



Fund "Sukhumi"

EMERGENCY REPORT

**Abrupt cancellation of the tuition
grant for students living in the ABL
areas threaten access
of conflict-affected
young people to higher education**

05.07.2021



FUND "SUKHUMI"

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

Cultural–Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" is an IDP women`s NGO that has been actively working since 1997 to eliminate gender-based violence, promote gender equality, the political empowerment of women and their effective participation in peace building. Through the community groups set up along the dividing line, Fund "Sukhumi" monitors the needs of IDPs and other conflict-affected communities, including women and young people focusing on human security in the gender dimension. All findings identified by the Fund "Sukhumi" are used as evidence-based information to advocate the interests of conflict-affected and IDP women and their families in local, national and international fora.

In 2020-2021, abrupt refusal to fund higher education tuition fee for students from Tsalenjikha and Zugdidi municipalities, living in villages along the conflict dividing line caused numerous socio-economic problems for them and their families.¹

According to the information obtained through a rapid assessment by Fund "Sukhumi"², in 2020-2021 academic year, the following number of students living along the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) with Abkhazia in **Tsalenjikha and Zugdidi municipalities** were not funded within the program of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia - "Tuition Funding of Affected Students Living in the Villages Adjacent to the Dividing Line"³:

- **Tsalenjikha Municipality:** 8 students from Pakhulani; 7 students from Lia; 2 students from Tskoushi (one of them from village Saberio - occupied territory) and 5 from village Chaleshi. In total, approximately 22 students enrolled in higher education institutions were not funded. In 2021, there are about 26 entrants who want to continue their studies in higher education institutions. However, the issue of funding is still unresolved.⁴
- **Zugdidi municipality:** 4 students out of 5 from village Koki (2 of them took a gap year due to inability to pay tuition fees); none of the 7 students from village Shamgona (three of them hit the so-called free faculty fully funded by the state); 12 students out of 13 from village Orsantia; none of 9 students from village Ganmukhuri; none of 4 students from village Tkaia; 10 students out of 14 from village Akhalabastumani⁵ A total of 46 students were left without a student tuition grant.

1 The Order 2021 of the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia on approval of the program "Tuition Funding of Affected Students Living in the Villages Adjacent to the Dividing Line in 2020-2021", 19.02.21, #MES 6210000138493; Annex to the order – Program - "Tuition Funding of Affected Students living in the Villages Adjacent to the Dividing Line" (Program Code 32 04 02 03)

2 Pakhulani, Tskoushi, Lia, Koki, Shamgona, Akhalabastumani, and Orsantis students and their parents, as well as public school teachers were interviewed through individual interview method. (16.06.21-18.06.21)

3 The Program - "Tuition Funding of Affected Students living in the Villages Adjacent to the Dividing Line" (Program Code 32 04 02 03)

4 The statistics in the report do not reflect the number of students/entrants living in village Muzhava.

5 According to the information available to Fund "Sukhumi", only the students of village Rike, Khurcha, and Rukhi have been funded.

Providing students with higher education tuition fee is especially relevant during the upcoming national exams, which require an urgent response.

Population, which confronted numerous socio-economic challenges, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, need additional help and support. Refusal to provide tuition grants to students living along the ABL have put them and their families in dire financial condition and **significantly hampered conflict-affected youth`s access to higher education.**

The cancellation of student tuition grants raised suspicions among the population that their villages had been stripped of an “ABL status”. However, according to the official information, the issue of revoking the status has not been raised for any of the villages so far. Accordingly, all villages that previously have had ABL status maintained it.⁶ However, it is still unknown to the population why and on what grounds the students from the ABL villages previously funded by the government-funded student tuition grant were denied this funding during the 2020-2021 academic year.

This decision has caused the following problems for students and their families:

- Due to the inability to pay the tuition fee, part of the enrolled students faced **the risk of dropping out of university.** Some of them had **to take a gap year;**
- Some students` families had **to take out a loan,** which became a severe financial challenge for them;
- **Motivation of students to enrol in higher education institutions has decreased,** since in case they could not get budgetary support, tuition fee, along with additional fees for accommodation rent, food and transport, are a rather heavy and unbearable economic burden for their families;
- The need to find additional resources to cover tuition fees has increased **the labor migration of women abroad and within the country,** leading to family split-ups.

⁶ Letter from the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia, 29.06.21: “In October 4, 2013, by the decree #257 of the Government of Georgia, a temporary governmental commission to respond the needs of the affected population in the villages adjacent to the dividing line has been established. The commission is responsible for inter-agency coordination. The issue of revocation of ABL status of the villages adjacent to the dividing line was raised in none of the sessions of above mentioned commission. Consequently, the commission has not revoked the status of any of the ABL villages”.

KEY FINDINGS IDENTIFIED IN TSALENJIKHA MUNICIPALITY

Refusal for student tuition grants has affected those students living in village Tskoushi⁷. They were denied funding for the reason that they submitted diplomas from the neighboring Pakhulani and Lia villages, located a bit further from the ABL. The decision did not take into consideration that there is only 9th-grade schools in Tskoushi, which leaves students from Tskoushi no option but to continue their studies and graduate from Pakhulani or Lia schools. This decision contradicts the requirement of Article 5, Paragraph 3 of the Program "Tuition Funding of Affected Students Living in the Villages Adjacent to the Dividing Line", which states that - *"Students enrolling in this program for the first time in the 2020-2021 academic year will receive funding if they have studied at schools of the villages adjacent to the dividing line for the last three years or at schools of the villages closest to the villages adjacent to the dividing line due to absence of appropriate education institutions"*.⁸ Consequently, there were no grounds for refusing to fund tuition for students living in the village of Tskoushi.

The example of Muzhava and Chale villages has revealed a rather bizarre practice of funding students with student grants. While making funding decisions, state agencies were guided by students` residence in the specific districts of the villages. For example, in village Muzhava, only students living in certain neighborhoods (Nashangu and Olori) were granted tuition fee, while students living in other neighborhoods of the same

⁷ Village Tskoushi, located closed to so-called Saberio-Pakhulani checkpoint.

⁸ Program of the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia of 2020-2021 "Tuition Funding of Affected Students Living in the Villages Adjacent to the Dividing Line" (Program Code 32 04 02 03)

village were not. In village Chale, only students living in the Etserkedi neighborhood were eligible for funding. Authorities did not explain to the population which specific legal document was the basis of such a decision when the students living in the same village located next to the ABL were funded according to the affiliation to their neighborhoods.

Refusing to provide students with grants significantly affects students' motivation to enter higher education institutions. Considering many factors, they know in advance that in case they do not receive 100% budgetary support, any additional amount will be a heavy financial burden for them and their families. All this not only lowers the young people's motivation to continue their studies at the universities but also **hampers the creation of more educated human capital in the villages, which in the long run reduces the prospects of development of villages adjacent to the ABL -**

"My son wants to continue his studies, but we do not have any guarantee that he will get a full-funded grant ... We have no opportunity to help ... Probably he will not even try to enter the university. We can not support him financially in another city, nothing to say about tuition fees." (Parent, Pakhulani)

"It would be a great relief for me to receive a grant. Maybe my daughter will not be able to get full budgetary support after the exams.... A student needs a lot besides the tuition fees. My daughter says that she will work, but it takes a lot of time for a student to study, and that can affect the quality of her education" (Parent, Tskoushi).

Students who were enrolled in higher education institutions and at the beginning could find ways to cover their first-semester tuition fees, after cancellation of the students' grant have been **exposed to the risk of dropping out from the universities.**

"I had a problem at the university ... I was looking forward to funding in vain. We could hardly pay the fee for the first semester ... Now I do not know how to pay the rest. The whole family appeared to be in a difficult situation because my parents can not support me financially "(Student, Pakhulani)

"My son probably would not have been able to start his studies if Prime Minister's program had not funded the first semester ... We have not paid for the second semester yet. The university has postponed paying the fee until the exams are over... We do not know how to help ... We will have to sell hazelnuts in advance, but we do not know what the harvest will be like ... The hazelnut harvest has been decreasing in recent years. My son works at night in the market to earn money for transport and food It all affects the attendance of students. Does anyone think about it? We often see neglected children ... My child can't even imagine that she can drop out of the university ... but there is a big risk of it."(Parent, Pakhulani)

The refusal to pay tuition fees for young people has significantly contributed to **the increase in labor migration and the split-up of families** in the villages along the ABL. According to the population, **the labor migration of women** from their villages abroad or within the country has visibly increased, which is primarily related to the need to mobilize additional funds for their children's education.

"Too many women have gone abroad in recent years. Fathers raise children. Mothers support and pay for children's education. Those who cannot go abroad, go to big cities or other regions" (Teacher, Tskoushi).

"I do not see any other way out. I have to go somewhere, but I think about how to leave three children in the family... My boy is already in the eleventh grade, and funding would be a great hope and relief for us ... (Parent, Lia)

KEY FINDINGS IDENTIFIED IN THE VILLAGES OF ZUGDIDI MUNICIPALITY ADJACENT TO THE ABL

The population living in Zugdidi municipality villages located along the dividing line pointed out that they do not understand **why the students from ABL villages who used to be funded in previous years were abruptly denied funding**. It is also unknown why the students only from three villages - Rukhi, Rike and Khurcha – out of nine located in the ABL⁹ were provided student grants for 2020-2021 academic year.

The parents of underfunded students noted that one of the declared reasons for refusal was **the low scores in entrance exams**. They [parents] find it unfair and unjust, especially in the conditions of a pandemic when students have restricted access to quality education due to the internet problem, lack of appropriate technical equipment and complicated distance-learning process in villages in general.

"My daughter graduated from Zugdidi municipality village Akhalabastumani public school in 2020 and was enrolled at Ilia State University the same year. The village Akhalabastumani is a village adjacent to the ABL. Due to this status, its graduate students were fully funded (by 2250 GEL) in BA and MA programs. Therefore, we also expected to be funded. As in previous years, the student paid the fee before the first semester of the first academic year according to the contract's schedule, expecting that state will transfer the money to university and reimburse the costs to the students' families in late December. As usual, we had paid 1125 GEL, which we expected to

⁹ Villages of Zugdidi Municipality adjacent to dividing line line: Orsantia, Ganmukhuri, Shamgona, Akhalabastumani, Rukhi, Khurcha, Rike, Tkaia and Koki

be returned on December 25-28. Unfortunately, on December 21, we received a message from the Ministry of Education stating that my daughter will not be funded due to low scores received in entrance exams. A similar message was received by 13 of her classmates. It has become a heavy burden and problem for my daughter and my family budget during the pandemic."(Student parent, Akhalabastumani)

"Pupils from the ABL villages should not be selected according to unpredicted criteria. They have been funded for years, and this year, when children had the hardest time getting an education and needed more support, they were abandoned. They caused a new concern to families and children" - (Teacher, Orsantia)

Parents also stressed that **it is unfair to take such a decision abruptly without informing the population in advance**. The students` parents noted that **families hoping for funding had to take out loans** in anticipation of a refund by the end of the first term. Refusal to fund has become a heavy financial burden for them -

"Accepting this reality turned out to be very difficult for my family economically and psychologically. I am a mother of three children, and only I have to take care of my children's needs. To pay the tuition, I had to take out a loan and pay the fee, hoping to get my money back in December. When you know from the beginning that education depends only on your budget, you calculate your resources and opportunities differently. Now, the refusal to provide grant turned out to be devastating for my family budget, which was reduced 10 times during the pandemic."(Parent, Akhalabastumani).

Residents of Zugdidi Municipality villages of the dividing line also emphasized on the increase in labor migration abroad, especially by women -

"A mother of two young children had to go to Italy to pay the tuition fee for her student child. There is a crisis throughout the world today, and it is difficult for her to provide her son's tuition and cover living expenses (rent, food) in the city ... She could not afford to earned so much and her student son had to take a gap year... who knows what awaits him tomorrow "... (Teacher, Koki)

Due to the difficulty of paying the tuition fee, **the students had to take a gap year**, since providing living in the big cities for their children (pay rent, cover food and transportation expenses) is a challenge for families -

"During the pandemic, every student living near the dividing line should have more benefits and should not think about reducing the support program ... There are families who had to take a gap year because they could not afford paying tuition fee ... How could these problems have been ignored?!" - (Teacher, Shamgona)

The abrupt cancellation of the tuition grants for students living near the ABL has contributed to the dire socio-economic conditions, exacerbating their difficult living circumstances. In order to mitigate the challenges, encountered by the conflict affected population the following steps should be undertaken:

- ✓ Examine the negative consequences of the revocation of the ABL status from the villages located along the ABL and assess the impact of cancellation of the student's grants on the life of the students and their families. The appropriateness and validity of the decision should be also thoroughly assessed;
- ✓ Ensure immediate resumption of the student tuition grants for students living along the dividing line of Zugdidi and Tsalenjikha municipalities, including students living in the villages of Tskhoushi, Paluri and Saberio;
- ✓ Properly inform the population on what grounds the tuition grant was cancelled.



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