

Social Assistance and Successful Advocacy in Georgia

A Social Protection Case Study



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This derelict and crumbling ex-soviet apartment block is home to thirteen displaced families. Photo: Caroline Berger

Oxfam's social protection project began in Georgia in 2005. Oxfam worked with the Association of Young Economists of Georgia (AYEG) to gather information about household poverty levels, and to advocate for change in the government's social aid system. This system - income support (cash transfers) and free health care – was previously failing to reach some of the country's poorest people.

Through monitoring, research and advocacy, AYEG and Oxfam were able to influence social policy, and as a result, the poorest and most vulnerable people's access to state benefits. Adjustments were made to the scoring methodology, as a consequence of this work, which resulted in an additional 34,000 families being included in the national social assistance system.

The Background

Georgia, a lower middle-income country with a population of 4.5 million, gained independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A period of unrest followed, including a civil war lasting nearly three years. Disputed parliamentary elections in 2003, internationally recognised to be marred by fraud, led to massive anti-government protests in most major towns and cities in Georgia. This peaceful 'Rose Revolution' brought about the election of a new government in 2004.

Despite steady economic growth since 2004, living standards have failed to improve. Relationships with neighbouring Russia have been tense. In 2008, military conflict broke out when Russian troops intervened in Georgia's ongoing territorial dispute with South Ossetia. The cost of Georgia's military has been a big drain on the national budget – the Ministry of Defence is the government's biggest spender. The conflicts of 1992 and 2008 led to the introduction of expensive resettlement programmes, with the relocation of over 300,000 people from the conflict affected areas. The economy also suffered from the loss of export trade to Russia, previously one of Georgia's biggest trade partners, mainly in agricultural produce. This has delivered a significant blow to the local economy, as 54 percent of Georgia's population depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Inflation has reached 15 percent, which disproportionately harms those with fewer resources.

A large percentage of people remain poor. Officially a third of the population live in poverty, with 15 percent of these living in 'extreme poverty'. Civil society

organisations, however, claim that these numbers are a fraction of the real picture, and have been slashed to portray government progress. The same is true, these groups claim, with unemployment figures. While the official unemployment rate stands at 12.6 percent, many experts argue that real figure is dramatically higher, up to 60 percent in rural areas. Georgia's economic liberalisation has deepened inequalities. There is a clear divide between urban and rural dwellers in terms of access to resources, essential services and opportunities. In 2007, an average of 87 percent of beneficiaries' income was spent on food, medicine and medical services alone.¹

Oxfam has been working in Georgia since 1993 in various interventions, initially working with humanitarian programmes to assist Internally Displaced People (IDPs), but later focusing on development programmes in health, livelihoods, Disaster Risk Reduction, and institutional accountability. Since 2002, Oxfam has been focusing on a governance programme that works with communities to develop their understanding of democratic processes and practices and to build their capacity to take part in democratic local governance. These initiatives included training communities to understand, analyse and monitor budgets and to understand their civic rights. As a result of Oxfam's work, public budget monitoring committees were set up. These committees were designed to both regularly track local budgets and to present community priorities to local government to influence spending. To complement this work, Oxfam worked with local government officials, strengthening their understanding of the responsibilities that they hold and the legal environment in which they operate.

Rationale for implementing a social protection programme

Although market liberalisation and globalisation of trade has boosted economic development in Georgia, it has also widened the gap between the rich and poor and between men and women. Existing protective measures, such as public welfare and redistributive mechanisms, have been inadequate in the face of rising income inequalities.

In the post-soviet era, Georgia inherited a category based targeting social aid system.⁴ In this context, people received social aid according to their household status, for example as IDPs, the chronically ill or people

Reversing extreme inequality is a key strategy in overcoming poverty and suffering, enabling rights, and achieving social justice.² Well-designed social protection programmes can allow people that are in transitory poverty³ to seize opportunities created by economic growth and at the same time, protect such individuals and households from falling back into poverty. This support is especially important for enabling poor women to overcome the multiple barriers that they face in participating and leading in economic and political life.

Oxfam's Programme Policy Guidelines on Social Protection

with disabilities, rather than based on their household need. In 2005 the Government introduced a new social aid system, under the management of the newly created Social Services Agency – (SSA), which sits within the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Affairs. Under the new social aid system, state assistance was to be distributed according to need. The SSA was charged with identifying beneficiaries and implementing a new targeting methodology. However, the changes made and targeting strategies employed were problematic and failed to reach thousands of people.

The new social aid system identified poor households by looking at their living conditions and registering them on an electronic database, which made them eligible for social-aid, income support (cash transfers), and free health care from the state. Eligibility was determined by a poverty indicators points system. Despite being hailed as a success by the government and donor agencies, the targeting methodology was, at times, flawed. For Oxfam, working in some of the most deprived regions of Georgia, it was clear that the programme was not reaching some of the poorest people.

As a result of these concerns, Oxfam together with its local partner – the Association of Young Economists of Georgia (AYEG), set up a project to monitor the impact and implementation of the social aid programme in three regions. The findings showed that many families, living in poverty, were not receiving the social aid they were entitled to. This was due to complicated and often subjective criteria, differences in seasonal income and local misconceptions about programmatic processes. They also found that, due to a lack of monitoring at local level, a large number of deceased people's social assistance was still being claimed. Oxfam's work on social protection coincides with its ongoing governance programme as well as other development programmes, including livelihoods work and access to better health care.

Opportunities

The key opportunities arose predominantly from an institutional environment of change and reform in the country, together with the partnership of an effective and competent local organisation.

- The government had wanted to lift the country out of poverty, implementing social policies based on need. While the government was difficult to influence initially, it was equally keen to demonstrate to the international community its commitment to reform.
- The government had addressed a number of key challenges, for example, removing administrative corruption and improving revenue collection.
- The government's category based targeting programme was new. This meant that a certain degree of alterations and 'tweaking' was to be expected.

- There was clear willingness from the Ministry and the SSA to collaborate with the non-governmental sector. The project centred on participation from the state, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and beneficiaries.
- New and open minded government officials helped to take the agenda forward.
- SSA staff were highly motivated and had a genuine interest in bringing positive change for poor people but lacked resources and capacity to monitor the system.
- Oxfam, together with AYEG, had a unique opportunity to support capacity building and ensure institutional 'buy in' to the new system.
- The new political environment in 2005 allowed space for advocacy opportunities

These external factors enabled AYEG and Oxfam to seize the opportunity to influence decision making at all levels. Furthermore, AYEG, as economists, had the skills and knowledge to contribute and manage the sampling, presentation and budgetary aspects of this project.

Oxfam's policy and advocacy work focused on working with key people who were open to change, and levered, where possible, the government's stated ambition for development and poverty reduction.

The Kobalias, a family of ten and refugees from Abkhazia, live in poverty in the village of Pakhulani. The family includes two elderly people, in need of health care, and two students, studying at the Tbilisi State University. Tuition fees have doubled the family's total expenditure, already stretched to breaking point on food and health care expenses.

Despite having applied for, and been awarded state assistance, the family decided to refuse the benefits available. An AYEG team member visited the family and discovered why. The family was afraid that as a result of participation in the State Social Assistance Programme (SSAP), they would no longer be considered as IDPs. "IDPs are waiting for EU (European Union) assistance, and they say that the people receiving assistance from the state won't be entitled to EU assistance".

The AYEG interviewer was able to clarify that receiving state benefits would not negate their IDP claims. As a result, the family were able to access much needed financial assistance, health care and energy vouchers.⁵

Challenges

- To be perceived as non-political in a highly politicised society
- To maintain consistency in advocacy work, in an environment of quick and dramatic reform

Project Details

In 2005, Oxfam began to work with AYEG to develop critical surveys and targeting methodologies to help assist those most in need. The overall goal of the project was to:

- **Develop sustainable monitoring methods and enhance cooperation between the government and the civil sector to benefit those most in need.**

Oxfam pledged £150,400 over five years to fund and support this project. The programme was based on four main components.

1 Research & establishing facts

- This component focused on monitoring the State Social Assistance Programme (SSAP) in three locations. Surveys were conducted consecutively and learning points were shared with the SSA after each survey was completed.
- A number of quantitative and qualitative surveys were conducted with families who had scored below and above the previously set eligibility cut off point (52,000 points).

The main findings were:

- Families that didn't qualify for assistance were often in a similar situation, or worse, than the ones that did.

- Ranking methodology and practice did not always reflect the living conditions of families accurately.
- Consequently, hundreds of poor families were not receiving assistance.
- There was a lack of capacity within the Social Subsidies Agency to verify the nationally collected household data.

2 Presentation of findings

Oxfam and AYEG held meetings with SSA representatives to discuss the findings and explain the methodology. Care was taken to keep these sessions out of the public domain to avoid alienating the SSA.

3 Advocacy and lobbying

Despite initial enthusiasm from the SSA, the AYEG-Oxfam findings challenged the SSA's targeting and monitoring strategies. These challenges were met with a resistance to change. Consequently, Oxfam and AYEG responded with a series of lobbying meetings with the SSA and the Ministry of Health. AYEG and Oxfam advocated that:

- If there were no changes to the system there would be a high risk of the entire programme becoming ineffective.



Two IDPs, standing outside their apartment block in Georgia. While official figures state that one third of the population is living in poverty, many civil society organisations claim that these numbers are only a fraction of the actual total. Photo: JustinJin/Panos Pictures

- Programme failure would be damaging to the government's image at a time of growing political and social pressure.

AYEG and Oxfam lobbied for:

- A rise in the threshold of 52,000 points to include more poor families
- The introduction of a clear monitoring system to check primary data
- The people's right to appeal against decisions to exclude them from the national social assistance data base

4. Working with the Minister of Healthcare

During the lobbying stage of the project a new Minister of Healthcare was appointed. He had worked for NGOs and was open to both the monitoring work and its findings.

AYEG and Oxfam successfully presented the case for altering and monitoring the revised SSA programme to the Minister of Healthcare. The Minister was then able to take this agenda forward.

Key Successes

- The poverty indicators points threshold was raised from 52,000 points to 57,000, which meant 34,000 more families were able to receive social assistance.
- As a result of the project, an information strategy was developed for the Social Subsidies Agency.
- During the project implementation process, training sessions were held periodically for SSA agents and journalists. Meetings were held with different state bodies upon the completion of each survey. Survey reports were developed and distributed to interested parties, and placed on the SSA web-site.
- The SSA agreed to establish a monitoring system to verify primary data
- There was a decision from SSA to set up a special unit of people who would carry out the same function as Oxfam-AYEG interviewers, nationally across Georgia. However, after some debate, the SSA concluded that while it recognised the benefits of participatory monitoring, it stated it should be an external force, such as a local or international NGO who should take on this role.

Lessons Learnt

- The importance of the right message at the right time. Oxfam started this programme at a time when the government wanted to address poverty and the when the national social aid system was being reformed.
- Working with strategic partners
- AYEG economic background meant that they knew how to conduct household surveys, what sampling was needed and how to interpret results. They had also been involved in the budget monitoring work, part of Oxfam's governance work from the beginning.

- Strategic engagement with the government and building on a governance programme. Oxfam and AYEG worked collaboratively with the government. This established a good relationship which was essential in the adoption and application of new targeting procedures.
- The centrality of a good national data base/census to effectively target beneficiaries. Oxfam and AYEG have contributed to this significantly.
- The need for on-going monitoring work. It is critical to maintain regular monitoring of the SSA's targeting changes, to ensure that targeting remains relevant to addressing poverty. Consistent follow-up in advocacy and lobbying is essential in Georgia's fast changing policy environment.

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Acronyms

| | |
|------|--------------------------------------------|
| AYEG | Association of Young Economists of Georgia |
| EU | European Union |
| IDPs | Internally Displaced Persons |
| NGO | Non-governmental Organisation |
| SSA | Social Services Agency |
| SSAP | State Social Assistance Programme |

Endnotes

1. Association of Young Economists of Georgia 'Project Report May 2007 – April 2008', p 35
2. (IDSMT Bulletin, February 2008, Oxfam GB).
3. People in transitory poverty refers to those that are on the poverty borderline, slipping in and out of poverty as external conditions worsen (see Chronic Poverty Report, 2004-2005 <http://www.chronicpoverty.org/publications/details/the-chronic-poverty-report-2004-2005>)
4. This is where eligibility for programme enrolment and benefits depends on a households or an individual's categorical status, such as whether the respondent is an internally displaced person (IDP), elderly, chronically ill, living with HIV/AIDS, a female headed or child headed household and so forth.
5. AYEG and Oxfam, 'Participatory Monitoring', 2007



As a result of national conflict, resettlement programmes relocated approximately 300,000 people from their homes. Thanks to this programme, the extension of state social assistance has been the lifeline for an additional 34,000 households in Georgia. Photo: JustinJin/Panos Pictures



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