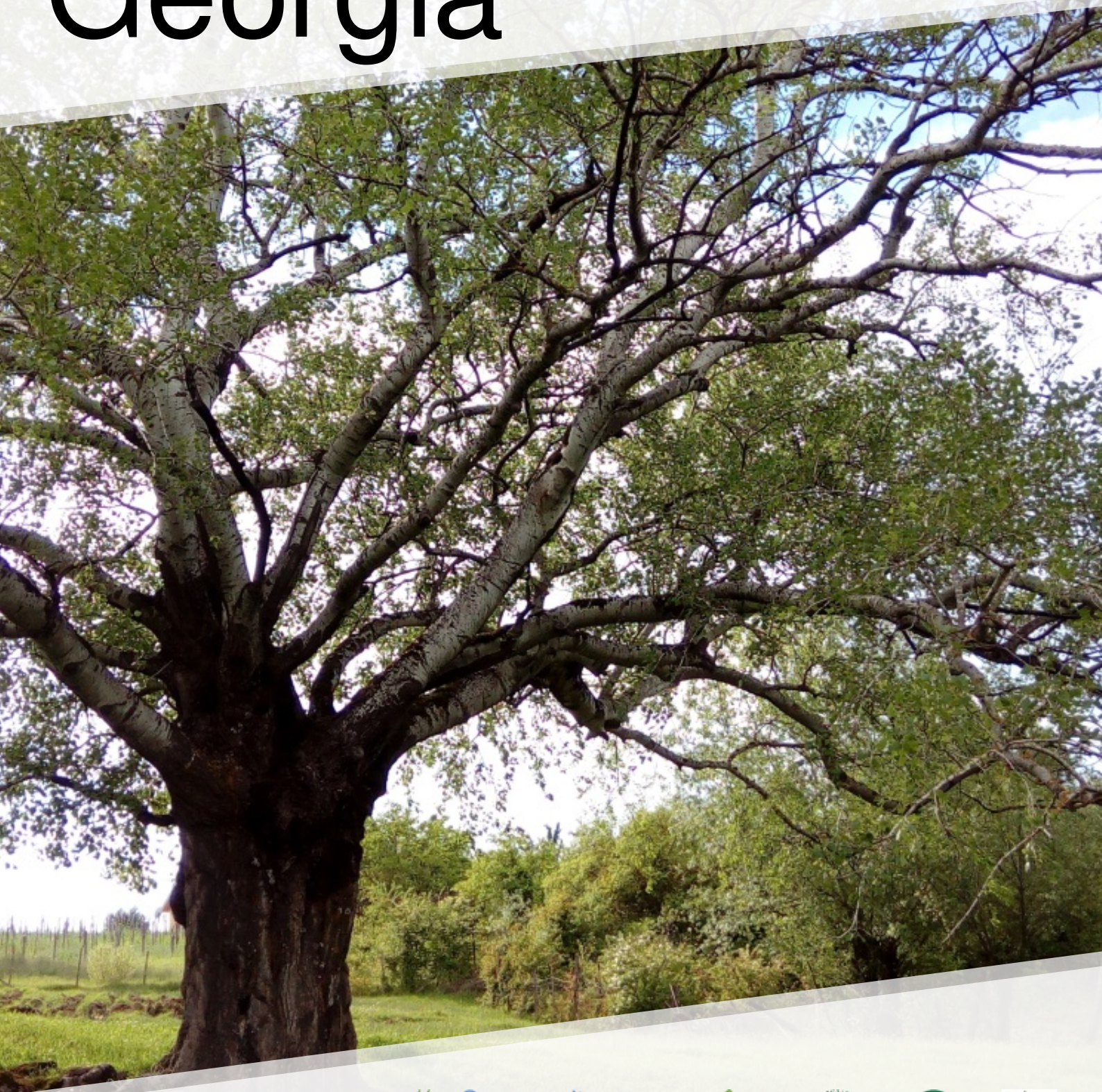


Report of the Community Conservation Resilience Initiative in Georgia



Country report on Georgia Community Conservation Resilience Initiative (CCRI) June 2018

Author: Katie Kiria

Assessment facilitation: The Greens Movement of Georgia/Friends of the Earth Georgia

For more information: <http://globalforestcoalition.org/resources/supporting-community-conservation/>

Cover photo: The Shamanadze family tree has been protected by locals for centuries, Merjevi community, Ilia Kunchulia/GFC

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Community Conservation Resilience Initiative (CCRI)

SUMMARY REPORT

By

**The Greens Movement of Georgia / Friends of the Earth
Georgia**



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Tbilisi, Georgia

**TARGET COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL ACTIVITIES IN THE
FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT**



1. SHORT SUMMARY

In 2016 implementation of the project - Community Conservation Resilience Initiative (CCRI) has started in Georgia by NGO coalition – the Greens Movement of Georgia/FoE Georgia and “Zelkova” targeting three local communities in East and West Georgia – Sakorintlo and Okami villages of Kaspi Municipality (East Georgia) and Merjevi village in Sachkhere Municipality (West Georgia).



The project aims at empowering and strengthening local communities to foster environmental protection and increases their role in local decision making as well as to increase their capacities in a way so they can identify their local problems, barriers, and elaborate realistic solutions to ensure sustainability. The project also aims at increasing of environmental governance and local demand through awareness raising and capacity building. The project itself has a bottom up approach and is driven by local communities and their initiative groups.

At the beginning of the project, project group has elaborated community selection criteria considering different environmental, social and other dimensions to ensure that participation of communities with different perspectives and backgrounds is ensured. The following methodology helped project group to reasonably choose focus groups and select target communities. For Georgia, as a small country with diverse climate conditions and relatively various natural and cultural heritages, selection process is an important step in planning and implementation of relevant campaigns and programs.

It is evident that insufficient state involvement is one of the main causes of caused problems in the region. Local Municipalities lack of relevant experiences and environmental governance is something rather new and unclear for many of local decision-makers. For them it is quite hard to make this links between environmental governance and its benefits for the service of improved social-economical patterns. Authorities lack of local initiatives and prefer not to become a novelty-bringing actors but only executive authorities. This attitude disturbs development processes and negatively impacts on many social and economic aspects of local livelihoods. It also disturbs the work of local civil society organizations in support of many local development projects. But it is clear that there is a high demand on local level for such support to build this communication and most of the times, local and regional authorities are welcoming new ideas and proposals in support of their communities.

2. Description of target communities

The project target communities are located in East and West part of Georgia - Imereti and Shida Kartli regions.

Sakorinto Community



Villages Sakorintlo (*population of Sakorintlo – 114 inhabitants according to 2014 demographical description*) is located near the conflict zone, villages has been divided into two parts after 2008 Russian-Georgia war which caused significant damage to local population. Village suffers from the absence of the basic infrastructure, such as absence of the roads, drinking and irrigation water supply system, sewage system, natural gas. There are no economic activities going on in the villages population is mostly self-employed and basic income of local families is family farms and agricultural activities. A cattle breeding is most developed in the region, almost every family owns

cattle which provides food and some income to families. Communities also grow some vegetables fruits and crops, but mostly for local use. Vine production is also developed in the region, although farmers face serious problems regarding maintenance of their vineyards. Village Sakorintlo is one of the most unsafe places to live; there are frequent cases of kidnapping people from their own gardens.

Local Farmers lack of sufficient knowledge on market value production and here is spread monocultures based on market demand which is never reliable and farmers are bankrupting frequently. State Authorities lack of capacities to provide support to local farmers and help them in production and/or realization of local products as Georgian market is monopolized by foreign companies that are importing low quality, cheap products. Another important problem is lack of sufficient agricultural lands, each family owns about 0.25 – 1.5 ha that is only enough for family own consumption, but for making market-value production local farmers need advanced knowledge and remarkable agricultural skills. There are no ongoing state and/or any other programs to solve problems of village Sakorintlo. Governmental Authorities claim that they lack of sufficient sources and seeking for international support.

Main biodiversity threats are uncontrolled and unsustainable consumption of local natural resources, such as firewood and timber extraction, gathering of non-timber forest resources and/or medical herbs, pollution of rivers, lakes, underground waters and ground with different kind of pollutant, uncontrolled and unsustainable grazing and related natural degradation processes. These are only part of the problems that occur in the region and need urgent actions to stop natural degradation processes and relatively help local communities to change their dependence to their natural surrounding and to adapt to new environmentally friendly solutions to improve their livelihoods and reduce negative impacts on the environment.

Activities undertaken in the framework of the project

At the beginning of the project, project group carried out preliminary baseline study of the village Sakorinto, in order to elaborate detailed activity plan and select suitable methodology. Target community is very vulnerable, as it has been affected by numerous political and economical pressure in different times. Social conditions are extremely poor, that results in strong environmental impacts and uncontrolled and illegal use of natural resources.

Natural ecosystems around the community are strongly affected, by both local population and due to military interventions. It has to be mentioned, that **local communities have never been involved in any environmental initiative, and relatively, their environmental knowledge is very poor.**



In this particular case, the goal of the project team was to start with environmental awareness rising activities. There has been organized several meetings with local population on different environmental issues. The main messages of the meetings were, how environmental destruction results in social and economical collapse, and how it also affects overall health issues. Project experts were trying to show the clear links between environmental destruction and possible social, economical and health threats.

It has to be mentioned, that at the beginning it was very difficult to build the bridge between people and project team and to raise their interest towards the topic, as social issues seemed to be more important for local people.



Meetings were organized following the well-tested PLA methodology (Participatory Rural Appraisal) aiming at mutual participation and participatory approach. Local communities were actively taking part in conversations, asking questions, discussing local problems and even finding possible solutions.



The conversation topics were regarding various environmental issues, such as environmental conservation, forest resources and their importance, water and pollution risks, climate change and renewable energy initiatives, etc.

Separate meetings were held with representatives of local municipalities as their support was important for implementation of current project.

Project group, together with local people identified the number of problems as well as possible solutions that need to be addressed adequately. Listed recommendations were formulated as one document and have been delivered to local Authorities for further actions.

Main achievements so far:

- Local communities raised their environmental awareness;
- Local communities have strengthened their abilities to participate at decision making

-"I didn't realized before how important environmental protection is for our lifes. I couldn't think about the links between environmental protection and social development. Our village suffers from various environmental problems were most of them are caused by human. Sometimes you do not realize that you do something terrible, that your future generations will suffer for what you are doing today. This particular project gave helped us to think differently, gave us key to some of our problems and lead us into finding solutions. We now know better about our rights, the responsibilities of our Authorities and we will demand changes for better future. We want our children to know more about our rights to nature and our responsibilities as citizens".- Villager of Sakorinto community.

processes;

- Local initiative groups established to be a mediators and a contact persons between villagers and the local Authorities to translate community problems into relevant document and deliver real local needs to decision making Authorities;



- Local Community Based Organization established to serve local communities to solve various environmental and social problems;
- Local Authorities strengthened and linked more with local communities (concept of bridging those two groups);

Okhami Community

Village Okhami is also located close to conflict zone and the occupied territories (1401 inhabitants according to 2014 demographical description) and shares almost all problems as village Sakorintlo including lack of sufficient infrastructure, absence of irrigation and drinking water supply, absence of sewage system and pollution of ground and water resources. Energy poverty is a serious problem for village Okhami. Local Communities mostly depend on wood resources, electricity and propane-gas, which is accumulated in a special tanks. Gas and wood are expensive resources as well as its transportation is also connected to a certain difficulties and risks as well, and causes also different environmental problems, such as decreasing of forest resources and degradation of water resources. Wood is burnt mostly in very inefficient stoves where often, wet wood is burnt, adding further to inefficient combustion. Apart from increasing the need for more firewood for the same level of heat, this causes indoor pollution responsible for respiratory diseases. Water is also heated on firewood stoves. This means that warm water is only available in small quantities, and comes with an increased work-load. Buildings are poorly insulated and subject to substantial heat losses. Households have high firewood cost and lack access to finance. Transportation of wood from mountainous places is very difficult and risky; there are many fatal cases and accidents during transportation of wood with old cars. Relatively, prices on wood are increasing every year.

Due to absence of irrigation water, local communities suffer from water shortage, their agricultural activities are not sufficient for large scale production, but only to satisfy local needs. Due to very hard social/economical conditions, interest of local communities towards environmental issues is not so high, although everyone agrees that village suffers from degraded ecosystems and lack of forest resources.

Activities undertaken in the framework of the project

Project groups elaborated baseline study of village Okhami in order to identify main environmental threats of the community and its causes. Specific methodology was also developed for addressing local needs and build connection with local people.

Project team implemented various meetings with community representatives and selected stakeholder groups. Meetings were aiming at identification of local needs and constraints, find out solutions and jointly develop perspectives.

The format of these meetings was simple, based on mutual communication and was driven by local community representatives but facilitated by project experts. Various environmental issues were discussed during meetings and different stakeholder groups have been addressed among them local farmers, local schools children, students, representatives of local Authorities, health care and other public institutions.



The main concerns raised during the meetings were absence of environmental governance in the region and lack of state involvement in conservation of local ecosystems. Environmental awareness of local people is very low, there has been no activities undertaken so far to address these issues. Local communities are demanding for more communication with different authorities in order to receive more information on, for example, sustainable agriculture, renewable energy technologies for reduction of costs on traditional energy carriers.

Local forests are in critical situation, part of the village is controlled by Russian soldiers where massive cuts are taking place. Village suffers from natural disasters and erosion processes due to degraded ecosystems. State Authorities do not care about local problems and do not link environmental problems with social and health issues.

"we are facing serious problems which are mostly caused by our activities. We were not even realizing how much environment affects our daily lives. Our village used to be rich in natural resources, and we were living in harmony with nature too, but today we lost this connection with nature, we have become enemies of our own mother nature and we are suffering because of that. We lost knowledge and respect towards our beautiful ecosystems. When I've first time heard about this project I was not so much enthusiastic, I couldn't see how community conservation was possible nowadays when we are no longer engaged in joint activities to support our environment. This particular project raised our awareness about how our individual activities can make changes in a global scale. I have initiated a local activity group at local public school, where local children will be involved in environmental activities and will get relevant education. I believe that future generation can motivate my people here in the community. We have already organized greening and clean up activities, we are going to develop other activities together with other villages also. I hope our efforts will inspire others and together we can achieve changes!"-Local Teacher from Okhami Community.

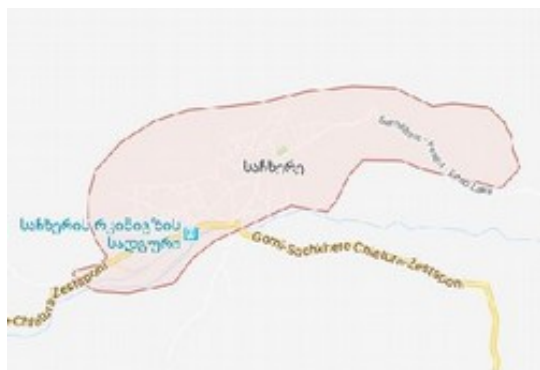


Project groups established local coordination groups in village Okhami, to be mediators between village population and other institutions. There has been developed a joint recommendation paper that has been delivered to decision making authorities for their activities. This coordination group is organizing various environmental activities such as greening and clean up activities, seminars and workshops on various environmental activities where they invite different experts. Project team is supporting local initiative groups to undertake these activities.

Main achievements so far:

- Awareness of local stakeholder groups raised;
- Local initiative groups established;
- Local communities empowered;
- Environmental agenda became an important issue at local level to be discussed;

Village Merjevi



The community of village Merjevi is located in west Georgia (1500 inhabitants). The relief of the village is mountainous and the main agricultural direction is cattle breeding. It is evident that insufficient state involvement is one of the main causes of caused problems in the region. Local Municipalities lack of relevant experiences and environmental governance is something rather new and unclear for many of local decision-makers. For them it is quite hard to make

this links between environmental governance and its benefits for the service of improved social-economical patterns. Authorities lack of local initiatives and prefer not to become a novelty-bringing actors but only executive authorities. This attitude disturbs development processes and negatively impacts on many social and economic aspects of local livelihoods. It also disturbs the work of local civil society organizations in support of many local development projects. But it is clear that there is a high demand on local level for such support to build this communication and most of the times, local and regional authorities are welcoming new ideas and proposals in support of their communities. In this regard, proposed project is directed to break these gaps and to stimulate constructive dialogue and cooperation between civil society actors and decision makers in support of enhanced nature conservation and integrated management of natural resources.

There is also a very serious problem of capacity and professionalism of municipality staff, which makes it difficult to cooperate and work together for concrete programs and projects. Due to these problems, project staff has organized capacity building and educational seminars and workshops for local Authorities to understand the importance of bringing environmental governance principles in their strategic development plans.



It has to be mentioned, that the community is under strong anthropogenic impacts due to hard social-economic situation. Local ecosystems and natural resources became the main income-generating source for local communities, in this situation it is extremely hard to gain public support and to mobilize local communities to participate in conservation project as in most of the cases such kind of initiatives are taken negatively, as environmentalists are often equated with the people restricting them to consume natural resources. Due to historical context also, in Georgia most of the communities still think that they have right to their neighboring forest as it historically “belonged” to their ancestors.

As local communities are the main resource users in the region and thus anthropogenic impact on local ecosystems are often caused by overconsumption and unsustainable use of natural resources, project primarily is focused on raising awareness of local communities on sustainable and efficient use of natural resources and testing of different practical solutions.

Activities undertaken in the framework of the project

Project group has elaborated a baseline study of local socio-economic conditions, challenges and the perspectives for development of alternative, renewable energy technologies in rural and remote areas. Lack of insufficient drinking and irrigation water is the most challenging issues for local communities. This is caused by poor management and nihilistic approach by local and central Authorities. Project group helped local communities to analyse quality of their drinking water to gain information about its qualitative values. It has been identified that the quality of drinking water is good, only an insufficient supply is a problem.

Local Government issues special license (permission) for wood-cutting, which allows each family to cut certain amount of wood in specially determined areas. But this method is not successful so far, because the amount of firewood is not enough for families that use wood in all seasons, most of the time local population also has to travel in a very far distance from their living places and transport wood. Transportation of wood resources is also connected with expenses and local population can't allow themselves to do it, they use to cut forest in nearby forest, sometimes in forbidden places, in protected areas, where state control is not strong. Rural population is not aware that deforestation, degradation of water resources and



extreme weather events are caused with uncontrolled and massive woodcutting. They mention the following problems, such as: “water level in rivers significantly went down in the basin”, “If woodcutting will continue in such manner in 10 year forests will not exist”, “In last year’s climate has changed a lot and vegetation period has been changed, extreme weather events became more frequent, we feel it in our daily life”, despite the fact that they realize the problems caused by uncontrolled use of natural resources, they do not see any perspective to stop wood cutting as its vital for their life’s.

Renewable energy technologies increased interest of local population, they realize that there is huge potential of renewable energy development and express their willing to study more about it. They also realize that massive use of renewable energy technologies will decrease uncontrolled wood-cutting.

Agricultural activities are the main income generating possibility in the community. After collapse of Soviet Union and during civil war in Georgia, when Country was in the edge of socio-economical and political crisis, all collective farms have been destroyed. Due to the crisis, communities started to resist using locally available resources. This period was the most critical period for local environment as well, as due to absence of state control mechanism and hard political crisis, people started to overconsume natural resources. During this period, almost 80-85% of wind-break zones have been cut down and used as firewood by locals. People forgot traditional knowledge, and nowadays, when agricultural activities became one of the main income-generating sources for local communities, people do not realize the importance of protection of their agricultural fields with strong and warm winds.

During collecting of the survey on local communities, it has been identified that one of the major threats for the agricultural fields are strong and hot winds, when people lost about 40-60% of their harvest. During interviews people mentioned the importance of restoration of wind-breaks, although this initiative never has been implemented by anyone in the region. People lack of initiative and knowledge on basic agricultural skills.

In this particular situation, project is delivering the knowledge for local farmers to restore degraded wind-break zones and to protect their agricultural crops. For this reason, the number of awareness raising activities has been organized. Local community was open to cooperate; they were expressing gratefulness towards the initiative.

Project also envisages providing alternatives to firewood in the region in order to reduce negative impacts on the environment. For this reason, one of the solutions are growing of fast-growing firewood plantations to generate own firewood for own consumption. These practices have been introduced to local people that raised high interest. The project team organized the number of awareness raising meetings, to introduce different alternatives to firewood generation. This practice has been successfully accepted by local communities.

Overgrazing and uncontrolled grazing practices provide serious risks for local ecosystems; it causes soil erosion, adverse water quality impacts from increased runoff, and loss of biodiversity. Erosion decreases soil fertility through washing away essential nutrients which



then reduces the biomass the soil can produce. Quite often overgrazing leads to a vicious cycle where pastures produce less nutrition, animals produce less and therefore farmers need to increase the number of animals, which causes even more overgrazing and respective negative effects. Project also addressed the issues of sustainable grazing and provided the basic knowledge on sustainable grazing benefits to local farmers thus introduced sustainable pasture management methods. According to international experience even a simple pasture rotation system can decrease soil erosion as much as 15% during the first year and additional 5% up to each next 5 years afterwards. At the same time the biomass and its nutritional value can increase over 20%, which decreases the need for overgrazing and creates a good sustainable cycle.

3. description of the community conservation initiative and its biological impact;

The project was focused on firstly to determine the major biodiversity threats within the communities and its causes and secondly to elaborate related methodologies to assess existing threats and address these problems. There has been elaborated the number of local activities to identify the major needs of local communities. It has been identified, that local communities lack of relevant information and awareness on existing environmental threats and their co-relations with other problems. Project group organized the number of awareness raising activities within the communities to ensure that local population is aware about existing environmental problems and their potential threats to their livelihoods, as well as different alternative and environmentally friendly solutions, interlinkages between environment-health-natural disasters-social and economic development and other factors.

The project methodology allowed participants to assess their local communities in terms of environmental and social economical parameters, to find out the main chalanges and obstackles disturbind development processes and identify main biodiversity threats in their communities, as well as to prioritize the urgent solutions to be implemented to ensure conservation of existing natural resources.

Project group initiated a local working group in each target community to assist project implementation group during the project and to ensure that broad number of local population is involved in project and benefit from the information provided and activities carried out by the project team.

The project ensured that local communities (with the name of local initiative groups) drafted local development agendas, identified major problems and threats and set up potencial solutions, and shared with the outcomes of the working meetings with local and regional governments. The project ensured that involvement of local communities in local decision making has been increased and a dialogue has been enhensed between local communities and local authorities.



4. description of the internal and external threats to the community conservation initiative that were identified during the CCRA;

Internal threats for the community conservation initiative are nihilistic and technocratic approach of different groups' existing in the communities. The main interests of these groups are gaining of financial benefits with all available resources. This problem is again driven by very hard social and economical conditions and high rate of unemployment in the region. In these particular cases, local communities are more interested in income generating proposals rather than conservation initiatives. For some of the people, environmental protection is the minor problem comparing to the problems they have. In this situation it was very hard for project group to show the benefits of environmental protection and the causes of natural destruction in longer and shorter periods. It has to be mentioned, that majority people realize the possible threats although due to a very high economical crises their attention is not directed to the environmental threats.

Another serious threat for the implementation of the community conservation initiative was lack of interest of governmental institutions. Environmental issues are not popular in Georgian society and especially in local municipalities, until serious environmental disaster will happen. Local Municipalities were not enough motivated at the beginning, although project managed to involve them into the project and increased their participation and interest.

5. description of the solution-oriented approaches, strategies and policies that could be deployed to counter these threats;

Based on project findings and gained experiences, project team identified that the main activities that currently need to be undertaken in target communities are educational and awareness raising activities. Local communities lack of basic knowledge on environmental values and are not able to make connections between environment and health protection and the social development issues. Lack of knowledge results is also a big problem in local state institutions. There are almost no local NGOs and/or CBOs working in the region to address local needs and problems. Media is not interested in broadcasting environmental issues rather than political and social issues. Project initiated a working group that will be in future established as a registered CBO and will continue working on local problems and needs. The project has also initiated usage of renewable energy sources (link to GMG Climate and Energy project) manufactured in Georgia and development of insulation measure in the houses in order to minimize the usage of timer as a source of energy. The project also created a precedent of mutual cooperation of local communities and Authorities. The project seeks to facilitate and enable the process of making local plans and initiatives more coherent and responsive to linkages between sustainable rural livelihoods and biodiversity conservation. It aims to enhance the capacity of local communities and institutions for integrating sustainable biodiversity-based livelihoods in participatory micro-planning while ensuring equity, transparency



and accountability. It also seeks to demonstrate community-driven approaches to nature conservation through establishment of ecologically sustainable livelihood and strengthening public policy.

6. description of the preliminary recommendations to outside actors in bullet point format;

- Support establishment of local NGOs and/or CBOs to ensure civil society activism in the region to address various local problems and challenges;
- To carry out large scale awareness raising/Educational campaign including target communities and local Authorities;
- Implement demonstrational projects to test sustainable grazing, farming, and forest conservation methodologies and further to develop relevant tested and approved recommendations based on that findings;
- Involvement of various experts to elaborate local development agendas including environmental aspects and communicate with the relevant authorities;
- Introduce renewable energy technologies to local communities to reduce demand on firewood and protect local forests;
- To train local initiative groups in decision making and communication strategies;
- Involve schools in conservation project and elaborate relevant agendas;

7. Elaboration of the gender aspects;

According to its objectives and impacts on rural livelihoods the project is gender focused. Women's perspectives and their roles are often not adequately reflected in hierarchic village or regional power structures, as well as in state policies and many international projects. Such structures can function as barriers to positive developments in villages. The project explored the different social roles of men and women and ensured that they were taken into account in the needs assessment and monitoring. Quotas of 50% for seminar participants were set.

The project was gender oriented and addressed the needs of women and men adequately. As gender issues are one of the core issues our organizations are struggling with, gender mainstreaming component was adequately addressed during the process of project implementation.

We acknowledge the fact that women are the most likely to suffer from various problems existing in our societies, but they are also the most capable of creating change and adaptation within their communities. There is no adequate attention paid to empowering women role in our societies at all levels. Women are often unable to voice their specific requirements. In several rural areas where women are responsible for feeding their families and are therefore more dependent on natural resources such as land, wood and water, their access to these resources is limited. They are also denied full access to information and new solutions. Although it's evident that the women have the knowledge and skills to find a sustainable path out of poverty and play an important role in development



processes. They need the power, tools and resources to turn this knowledge into solutions and for this it is important and necessary to deliver this skills and solutions to them in order to ensure sustainable development of our societies. If we recognize women role in development of society, we also have to recognize the problems that women are facing in everyday life and the seriousness of the situations in which the women are living and struggling for better life and transformation.

In order to emphasize the importance of gender issues and its indication in environmental governance concepts, project staff used a special gender oriented strategy to ensure that the level of involvement of men and women was addressed equally and that the women had given a relevant platform to deliver their voices and participate in the process. We realize that in Georgia, gender issues are not seriously taken into consideration, in many aspects. This problem is especially visible in regions where women are practically never given a power of governance or management – one can never see women in responsible positions in local municipalities. Last years, gender mainstreaming campaigns have significantly increased in Georgia, but so far it couldn't solved the problems of women participation and involvement.

The project addressed three key barriers to greater democratic and social participation of rural women; firstly, a very low degree of participation and decision-making power in their communities; secondly, women's exposure to gender specific environmental health problems; thirdly, the double burden of traditional gender roles, as women work on the land but also run the home, provide fuel, water and food and are responsible for family health.