



DASHED HOPES OF THE FIRE-AFFECTED POPULATION IN THE GALI DISTRICT: NEEDS AND RESPONSE STRATEGIES

RAPID ASSESSMENT REPORT



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INTRODUCTION

The closure of the “check-points” between Georgia proper and Abkhazia as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, cut off access to all basic and vital services to the people of Gali district, leaving them neglected and indefinitely locked up as hostages of the situation. The population, which has been without attention and effective support since February 2020, faces numerous challenges and serious risks to their human security.¹ **On January 4, 2021, wildfires in nine villages² in Gali district further aggravated the lives of people who were already in dire straits, leaving them virtually without essential livelihoods.** Two months after the disaster, the fire-affected people feel forgotten, abandoned and neglected.

According to the de facto authorities in Sukhumi, the fire covered an area of about 600 hectares in Gali district and burnt forests and fields surrounding the villages.³

According to the affected population, 300-350 families have been affected by the fire, several of them have their houses burnt down, acres of hazelnuts, maize fields, fences, orchards, vegetables, cattle sheds, cattle feed and ancillary facilities destroyed.

Due to limited access to uncontrolled territory by the Georgian authorities, **it is impossible to officially determine the exact number of families affected or the exact amount of damage.** As a result of direct communication with the fire-affected population by the Fund “Sukhumi”, it was established that the **situation of their families was not properly assessed and the amount of damage was not investigated either by the de-facto government** or, if it was done, only in a fragmentary manner, in specific villages and individual families.

All the information about the number of hazelnuts burnt and the damage to the families has been collected so far only on the initiative of community leaders living in Gali district. The lists have been actively disseminat-

1 “The Gender Dimension of The COVID-19 Crisis: Assessing The Efficiency Of Pandemic Response”, Monitoring report of the Fund “Sukhumi”, December, 2020, page 22, available at <http://www.fsokhumi.ge/index.php/en/publications/peace-and-security/item/4038-the-gender-dimension-of-the-covid-19-crisis-assessing-the-efficiency-of-pandemic-response>

2 Villages: Zemo and Kvemo Barghebi, Sopchai, Khumushkuri, Sida, Nabakevi, Tagiloni, Otobaia, Rephi.

3 “Fires in Gali district affect 9 villages”, January 5th, 2021, Source © APSNYPRESS (АПЧЫПРЕСС), available in Russian at <https://www.apsnypress.info/ru/item/1987-pozhary-v-galskom-rajone-zatronuli-devyat-sel>

ed through the social media and sent in the form of letters from civil activists⁴ to the relevant Georgian government agencies.

According to the information available, the people of Gali still do not know ***when and what the Georgian Government intends to do to help its own citizens affected by the fire***. According to them, there has been no direct communication with them by officials and no investigation into the priority needs and challenges they face as a result of the fire.

In February 2021, a rapid-assessment has been conducted by the Fund “Sukhumi” to study the negative impact of the fire and the urgent needs of the affected population, and to draw the attention of relevant Georgian government authorities, including delegates of the Geneva International Discussions and international organizations. The survey was conducted by telephone and online, individual or group interviews with community leaders and ordinary people in fire-affected villages (Zemo and Kvemo Barghebi, Khumushkuri and Nabakevi). Eleven people were interviewed, including 9 women and two men. To better explore the impact of fires on different populations, the survey included different age groups, including young and middle-aged people, retirees, students, parents of young children, and people with disabilities. Due to limited access to Gali District, only a small number of fire-affected populations were surveyed, however the data collected still allow for generalization.

This document provides a list of generalized and integrated problems and needs identified as a result of the study, as well as specific recommendations that are important to reduce the negative impacts of fire on the population of Gali District and to develop appropriate emergency response strategies to provide adequate and appropriate assistance.

4 From the private facebook account of civil activist – Tea Qardava: The list of fire-affected population in Gali district disseminated through the social media:

<https://www.facebook.com/tea.qardava.399/posts/2865881437022875>.

<https://www.facebook.com/tea.qardava.399/posts/2865830187028000>:

Zemo Barghebi: <https://www.facebook.com/tea.qardava.399/posts/2867484603529225>;

Khumushkuri: <https://www.facebook.com/tea.qardava.399/posts/2865881437022875>.

<https://www.facebook.com/tea.qardava.399/posts/2867480030196349>;

Kvemo Barghebi, Sophchai; <https://www.facebook.com/tea.qardava.399/posts/2867107920233560>;

Nabakevi <https://www.facebook.com/tea.qardava.399/posts/2866544186956600>;

KEY FINDINGS

1. Damage caused by wildfire and its impact on human security of the population.

The wildfires that broke out in nine villages in Gali district have further complicated the already dire situation of the isolated and virtually neglected population, as a result of closure of the “check-points” due to the Covid-19 restrictions. This has left them without a major source of livelihood. The respondents told the representatives of the Fund “Sukhumi” that the devastating impact of the fire affected practically every family living in the fire-affected villages, and that **the colossal loss will have a much more painful impact on the population in the long-run.**

1.1. Economic and food security

According to the information provided, most of the families have had their fences destroyed by fire, thousands of hazelnut groves, corn fields, bamboo plantations, orchards, vegetables, cattle feed and stables and outbuildings, which left them without a livelihood and confronted with many challenges and difficulties.

The damage caused by the **destruction of the hazelnuts** posed a particular threat to the **economic security** of the population. And, to make matters worse, the restoration of the burnt hazelnuts takes quite a long time, which in the future posed a long-term challenge and problem for the population, which was left without a basic, sometimes even the only, source of income –

“Hazelnuts were our main and only source of income, and most of them were burned. What more can I say, I had a total of 800 hazelnut trees and 500 of them have been burned, completely destroyed. This is a great loss for my family” (woman, retired, Nabakevi).

“Our hazelnuts are completely burned, which is a great loss to us ... It takes 2-3 years for the hazelnuts to bring in an income, and how can we generate income during that time ... so much work was put into taking care of these hazelnuts and they are gone, the fire took them away in an hour.” (Female, Kvemo Barghebi).

Since the restoration of hazelnuts takes a longer time, part of the affected population is considering **replacing hazelnuts with plants** that will improve their economic situation **in a shorter time** –

“It takes a long time to grow hazelnuts, and during this time people will face a lot of problems ... Some people consider that instead of hazelnuts they should plant blueberry orchards. This is also profitable. For this, people need help. Probably, in case of financial support, people will decide what to do to improve the situation” (woman, Kvemo Barghebi)

A particular concern for the fire-affected population is **the burnt fences**, the **restoration of which is considered urgent**. According to the respondents, the delay in restoring the burnt fences increases the losses caused by the fire day by day, as the people are unable to protect the hazelnut plantations, the vegetables, and the fruits which have survived the unrestrained fire, from the intrusion of **cattle and small livestock** into the farms. In addition, the lack of a fence poses a rather high risk to the physical safety of the people, as their doors are open to the **wild animals** living in the nearby forests.

“Burnt fences are the biggest problem, because the surviving hazelnut plantations are now being destroyed by cattle ... it is impossible to guard them, they come in unhindered and destroy the vegetable garden and fruit trees along with the hazelnuts” (Woman, Zemo Barghebi)

“A fence is urgent. Everything has left open. The pig will come, the cattle will come, and the rest of the hazelnuts and products will be destroyed ... Who knows what will come out of the forest, maybe a jackal or a wolf will come to us ... The children are running around in the yard. If you do not enclose the yard, the yard will be open for everyone and you will be in danger “ (Man, Zemo Barghebi)

In addition to hazelnuts, **bamboo plantations were a good source of income** for some families, causing them to lose not only their income but also the ability to quickly restore burnt fences.

“Our family had a bamboo plantation of one acre ... Besides the hazelnuts, the bamboo plantation was also a good source of income. It was sold at a very good price. If it could survive, there was enough bamboo for the whole village to fence their farms. It lasts long, it is solid and can be used as a stake, it is very good for fencing the yard” (woman, Zemo Barghebi).

The respondents noted with concern that even if they wanted to, **they would have no opportunity to restore the hazelnut plantation, vegetable or corn fields at this stage**, as the most important and **urgent for them is to fence the yards**. Because of the high cost of fences in Abkhazia – they are many times higher than the prices in area beyond Enguri – this is an unrealistic prospect for them without external assistance and support.

Due to quite limited time to plant new hazelnuts and sow corn **it is urgent to restore the fences**. If this is not accomplished in the first month of spring, the prospect of a solution to the problem will be postponed for another year, putting them into a serious food and economic crisis-

“The fire not only destroyed the hazelnuts, but also most of the food, and some families even lost the cattle ... we were left without anything ... We have been restricted for more than a year ... This year the produce we grew in our plots saved us, we were abandoned and alone, and what awaits our children, our families tomorrow? Who will help us? “ (woman, Kvemo Barghebi).

“We must begin again to grow hazelnuts. But our work alone will not suffice ... No one here cares about the work. To grow hazelnuts again, you must first fence the plot, without that there is no point in planting hazelnuts, the cattle will destroy the plants immediately. All this requires money. For the fence you need to buy barbed wire. For this you need a large amount of money ... If it was “in Georgia”, I could buy everything cheaper ... We are still locked up, and here the prices are higher. You have to pay at least four times as much. We don’t have that much money” (woman, Kvemo Barghebi)

Respondents noted that **they are anxiously awaiting the approaching date of payment of land tax**, which they pay to the de facto local government every quarter. According to the information available to them, despite these losses, there are no plans to exempt them from the land tax at least temporarily, until their condition improves, which will make their situation worse and more intolerable against the background of existing losses -

“Soon the time is approaching for the land tax, which we generally always pay... what tax shall we pay now when the hazelnuts are burned ... Acres of land give us no income, and so large a sum, how shall we pay it?! We will have to pay the tax again in March and there will be no exemption for us “ (Woman, Zemo Barghebi).

Talking to the respondents also showed quite **high frustration and despair**. Due to high amount of damage and difficult social-economic situation of the families, **the population started abandoning their homes and the tendency of labor migration abroad appeared-**

“My brother, who has a hazelnut plantation and supports the family, is very disappointed, he thinks that all the work is not worth it. And we don’t even have hope that anyone can help us. My brother may leave everything and leave the village, we are very hopeless ... “ (Woman, Kvemo Barghebi).

“The people had an income mainly from hazelnuts. During the nut season there was much activity in the village. If there is no more income from hazelnuts, many things will change” (woman, Khumushkuri).

“My father has already applied for the employment program in Germany, but he could not appear in the first stream of people. There are many people in the village who have already enrolled in this program ... my mother is forced to move to Tbilisi to find a job.”(young woman, student, Nabakevi)

The inhabitants **look to the future with a great anxiety**, thinking that the financial problems caused by the loss of the source will cause much more threats and challenges to the population.

“Problems will arise. People will need money for some items and we won’t have it. If I have to go to the doctor and I won’t be able to afford it, I won’t be able to give my child an education and that will be the result of this fire. “

“Everyone knows very well what kind of damage we have. The lists are all over the internet and the government has these lists. The government has to figure out how to help us. We have to start from scratch, everything requires money we don’t have. We don’t know what problems we will have tomorrow. This winter will be harder to bear and yet we don’t know all the problems that will occur. Any kind of help is important for us.”

1.2. Health and Social Security

The research revealed that the psycho-emotional and health condition of the population were worsened due to the stress caused by the fire in extremely poor safety conditions. The victims of the fire mentioned **how great the impact of the fire was** on the population, especially **on children, the elderly and on the psycho-emotional state of women**.

“We got a lot of stress and shock during the fire, we will probably need a lot of time to get out of the situation ... I still can’t forget the bitterness of facing death ... Thank God we survived, but it will have serious effects on our health ... We have elderly people with blood pressure, men with heart problems, women with cancer. When you don’t have financial resources anymore, how can you take care of your health?” (Woman, Kvemo Bargebi).

During the conversation, numerous respondents mentioned that since the people are facing the food crisis and priority is given to feed the families, their **health are put on the back-burner**, which in a long-run could pose the risk for the health of the fire-affected population-

“When you have a problem feeding your family, health doesn’t become that important unless you have something extremely worrisome... Most of the people from our village are under mental stress, the elders have constant problems with blood pressure, I also need a medical checkup, but who can complain about that when I think about not to starve the family to death ...” (woman, Kvemo Barghebi)

“Everyone tries to avoid going to the doctor because then they can’t buy medicine, and what is the point of all this. Until now, they could not buy medicines and now it will be more difficult for them to purchase medicines. God knows what awaits us. (Woman, Kvemo Bargebi)

One of the biggest problems is **the rigid and indifferent social policy that blindly responds to the high level of vulnerability of the population living in Gali and does not take into account the specificity of their situation**. Respondents mentioned how painful the issue of IDPs, people with disabilities or other **terminated allowance** is for them today.

“We have our income from hazelnuts and from pensions and allowances that have been stopped due to lockdown. I have pensioners in the family, they didn’t get pensions for a year, we didn’t get refugee allowance either. When they started giving pensions for 2 weeks in December, there were not many people in that list ... Maximum 10-15 pensioners from the village could get the money” (female, Kvemo Bargebi).

The population, now dependent as never before on outside help and support, **is trying in vain to restore suspended allowances**. Neither social policy tailored to their needs has been developed and introduced by the Government of Georgia that takes into account the plight of the population with restricted movement almost over a year, nor they have been provided with **the possibility to recover their documentations and restore suspended allowances remotely**.

Extremely alarming is the situation of father of a 14-year-old girl with disability living in Khumushkuri village (Gali district), who is desperate over discontinued disability status and suspended pension of his child, as due to restricted movement from Gali, he hasn't been able to attend a medical examination for the commission with his child in August 2020. Despite numerous appeals for help and petitions to the relevant government agencies, the issue of restoring his daughter's pension has not been resolved to date -

“My youngest daughter Mariam has health problems. Her diagnosis is inborn cerebral palsy. The child has difficulty moving on her own. She walks in tears and needs help to move. Every two years Mariam goes to the medical commission in Tbilisi. The last commission was in August. Unfortunately, we could not attend the commission to prolong pension. We, as parents, do not have the documents in order [residence permits in Abkhazia], which makes it even more difficult to pass the “checkpoints” from Abkhazia. It is impossible to cross non-official roads, because the child cannot cross this road independently, and it is very difficult to carry her with our bare hands. For this reason we could not attend the medical commission. Accordingly, from August, Mariam’s disability status was stopped and monthly pension of GEL 250 was cut. There is no explanation as to when she will receive the pension, and we have received no response from anyone. We have repeatedly appealed to the Abkhazian government for help, but have received a negative response. It turns out that she cannot get the pension without passing the commission. The child needs special nutrition, care, medication and attention. We also had a great loss during the fire. Every Lari is important for us” (man, Khumushkuri).

Unfortunately, these facts are not a single case that points to **the specific needs of the conflict-affected population in Gali district in the face of indifferent and blind social policies**. It is important to thoroughly review the existing approach and timely develop a different social policy reflective to the specific needs of Gali district people.

1.3. Education Security

The effects of the wildfire could have a rather negative impact **on the prospects and opportunities for students from the Gali district to continue their studies.** It was mentioned that some of the students studying in the private universities in Georgia 'proper' will not be able to pay the rent during the study period because their parents lost the only source of income and it was also the only source of income for them. Therefore, it is important to consider the issue of renting an apartment during the study period, taking into account the conditions of the students who were affected by the fire -

“My family does not have the money to pay the apartment rent because our income was taken away by the fire. The apartment rent was paid from the hazelnut income. If I can't pay the rent for the apartment, the possibility for me to study is in question. Besides, this is not a one-year story, we lost at least three years of income that my family had already planned for. We may not notice everything today, but more problems will arise in the future. Helping in renting the apartment for students from Gali will be a very good help from the government. There are many students like me” (young girl, student, Nabakevi).

The negative impact of income loss on **children's participation in the educational process** was also noted by parents of school-age children who stated that many families will be unable to send their children to school. Mainly because of the inability to buy clothes and books.

“The children were taken to school by their parents in September. The parents sold some hazelnuts, collected some, and bought clothes for the children. Then the classes were moved to distant classes because of the pandemic. The children have grown up and these clothes no longer fit the children. They can wear them at home, but when school opens, the children won't have clothes and no shoes ... Even if you try to save some money, you can't just buy clothes and books. There is a market in Gali, but it is very expensive and no one can afford anything”

2. Strategies to address the existing problems – Recommendations

The survey conducted by the Fund “Sukhumi” clearly identified the priority needs of the fire-affected population that require urgent attention and proactive measures. In order to reduce the damage caused to the population by the fire and provide timely assistance, it is important to take the following actions:

- **Relevant Georgian Government Authorities, by the assistance of International Organizations working in Abkhazia** to explore the losses and assess the needs of the fire-affected population in a timely manner through direct involvement of the fire-affected population, informed civil society organizations and other stakeholders in consultations in order to develop an appropriate emergency support programs;
- **The relevant agencies of the Government of Georgia**, in particular **the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs**, considering the vulnerability and specific situation of the Gali district population should ensure immediate restoration of all suspended allowances and social assistance. Taking into account the restricted movement of the population, these agencies should develop and provide mechanisms and opportunities for the Gali district population to recover expired documentations and **restore discontinued social benefits and allowances remotely**;
- **Relevant agencies of the de jure authorities of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia**, including the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of Abkhazia, Ministry of Education and Culture and relevant regional departments, should take **proactive measures to protect the interests of the vulnerable population of Gali District**. Increase lobbying of the central government on behalf of the fire-affected population to address urgent needs and problems and develop programs tailored to their needs, including immediate restoration of all discontinued and suspended social assistance and providing assistance to the students from affected families to rent apartments in their places of study.
- In addition, actively participate in the process of developing and adopting a **policy to grant Gali District population a special status** and making existing blind **social policy reflective to their specific needs and priorities**;
- **Relevant agencies of the Georgian Government**, to develop and offer all students from Gali district, irrespective whether they study in the state or private universities, a financial allowance for apartment rent during the 2021-2023 academic years.

- **The Georgian authorities, including delegates to the Geneva International Discussion**, representatives of the International Organizations, the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) participants by using the hotline to consult and negotiate directly with the de-facto authorities in Sukhumi, the possibility to provide humanitarian assistance to the fire-affected population in Gali District, including providing financial assistance, relief goods, supplies for burnt fences and farms, scheduling health visits by the mobile medical teams and providing medicines and food; Negotiations should also be held with the de-facto Abkhazian authorities on the timely exemption of the families affected by the fire from the land tax;
- **International organizations accredited in Georgia and also working in Abkhazia**, including UNHCR, UNDP, UN WHO, UN FAO, UN Women, UNICEF and others to offer rapid response to the acute impact of the wildfires on the population and announce emergency assistance grants for the following priority directions: assessment of the loss and gender-specific needs of the fire-affected population and development an appropriate support strategies; actions to support the restoration of fences and burnt farms; initiatives to support small and medium enterprises to improve the economic situation of the fire-affected population; promotion of psychological rehabilitation programs for the fire-affected population, including children, women and the elderly, organization of field trips for mobile medical groups to examine the health status of the fire-affected population.



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