Picking up the pieces

Two wars in 20 years between South Ossetia and Georgia have created a society in a state of flux with a flow of internally displaced people and returnees in the region. Dina Alborova, director of the Agency for Social, Economic and Cultural Development, talks about the difficult job of bridging the gap between ethnic Georgians and Ossetians and building peace in the region.

Denis Sinyakov / Reuters

Dina Alborova graduated in history from Belarusian State University. She began teaching political science at South Ossetian State University in 1993. In 1996, Dina was appointed project manager at the Norwegian Refugee Council, and in 1998 she became manager of a sustainability programme in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone for the International Rescue Committee. Dina has been director of the Agency for Social, Economic and Cultural Development since 1999, and teaches politics and conflict studies at South Ossetian State University.
Interview by **Anna Matveeva**

How did you get involved in peace work?
I have been working in the field of conflict resolution for the last 17 years. My own life as an individual and my peace-building work are so interconnected that it has become a major part of my identity. I got engaged in the peace process in South Ossetia as a young lecturer in political science. Then my work at the Norwegian Refugee Council plunged me straight into the plight of internally displaced persons, mostly ethnic Georgians who had fled South Ossetia during the 1991war, and whose return we sought to facilitate.

A legacy of violence and distrust made it very difficult for people to re-integrate. I felt I had to confront this issue. I learned new negotiation and conflict resolution skills, making me more prepared to reach out to the other side. In 1999, I founded the Agency for Social, Economic and Cultural Development, an NGO in Tskhinvali engaged in peace building and social development. My colleagues and I continue to operate despite discouraging conditions following the 2008 war.

Are there knowledge gaps that challenge your work?
Society paid a huge price for the wars and their aftermath, and there is no real, in-depth data on social problems. We know that security was foremost in people's minds initially, but now they have other concerns as well. Recipients of our agency's assistance – vulnerable groups, returnees and internally displaced persons among them – articulate a host of human needs, such as social problems, unemployment and low local salaries. All these issues remain vastly under-researched.

The area along the *de facto* border between Georgian and Ossetian territory is difficult. It is essential to monitor and analyse the dynamics of change there. Initially, the area was thought to be unsafe, so people started leaving and took their children with them. Schools began to close down.

Now security has improved, so people are returning. They have little choice but to work in agriculture again though. Many have already lost their skills and attachment to the land, so it is difficult for them to get back into a routine. To make matters worse, there is no agricultural credit to speak of, and poor road infrastructure makes it difficult to access markets.

The EU Monitoring Mission closely monitors the situation on the Georgian side. However, the mission does not have

access to the Ossetian side. Even if they were to go there, the distrust runs so deep that I doubt local communities would be willing to tell them anything of substance. It would take a more impartial body to undertake such sensitive field research.

We have our own findings about the intricacies of reconciliation, which would be interesting to compare with situations elsewhere. For instance, we believed people from mixed marriages would be a good peace-building resource for our activities. The opposite was true: under pressure from both sides, this group proved extremely cautious. The same goes for mixed Georgian-Ossetian villages, where mutual fear was greater than in areas composed of single ethnic groups.

What can the 2008 war experience teach us about peace building?

The war bitterly disappointed many South Ossetians involved in the peace process. Nevertheless, relations with our Georgian partners withstood the militarist hysteria, and people behaved decently across the conflict divide. In this sense, it was worth pursuing peace at the time. Perhaps the war was inevitable, as there were major interests at stake, fuelled by geopolitical rivalry. Local civil society did not have the power to resolve the situation, but it still has to pick up the pieces from the fall-out.

Much research went into analysing the conflict itself, but little was dedicated to the analysis of civil society's efforts to resolve it. Looking back now, there were three stages. There were many joint Georgian-Ossetian projects and peace initiatives from the 1991 war to the Rose Revolution in 2003. Interaction between communities was gradually getting back to normal. There was a vast black wholesale goods market, in which traders from both sides cooperated profitably. However, this created an illusion of resolution. In reality, there was a peace-making 'business' at work, and not a genuine resolution of the conflict.

Things have worsened since the new leadership came to power in Tbilisi in 2004, with more hostile incidents and road closures. Relations between ethnic communities in South Ossetia have also deteriorated. This new situation demanded our attention, so we shifted our focus to bridging the gulf between different groups in South Ossetia. What we now have is the third, post-war stage, in which society is still severely traumatized.

Has 'gender and conflict' played a role in your peace-building initiatives?

In South Ossetia, peace-building and civil society projects generally attract women, whereas politics is almost always in the hands of men. I wonder why, whether this is a conscious choice made by women, or whether their political participation is impeded by invisible barriers.

Too often, 'gender and conflict' implies women-related problems. However, women have proven to be quite resilient under the circumstances. They seem to draw energy from their survival instinct and sense of family. Many men, meanwhile, have experienced psychological traumas and feel lost. Health records and life expectancy data confirm this. Researchers in the Caucasus region have conducted studies on women's issues, but they have neglected to focus on how conflict affects men.

Are there taboo subjects which are too 'political' for researchers to touch?

Absolutely. Local society is keen to find out why international organizations did not intervene in 2008. There were many early warning signals that the situation was spiralling out of control. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the UN and other agencies had a presence in the region. The European Union had appointed a Special Representative for the South Caucasus in 2006. However, this international infrastructure proved ineffective. When I am asked by my constituents, who know that I work with international partners, why they failed to protect them, I don't know what to say.

The presence of the international community in South Ossetia enabled us to establish a local civil society and gain access to global solidarity networks. But it overlooked the danger of a new war. An honest analysis of the roles played by international organizations would help to clear the air and reveal what we as practitioners can realistically expect from such mechanisms. Perhaps multilateral bodies are too constrained to be effective when real power is at stake. Perhaps it all depends on the key personalities involved. But these questions need to be asked, even if they ruffle feathers. ■

See www.thebrokeronline.eu for a longer version of this article, including a brief history of conflict in Ossetia.