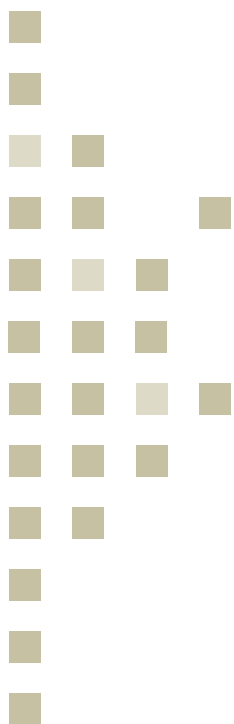


[646] Paper

Defusing a Ticking Bomb?

Disentangling International Organisations
in Samtskhe-Javakheti

Indra Øverland



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Besøksadresse: Grønlandsleiret 25
Adresse: Postboks 8159 Dep.
0033 Oslo
Internett: www.nupi.no
E-post: pub@nupi.no
Fax: [+ 47] 22 17 70 15
Tel: [+ 47] 22 05 65 00

Defusing a Ticking Bomb?

Disentangling International Organisations in Samtskhe-Javakheti

Indra Øverland

[Abstract] This article examines how various organisations divide and coordinate their conflict prevention and development aid in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of southern Georgia, and how that coordination might be improved. There have been numerous early warnings of impending violent conflict and calls for conflict prevention in Samtskhe-Javakheti. Counter-claims have, however, been asserted that the region's problem is in fact not one of potential violent ethnic conflict, but rather one of poverty and peripherality, and that exaggerated, uncoordinated early warning might in fact inflate conflicts that were not initially acute. At one point it seemed that the Samtskhe-Javakheti case would provide an example of uncoordinated and one-sided focus on conflict prevention and early warning on the part of international organisations, and its potentially detrimental consequences. An overview of the activities of the organisations, however, shows the contrary. A critical, sensitive and deconstructive perspective is already incorporated into their approach, and their activities are well coordinated. More formalised institutions are nonetheless needed to ensure the inclusion of large multilateral actors such as the World Bank and Council of Europe in the process, and consistent coordination in other regions too.

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Introduction

Numerous authors have argued for the interconnectedness of underdevelopment and conflict, and consequently for the linkage of development aid and conflict prevention.¹ The conflict-development theme became a particularly important focus of attention during the 1990s with the establishment of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict and an OECD task force to examine the linkages between conflict, peace and development aid.² In 1999 the Carnegie Commission estimated that if effective preventive measures had been taken in nine countries affected by conflict in the 1990s, the OECD countries alone could have saved more than USD 160 billion.³

Occasionally statements about the connection between development and conflict prevention seem to indicate that they are two good things that aid agencies wish upon their recipients and therefore superficially lump together in a chicken-and-egg relationship without further clarification. In other cases there are more complex arguments detailing the relationship between them. It is argued variously that development aid can facilitate the resolution of violent conflicts, that conflict resolution facilitates socio-economic development, or both.⁴ Leonhardt and Nyheim argue among other things that conflict hinders development.⁵ While recognising that poverty and conflict often are associated, Azar, Stokke and others have argued that socio-economic development can potentially worsen rather than solve ethnic conflicts, especially when it results in increased regional disparities.⁶ Other authors have maintained that relative deprivation in itself is not enough, and that the perception of relative deprivation and faith in the ability to resolve it through violence are also necessary for the poverty–conflict equation to work.⁷

¹ Stokke, O., 'Violent Conflict Prevention and Development Co-operation: Coherent or Conflicting Perspectives', *Forum for Development Studies*, no. 2, 1997, p. 196.

² OECD, *DAC Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development Co-operation*, (Paris: OECD, 1997), p. 7.

³ OECD, *Helping Prevent Violent Conflict: Orientations for External Partners*, (Paris: OECD, 2001), p.11.

⁴ Lodgaard, S. and Rønnefeldt, C., *Development Assistance as a means of Conflict Prevention*, (Oslo: NUPI, 1998), p. 2; Sæther, G., 'Inequality, Security and Violence', *The European Journal of Development Research*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2001, p. 195.

⁵ Leonhardt, M. and Nyheim, D., *Promoting Development in Areas of Actual or Potential Violent Conflict: Approaches in Conflict Impact Assessment and Early Warning*, (London: FEWER and International Alert, 1999), p. 1.

⁶ Azar, E., *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases*, (Hampshire, England: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1990), cited in Peck, C., 'Finding Structural Solutions to Conflict' in Peck, C., (ed.), *Sustainable Peace: The role of the UN and Regional Organizations in Preventing Conflict*, (New York: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1998), pp. 58–59. See also Miall, H., Ramsbotham, O., and Woodhouse, T., (eds.), *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflict*, (London: Polity Press, 1999), pp. 73, 86, 92, 108; Stokke, O., *op. cit.*, p. 217; The Carnegie Commission on the Prevention of Deadly Conflict, *Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report*, (New York: Carnegie Commission, 1997), p. 84.

⁷ Gurr, T., *Why Men Rebel*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), cited in Stokke, O., 'Violent Conflict Prevention and Development Co-operation: Coherent or Conflicting Perspectives', in *Forum for Development Studies*, no. 2, 1997, p. 224.

In sum, the precise causal relationships between conflict, development, peace and underdevelopment remain multifaceted, indeterminate and unclear.⁸ What is clear is that a conscious, integrated and coordinated approach to conflict and development is needed in order to compensate for that complexity.⁹ The OECD Development Assistance Committee has summed up that there is a need for

greater coherence and transparency in conflict prevention initiatives and responses to conflict and complex emergencies by the international community. This involves early warning that is more closely linked to decision-making and better organised and co-ordinated among the various multilateral, regional, bilateral and non-governmental actors. Wherever possible, a shared analysis should lead to agreed strategic frameworks for action and to agreed responsibilities for leadership in co-ordination, taking into account the local, national, regional and international context.¹⁰

Recognising both the importance of conflict–development linkages, the lack of clarity about their exact nature and the calls for coordination to compensate for those limitations, this article aims to answer the following questions: (1) How do various organisations divide and coordinate their conflict prevention and development aid in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of southern Georgia? (2) How might their current approach be improved?

The Samtskhe-Javakheti region provides a particularly interesting case for such a study because it has a whole range of entangled problems and potential problems relating to both underdevelopment, peripherality, military issues and several potential ethnic conflicts. In addition, during the period from 1995 to 2001 international organisations have taken an increasing interest in the region, variously implementing development aid or conflict prevention projects.¹¹

Samtskhe-Javakheti is one of Georgia's twelve provinces (*mkhare*). The Javakheti part of the region borders on Armenia and is predominantly Armenian. The other part of the region, Samtskhe, borders on Turkey and has a more even mix of Armenians and Georgians with other smaller groups thrown in. There are three main cities in the region of relevance to this study. Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda in Javakheti are important Armenian strongholds, while Akhaltsikhe lies in Samtskhe, has a stronger Georgian component and functions as the capital of the entire Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

⁸ Stokke, O., *op. cit.*, p. 202.

⁹ OECD, *DAC Guidelines*, *op. cit.*, p. 13, Stokke, O., *op. cit.*, p. 228; Leonhardt, M. *The Challenge of Linking Aid and Peacebuilding*, (London: International Alert, 2000), p. 5.

¹⁰ DAC, *Conflict, Peace and Development Co-operation*, *op. cit.*, p. 4; cf. Rusu, S., 'Principles and Practice of Conflict Early Warning', in *Journal of Conflict, Security and Development*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2001, p. 127.

¹¹ CIPDD and FEWER, *Policy Brief: Javakheti in Georgia. Problems, Challenges and Necessary Responses*, (Tbilisi: CIPDD, 2000), p. 1. Available from www.fewer.org/pubs/index.htm.



Figure 1. Main map: Georgia and adjacent countries. Inset map: Samtskhe-Javakheti.

Samtskhe-Javakheti: problems and potential problems

Socio-economic underdevelopment

The Samtskhe-Javakheti region has a whole rainbow of present and potential problems. Most strikingly, it is one of the poorest parts of Georgia. Contributing to the dire socio-economic situation are the harsh climate and landscape, in particular in Javakheti.¹² Most of Javakheti consists of high mountains, and some of its towns and villages are over 2,000 metres above sea level. With the exception of a few narrow valleys the landscape is arid and treeless with dusty cold winds during the winter and difficult agricultural conditions.

The socio-economic development of the region is also hindered by lacking infrastructure and the dire state of what infrastructure there is, in particular roads, housing and medical facilities. Neglect on the part of the central authorities in Tbilisi and the lack of effective means of communication have isolated the region from the rest of Georgia.

An important factor contributing to the region's isolation and lack of development is its former status as a closed border zone. Constituting part of one of the two only direct borders between the Soviet Union and a NATO country, a 78 km wide swathe of land along the border was subject to strict limitations on travel and was not prioritised in terms of socio-economic development.¹³

The majority of Javakheti's male population engages in seasonal labour migration to Russia, providing one of the region's main sources of income. It also renders Javakheti sensitive to downturns in the Russian economy, such as in August 1998, and dependent on Russian–Georgian visa regimes, which have been tightened since 1998.

Tension between ethnic Armenian population and Georgian authorities

Between 92 and 97 per cent of Javakheti's population is ethnic Armenian.¹⁴ They feel neglected by the Georgian authorities in terms of socio-economic development and investments in infrastructure, and threatened by Georgian nation-building. The Javakheti Armenians in turn are sometimes perceived by the Georgian authorities as potential separatists and a threat to Georgia's territorial integrity. On several occasions during the 1990s, officials appointed by Tbilisi were rebuffed by the Javakheti Armenians. There were

¹² Ginosyan, O., 'A View on the Political and Economic Situation in Javakheti', in Hovhannisyán, N. and Gogsadze, G., *Ethnoregional Policy of Armenia and Georgia*, (Yerevan: Institute of Oriental Studies, 1999), p. 34, 36.

¹³ The other direct border between the Soviet Union and a NATO country was that between the Kola Peninsula in north-western Russia and Finnmark County in northern Norway.

¹⁴ Cf. Rochowanski, A., *Assessment of the Current Situation in Javakheti for UNDP Georgia June–July 2001*, (Tbilisi: UNDP, 2001), p. 2; CIPDD and FEWER, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

also incidents when Georgian military activity in Javakheti was thwarted by the Armenians, and in 1990 and 1991 a border post between Javakheti and Armenia was blown up.¹⁵ It has been said that at the end of the Soviet period there was a debate among the Armenians as to which area they should aim for first, the small one or the big one. They went for the big one, Nagorno-Karabakh, while the small one, Javakheti, was left alone for the time being.¹⁶ Such talk makes the already jittery Georgian authorities even more nervous.

Akhalkalaki military base

Relations between the Georgian authorities and the ethnic Armenian minority are exacerbated by another important aspect of the region's Cold War legacy: a 2–3000 man strong military base at Akhalkalaki, one of several bases that Russia maintains in Georgia and that Georgia has been trying to rid itself of since it gained independence.¹⁷ The base has a long history, dating from the Russo-Turkish wars around 1830. It was established as a Russian and Christian outpost against the Turks and to some extent is still seen that way by local ethnic Armenians. While the Georgian authorities see the base as undermining Georgian sovereignty, the ethnic Armenian population in Javakheti sees it as a security guarantee in uneasy relations with the Georgian authorities. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has led negotiations between Georgia and Russia about the timeframe and conditions for the closure of the base, but conclusive agreements have so far not been reached. For Georgia the continued Russian military presence is also an obstacle to closer integration with NATO.

The base is also a cornerstone of Javakheti's economy, providing both employment for locals and a market for local agricultural produce and services. The economic importance of the base is so great that in Javakheti the Russian rouble is more widespread than the Georgian lari.¹⁸

¹⁵ Melikishvili, L., *Latent Conflict in Polyethnic Society* (Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press, 1999), pp. 96.

¹⁶ Cf. Hovhannisyán, N., 'On Some Peculiarities of Ethnoregional Policy of Armenia', in Hovhannisyán, N. and Gogsadze, G., *op. cit.*, p. 55; Dzhincharadze, P., 'Should Russian Military Bases Be Withdrawn from Georgia: Several Aspects of the Situation', in *Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies*, no. 5, 2000, p. 127; Nodia, G., 'A New Cycle of Instability in Georgia: New Troubles and Old Problems', in Bertsch, G., Craft, C., Jones, S., and Beck, M., (eds.), *Crossroads and Conflict: Security and Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 194.

¹⁷ Darchiashvili, D., 'Ethnic Relations as Security Factor in Southern Georgia', in *Central Asia and Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies*, no. 1, 2000, p. 53. At the Istanbul OSCE Summit Russia agreed to shut down its bases in Vaziani outside Tbilisi and in Gudauta in Abkhazia. The bases in Batumi in Adjara and in Akhalkalaki still remain to be agreed upon. Georgia argues for a three-year withdrawal plan, while Russia maintains that it needs 15 years. Tseretelli, V., 'Russia and Georgia: Post-Soviet Divorce', in *Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies*, no. 3, 2001, p. 117.

¹⁸ CIPDD and FEWER, *op. cit.*, p. 2. Upon driving into Akhalkalki the first time my Georgian driver and I stopped at a petrol station on the outskirts of the town. We were baffled by the ridiculously high petrol prices noted on a large board outside the station. As we pulled up at one of the pumps, a young man approached the car. The driver asked him politely in Georgian about the prices. The young man looked blankly back at us. The driver repeated what he had said a couple of times, trying to explain. In the end the young man sternly said "Chto?" [what] in Russian, indicating that he could not understand or did not want to be spoken to in Georgian. We now asked him in Russian, and it turned out that the prices were in Russian roubles.

Due to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and its geo-political isolation, Armenia has become greatly dependent upon Russia, and the interests of the two countries are seen as overlapping in many areas. Around 70 per cent of the personnel at the Russian base are actually Armenians with Russian passports.¹⁹ The base is particularly threatening for the Georgian authorities in light of the fact that some Armenians from Javakheti contributed in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, and that the base has been used to distribute weapons to local Armenians in times of insecurity.²⁰

Repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks

As a part of its accession package to the CoE, Georgia had to accept the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks within a time frame of twelve years.²¹ The Meskhetian Turks are Muslims of unclear ethnic identity who were deported from southern Georgia to Central Asia by Stalin's regime in 1944.²² In 1989 they were thrown out of their homes in the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia during pogroms. Many had a long-term dream of returning to Georgia, and aimed to repatriate.²³ However, they were unwelcome in Georgia, and as a result they were spread throughout Turkey and various former Soviet states where the local population is often hostile towards them. The total number of Meskhetian Turks, and how many of them actually wish to go to Georgia, is uncertain. There are probably between 200,000 and 400,000 of them in total, mostly residing in Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine.²⁴

Both Armenians and Georgians are sceptical to their repatriation, often citing family stories of abuse by Muslims or Turks and lack of housing and arable land. Armenians tend to have a particularly negative attitude, which is related to Armenia's bad relationship with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and the dispute about Turkish massacres of Armenians during the early 20th century. Part of the Armenian population in Javakheti in fact descends from Armenian refugees from Anatolia who settled there during the 19th century.²⁵

Armenians have occasionally implied that the Georgian authorities might use the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks to counterbalance the Armenian population in Samtskhe-Javakheti. The resettlement of Georgian-speaking Muslims in Ninotsminda due to erosion and landslides in Adjara during the 1980s has fuelled this Armenian conspiracy theory.²⁶ Meanwhile some

¹⁹ CIPDD and FEWER, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁰ Melikishvili, L., *op. cit.*, pp. 97.

²¹ Rusetski, A., 'Factors of Sustainable Development of a Polyethnic State Exemplified by Georgia', in Hovhannisyan, N. and Gogsadze, G., *op. cit.*, p. 89; Kokoev, K., and Svanidze, G., 'Problems of National (Ethnic) Minorities in Georgia', in *Central Asia and Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies*, no. 1, 2000, p. 37, 38, 42.

²² Ségolène, A., 'La Diaspora Meskhète Face aux Défis de la Transition Post-Sovétique', in *Cahiers d'études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien*, no. 30, 2000, p. 114.

²³ Ségolène, A., *ibid.*, p. 121, 123.

²⁴ Ségolène, A., *ibid.*, p. 114.

²⁵ Darchiashvili, D., *op. cit.*, p. 44.

²⁶ Several hundred Adjarian families were resettled to Ninotsminda. Now less than a hundred remain. CIPDD and FEWER, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Available from www.fewer.org/pubs/index.htm; Melikishvili, L., *op. cit.*, p. 66; Rusetski, A., 'Factors of Sustainable Development of a Polyethnic State Exemplified by Georgia', in Hovhannisyan, N. and Gogsadze, G., *op. cit.*, p. 89.

Georgians fear that the resettlement of the Meskhetian Turks on the border to Turkey might pose yet another separatist threat.

The Dukhobors under pressure

Finally the small Russian religious sect of Dukhobors feels that its land is being encroached upon and that it is being forced out of the region by competing Armenians and Georgians.²⁷ The Dukhobors were moved from Tavriysk and Voronezh in Russia to Javakheti in the 1830s and 1840s, and now many have opted to go back to Russia.²⁸ Around 800 remain of the more than 3,000 who were registered in 1989.²⁹

Linkages between problems and with the national and regional contexts

Samtskhe-Javakheti's problems are all intimately interwoven. Poverty and underdevelopment render the Armenians dependent upon the Akhalkalaki military base. Their support for the base makes the Georgian authorities suspicious of them. The failure of the Georgian authorities to enhance the development of Samtskhe-Javakheti and the submission of Javakheti to a regional capital in Akhaltsikhe render the Armenians suspicious of the Georgian authorities. Georgia's promise to the CoE to repatriate the Meskhetian Turks strengthens the wish of the Armenians to retain the base.

The Georgian national context has further ramifications for the problems in Samtskhe-Javakheti. During the early period of independence the Georgian elite in Tbilisi engaged in a nation-building process that was often characterised by Georgian ethnocentrism. This in turn made the numerous and large minorities that occupy much of the country's mountainous rim weary of Georgian integrationist attempts, and encouraged separatist tendencies among them. There were wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in north-western Georgia during the first half of the 1990s. In particular Abkhazia remains de facto independent of Tbilisi. The sizeable Armenian minority in Abkhazia in fact supported the Abkhaz bid for independence, providing Georgians with a further basis for linking experiences in Abkhazia with the perception of a separatist threat in Javakheti.³⁰ Adjara on Georgia's south-eastern border with Turkey is populated by Georgian-speaking Muslims and the Pankisi Gorge in the eastern part of Georgia is populated by Kists, a Chechen group. Neither area has experienced war, but both have almost as much de facto independence from Tbilisi as do Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These events and situations have filled relations between the Georgian majority and the country's many minorities with volatility and mutual suspicion, including relations between Tbilisi and the Javakheti Armenians.

The wider regional context of the Caucasus has yet further implications for Samtskhe-Javakheti. Relations between Russia and Georgia are strained by Russian underhand support for the separatist struggles in Abkhazia and

²⁷ Melikishvili, L., *op. cit.*, pp. 44, 68, 94, 103–104.

²⁸ Dzhincharadze, P., 'Should Russian Military Bases Be Withdrawn from Georgia: Several Aspects of the Situation', in *Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies*, no. 5, 2000, p. 128.

²⁹ CIPDD and FEWER, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Available from www.fewer.org/pubs/index.htm.

³⁰ Cf. Hovhannisyanyan, N. in Hovhannisyanyan, N. and Gogsadze, G., *op. cit.*, p. 60.

South Ossetia, and by Russian accusations of Georgian failure to deal with Chechen rebels operating out of the Pankisi Gorge. Some Georgians perceive the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks as a Russian ploy to destabilise the region and retain the Akhalkalaki military base. Armenia has been at war with Azerbaijan, is subject to a Turkish blockade and is nervous about Turkish expansionism in the region. Samtskhe-Javakheti is a likely trajectory for future possible oil and gas pipelines transiting Georgia on the way from Azerbaijan to Turkey. Western countries, organisations and companies favour Georgia as a pipeline route because it diminishes dependency on Russian export routes and thus Russian hegemony in the region. Russia sees Georgian pipeline routes as a threat to its interests in the Caucasus.

The mix of problems in Samtskhe-Javakheti bears a striking resemblance to the preconditions for violent conflict and the ties to underdevelopment identified in theory:

Factors which may contribute to the polarisation of ethnic and cultural differences include: economic, social and political dislocation resulting from imbalanced development itself; the legacy of colonial boundaries; illegitimate or weak state institutions; the forced assimilation of minorities; and aspirations for increased autonomy by territorially concentrated ethnic groups.³¹

And certainly there has been no lack of warnings about the potential for large-scale ethnic conflict in Samtskhe-Javakheti.³²

³¹ OECD, *DAC Guidelines*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

³² E.g. Aivazyan, H., 'Some Peculiarities of Ethnoregional Policy of Georgia Exemplified by Javakheti', in Hovhannisyan, N. and Gogsadze, G., *op. cit.*, p. 14; Melikishvili, L., *op. cit.*, pp. 86, 101, 109.

The international response

Early warning

International organisations have produced numerous reports warning about Samtskhe-Javakheti's problems and the danger of violent conflict. In March 1999 the Centre for Civil–Military Relations in Tbilisi produced a report in cooperation with the NGO Conciliation Resources on the security situation in the region for the UNHCR's (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) 'Local Monitoring Project in the CIS'.³³ In July 2000 the London-based Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER) in cooperation with the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) produced a policy brief mapping the problems in Javakheti and proposing countermeasures.³⁴ During the same period the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) started producing regular briefing notes on the situation and international activities in the region. In July 2001 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had the situation in Samtskhe-Javakheti assessed and yet another report was produced.³⁵

In 2000 the OSCE set up a large-scale early warning project on Samtskhe-Javakheti, with 12 local correspondents submitting monthly reports to CIPDD. CIPDD processes the information from the correspondents and passes it on to the OSCE, which further disseminates it, including to the government of Georgia. The contents of the reports are purposely kept confident. The OSCE was also involved in the 'Media Project on the Prevention of Ethnic Conflict in Georgia' run by the media NGO Studiore, which included a series of televised roundtable discussions in which problems in and related to Samtskhe-Javakheti were debated openly by representatives of various groups and institutions.

Untimely warning?

Before managing to visit Samtskhe-Javakheti, I sat in the basement office of a Tbilisi NGO one afternoon and interviewed the members of the NGO about the problems in Samtskhe-Javakheti. One of the interviewees was particularly critical of my approach to the region. She said 'I want to do early warning work with you now, and tell you to be careful about words that you use. Every conflict and every place is different'. She went on to criticise the way international organisations and researchers talk and write about the danger of conflicts in the region, arguing that they might in fact foment conflicts that were not initially serious or even existent. She argued that verbalisation can exacerbate low-intensity conflicts.

³³ Darchiasvhili, D., *Southern Georgia: Security Objectives and Challenges*, (Tbilisi: CCMR, 1999).

³⁴ CIPDD and FEWER, *op. cit.*

³⁵ Rochowanski, A., *op. cit.*

Later it struck me that the frequent refusal of local officials both in Samtskhe-Javakheti and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union to acknowledge ethnic conflict or talk about 'nationalism', might in fact be a conflict prevention measure in line with her way of thinking. There is often particular reluctance to use the word 'conflict', even in conjunction with 'prevention'.³⁶ The offhand dismissal by foreign researchers and organisations of this reluctance as a residue of Soviet propaganda and intransparency might in fact be rather misplaced and unconstructive.

Early warning can feed into worsening mutual media representations of ethnic groups, a crucial aspect of contemporary ethnic conflict. During 2000 and 2001 the problems in Samtskhe-Javakheti were increasingly relayed by both Georgian, Armenian and international media.³⁷ Events which may not initially be related to ethnic identity can easily be misconstrued by anticipatory media in an atmosphere of early warning.³⁸

For example, after visiting Samtskhe-Javakheti in September 2001 I could not return to Tbilisi via the town Tsalka, as I had intended. The Tbilisi media had reported ethnic violence in Tsalka during the past few days, internal troops had been sent in and the situation was not considered safe. It later turned out to be a quarrel between two neighbours: one neighbour had killed the other's dog; the other neighbour had retributed by killing the first neighbour's dog. Fighting had ensued in which two people were allegedly killed. One of the neighbours happened to be Armenian and the other Georgian, and the Tbilisi media picked up on this. Locals in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki, however, entirely refused to give the ethnic aspect of the incident any weight, seeing it as a ridiculous neighbourly squabble without ethnic ramifications. The danger, as I was warned by my NGO interviewee in Tbilisi, is that things may become what they are called.

When skewed media imagery is fed back into the local environment it can have adverse consequences. For example, a member of an Armenian NGO in Samtskhe-Javakheti told me he had been asked in an interview by a journalist whether he thought that the Georgian government wanted to settle the Meskhetian Turks in the area in order to neutralise the Armenian population. He had never thought or heard of anything like that before. Another Armenian felt that an article written by a foreign journalist gave the

³⁶ CIPDD and FEWER, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁷ For example, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting reported on the region on 22 September 2001 (Alaverdyan, D., 'Armenia Faces Georgian Dilemma', *IWPR's Caucasus Reporting Service*, no. 102), and the English-language Armenian internet news service *Asbarez Online* reported on Samtskhe-Javakheti and related issues at least 13 times during the first ten months of 2001 ('ARS Creates Fund to Aid Armenians of Javakhk', 9 February 2001; 'The Issue of Javakhk Involves the Right to Self-Determination Says Roustamian', 8 February 2001; 'ARS "Javakhk Fund" Needs your Assistance', 27 February 2001; 'Shevardnadse Concerned Over Recent Articles Printed on Javakhk', 2 March 2001; 'ARF Statement on Javakhk', 5 March 2001; 'Armenia to Reconstruct Alternative Road to Georgia', 20 March 2001; 'Georgians Believe Javakhk's Problems are Only Socio-Economic', 4 June 2001; 'Georgian Political Analyst Says Repatriation of Meskhetian Turks Dangerous', 10 July 2001; 'Javakhk Armenians Appeal to Shevardnadse', 7 August 2001; 'Journalist Comments on Situation in Javakhk', 8 August 2001; 'Base Withdrawal in Akhalkalak will Affect Local Population', 4 September 2001; 'PACE Discusses Rights of Javakhk Armenians', 25 September 2001; 'Georgia Denounces Rustamian's Statements', 26 September 2001. These articles can be found at www.asbarez.com.

³⁸ Cf. Hovhannisyanyan, N., in Hovhannisyanyan, N. and Gogsadzze, G., *op. cit.*, p. 60.

impression that ‘several thousand men, armed to the teeth, control the towns of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda’, that they are ‘a delayed-action bomb’.³⁹

I also had other experiences in Samtskhe-Javakheti that indicated that the degree of ethnic animosity on the ground was far from proportional to the amount of early warning about the region. Having heard and read numerous times about how the Armenians hated Turks and would never allow the Meskhetian Turks to return, it was surprising to find about eight Meskhetian Turk families already having repatriated and living peacefully in Akhaltsikhe. While interviewing one of those families a girl came in and offered us coffee. I thought she might be a daughter or cousin of the family I was interviewing. It turned out, however, that she was their Armenian neighbour, with whom they were obviously on friendly terms. The explanation of this paradoxical situation may lie precisely in the exaggerated image of local ethnic conflicts created by outsiders, including the national media looking for scandal, the Georgian and Armenian elites engaged in nation-building and international organisations doing early warning and trying to prevent violent conflict.

In a critique of mixing aid with politics, Sæther argues that it is easy for external actors to underestimate the

complexity of political activity. Questions of political power relations between centres(s) and regions are always at the core of politics. How may foreign actors take on such a role and responsibility for which they will not be held accountable?... Can, and will, such interventions create political stability, or will they only add fuel to an already heated political situation? How can foreign actors be seen as promoting democracy when they design a framework for politics at a moment when national politics is in ruins?⁴⁰

Going to Samtskhe-Javakheti also confirmed that the region suffers from peripherality and severe underdevelopment: the first thing that strikes one is the bad state of the few roads connecting the towns and cities of the region. Most are potholed to an extent that defies any driver or vehicle.⁴¹ Houses are derelict and schools and medical facilities lack basic equipment. While most organisations note the socio-economic troubles of the region in their reports, few provide statistics or go into any detail. As one Armenian has written, ‘we have tried to draw in representatives of various countries, banks, funds, investors and donors. They all inquired about our problems closely, listened to our answers very-very attentively, showed their deep compassion and – left! Done with it’.⁴² The disproportionate focus of aid workers on ethnic conflict is precisely what Mary Anderson warned against in her celebrated book *Do No Harm*.⁴³

If Samtskhe-Javakheti’s main problems are in fact underdevelopment and isolation, then perhaps international organisations should channel their

³⁹ Article by Lieu, C., in the *Azeri Times*, 19 March 1999, cited in Ginosyan, O., ‘A View on the Political and Economic Situation in Javakheti’, in Hovhannisyanyan, N. and Gogsadze, G., *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ Sæther, G., *op. cit.*, pp. 208–209.

⁴¹ The short road between Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda is an exception, since it was repaired for a visit from Shevardnadze.

⁴² Ginosyan, O., ‘A View on the Political and Economic Situation in Javakheti’, in Hovhannisyanyan, N. and Gogsadze, G., *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁴³ Anderson, Mary B., *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – or War*, (London: Lynne Rienner, 1999), pp. 23, 37.

resources directly into solving those problems and talk and write less about looming conflict. To the degree that there is also a danger of violent conflict due to the socio-economic problems, development aid may in fact also be the most efficacious means of conflict prevention, going to the root of the problems rather than dealing with their symptoms and even risking aggravating them. It is clear that the region has great needs for improved medical facilities; schools, kindergartens and children's homes; infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water supply and sewage; and not least local governance and administrative relations with the central Georgian authorities.

It would be tempting to apply the Copenhagen School's securitisation perspective to the approach of various organisations to Samtskhe-Javakheti.⁴⁴ Securitisation is the notion that issues become security issues through the discourse of actors with specific interests. It would seem that it is in the self-interest of numerous organisations to maximise the probability of crisis in order to draw attention to themselves and justify their activities in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

Sitting in the NGO's basement office in Tbilisi being warned about early warning, I thought I had found the perfect turn for an article on Samtskhe-Javakheti: 'International organisations and overzealous early warning risk blowing up poor region rather than defusing its problems. Greater consciousness about the relationship between underdevelopment and more coordination are needed.'

All is, however, not so simple. A more thorough examination of the early warning documents on Samtskhe-Javakheti and the projects that have been implemented there reveals great complexity – not only in the politics of the region, but also in the approach of the various organisations engaged there.

A sensitive, coordinated approach

In their joint early warning report, CIPDD and FEWER state that

The issue of whether and why Javakheti should be singled out as a problem area and as a special target for assistance programs, is a sensitive and sometimes controversial problem in itself... Extreme caution and sensitivity should be employed by all governmental, non-governmental, local and international actors, so that any assistance programs do not raise false expectations and threaten the delicate regional balance.⁴⁵

Similarly, writing about Samtskhe-Javakheti for a UNHCR project, Darchiasvili notes that 'it can be dangerous to impose a conflictual dynamic on complex circumstances which do not inevitably have to lead to conflict'.⁴⁶ Thus international organisations have mostly been aware of the unclear relationship between poverty and conflict and the sensitivity of conflict prevention in Samtskhe-Javakheti, and make the same point I am making in their own reports and discourse.

⁴⁴ Cf. Buzan, B., Wæver, O., and de Wilde, Jaap, *Security: a New Framework for Analysis*, (London: Lynne Rienner, 1998), pp. 23–24.

⁴⁵ CIPDD and FEWER, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁶ Darchiasvili, D., *Southern Georgia, op. cit.*, p. 26.

A closer look at projects implemented in the region also shows that there was a good mix of projects related to conflict prevention and development aid. A useful overview of various types of projects in Samtskhe-Javakheti up to 2000 is provided in the *Javakheti Stability Consolidation Plan* published jointly by the NGOs CIPDD, FEWER and EWI (East West Institute).⁴⁷ In addition to the early warning reports of different organisations mentioned above, in 1998 the OSCE arranged seminars on human rights in the Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki areas; and in 1999 and 2000 the UNV funded the publication of the *Multinational Georgia Newsletter* by the NGO Multinational Georgia to encourage the information flow between various ethnic groups.

Nonetheless, projects related to conflict prevention have not predominated unduly. In fact there have been roughly the same number of projects related to socio-economic development. For example, in 1997 Oxfam and the Dutch Embassy funded a project implemented by the NGO Centrum voor Begaafdheidsondersoek (CBO) which involved the restoration of the Ninotsminda Culture Centre and also entailed income generation for several families; in 1998 the Eurasia Foundation funded a trip for a delegation from Ninotsminda to various businesses and resource centres in Georgia and Armenia; in 1999 the UNV distributed 400 food packages to elderly and disabled people in the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts.

The *Javakheti Stability Consolidation Plan* distinguishes between projects according to ten seemingly haphazard prefixed categories. These categories do not entirely serve the purpose of distinguishing between development aid and conflict prevention, so I have introduced the extra category of early warning and regrouped them all into two main blocs. The first bloc consists of those projects directly or indirectly related to development aid, while the second bloc consists of those related to conflict prevention. The pure coordination projects have not been included in this overview, since they are related neither to development aid nor to conflict prevention.

⁴⁷ CIPDD and FEWER, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–16.

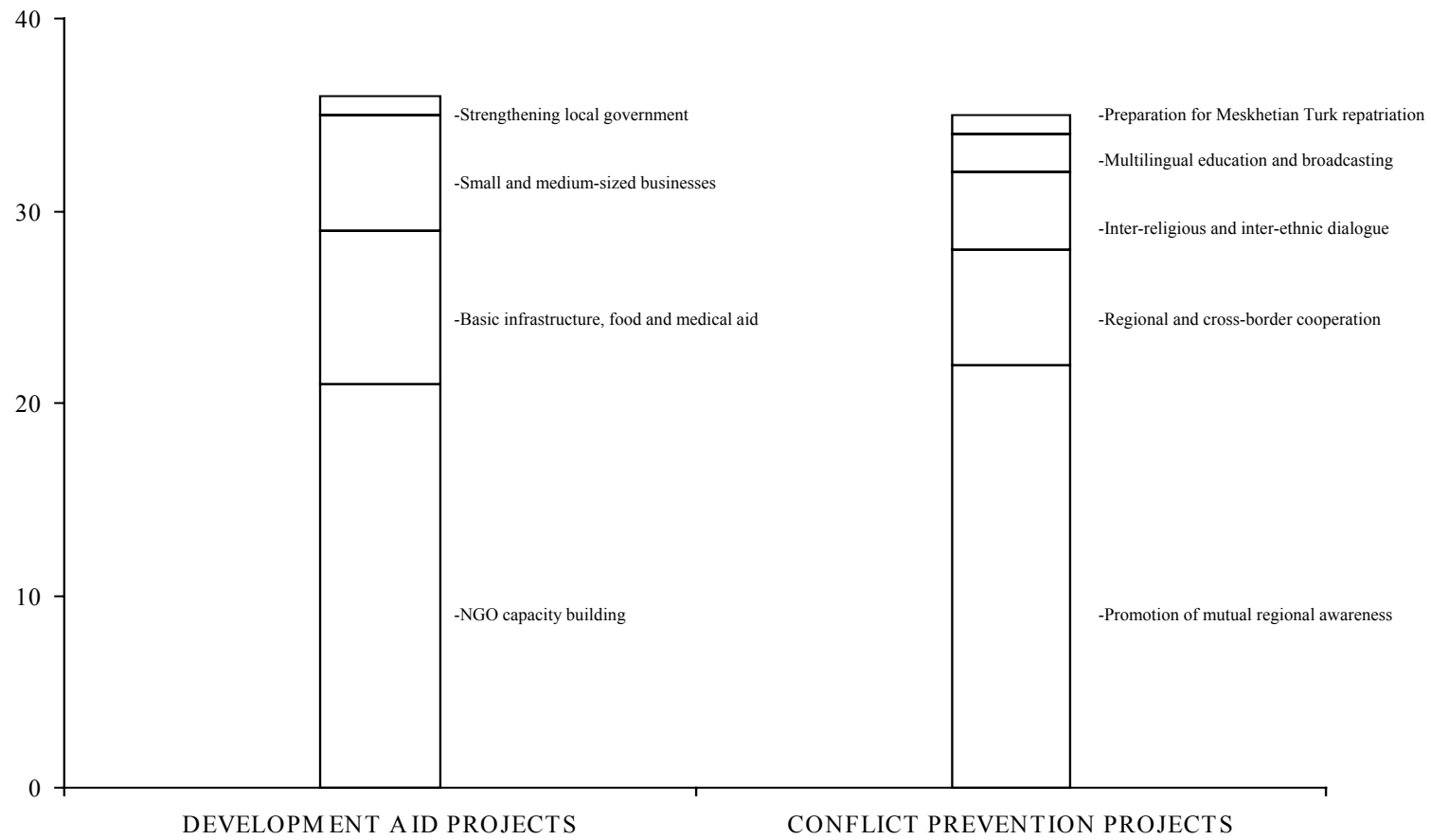


Figure 2. Number of development aid and conflict prevention projects compared.

Conclusions

The Samtskhe-Javakheti case shows that it is necessary to mirror the complexity of development and conflict inter-linkages in the work of international organisations. It shows that it is crucial that they have a reflected, sensitive and coordinated approach. Different organisations have different comparative competences and advantages in relation to conflict prevention and development aid. The sensitivity of conflict prevention in a post-Soviet location with particular developmental difficulties also makes it important that the international organisations know what the others are calling things and what they are doing about them.

The case of Samtskhe-Javakheti also shows that such an approach is possible. The coordination of international organisations in the region, their division of labour and the integration of conflict prevention and development have all been good and reflexive. Several factors have facilitated this fortuitous evolution of affairs. The initiatives and high quality work emanating from organisations such as FEWER, EWI and CIPDD have been crucial. The simultaneous entry of many organisations to Georgia and the former Soviet space over a relatively short period of time and the location of the UN agencies in a single building in Tbilisi (the UN House) have resulted in a relatively high level of integration. The integration of international organisations working in Georgia has also been aided by internet technology, for example www.assistancegeorgia.org.ge, which provides addresses of all organisations operating in Georgia, dynamic maps of their operations and a collection of analysis and evaluation documents. Internet publication has made early warning and coordination reports readily available.

However, to some extent the relatively good coordination of the international approach to Samtskhe-Javakheti is incidental, contingent upon certain organisations taking on leading roles on their own initiative. In a policy paper published jointly by FEWER and International Alert, it is argued that 'networks are emerging as the most effective and strategic system for early warning, insofar as they allow for the pooling of different information sources (dynamic, local structural), methods of analysis (quantitative and qualitative, local and international), and the overall sharing of the burden (resources, risk) of early warning'.⁴⁸ While the roles that such NGOs and networks have played show how useful it is that some organisations take on leading roles, horizontal networks between organisations may not always be reliable enough for such tasks:

In several cases, NGOs have been instrumental in preparing the ground... This strategy involves dangers too... important foreign policy initiatives are taken and implemented by NGOs... in some conflicts NGOs have pursued different, even contradictory policies... initiatives that are unco-ordinated run

⁴⁸ Leonhardt, M. and Nyheim, D., *op. cit.*, p. 4; cf. OECD, *DAC Guidelines, op. cit.*, pp. 15–16.

the risk of backfiring, with repercussions both for peace promotion and development assistance.⁴⁹

Central information gathering and decision-making loci are required.⁵⁰ Thus there is a need to review previous suggestions for institutions that could guarantee a consistent coordinating function across regions and cases.⁵¹ This is not only a question of reliable administration and decision-making, but also one of dependable financing. Coordination is not gratis. The unpredictability of financing for coordination has been severely damaging in several cases, resulting in underfunding, false economies and inefficiency.⁵²

In terms of institutional frameworks, UNOCHA is a good start, but needs further development. For example, the limitation of its mandate to humanitarian operations limits its capacity to provide effective coordination in cases where humanitarian and development aid are intertwined with conflict prevention in complex ways.

A stronger and more formalised central coordinating institution with broader powers might also be able to more effectively include large institutions such as the World Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the CoE in a collaborative approach to regions such as Samtskhe-Javakheti. The WB and EBRD are already engaged in large infrastructure projects elsewhere in Georgia and might easily be able to extend those activities to Samtskhe-Javakheti. They also have a capacity for socio-economic analysis that many of the organisations involved in Samtskhe-Javakheti are short of, and which is therefore often lacking in their early warning reports. The CoE might be induced to relate its policy on Meskhetian Turk repatriation to the work of other organisations in Samtskhe-Javakheti, perhaps taking greater account of the capacity of the Georgian state and society to deal with repatriation, and the danger of sparking violent conflict.

In sum, the case of Samtskhe-Javakheti shows that a relatively coordinated and conscious approach to areas with both development aid and conflict prevention needs is possible, but that more formalised over-arching mechanisms and institutions are needed in order to ensure the maximisation and consistency of coordination, and the inclusion of all relevant actors in the approach of the international community to such areas.

⁴⁹ Stokke, O., *op. cit.*, p. 231; cf. DAC, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ For a contrary argument emphasising the need for flexibility in selecting organisations for leadership roles in different contexts, see OECD, *DAC Guidelines, op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁵¹ Cf. Stokke, O., *op. cit.*, p. 228; OECD, *DAC Guidelines*, p. 28.

⁵² OECD, *DAC Guidelines, op. cit.*, p. 25.

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