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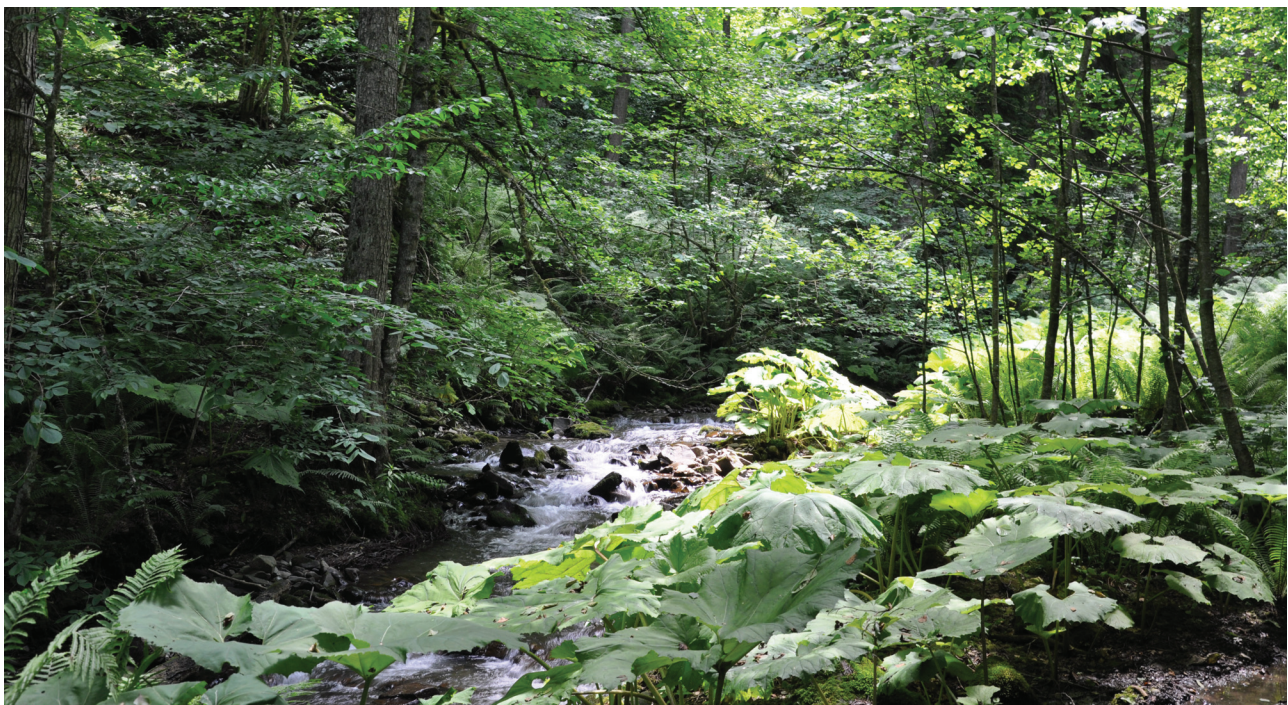
EU-NGOs Project: Strengthening Environmental Governance by Building the Capacity of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

EU-NGOs Case Study

Georgia, EU-NGOs project “Improving forestland governance to foster sustainable development in Georgia”, Green Alternative

Summary

This project “Improving forestland governance to foster sustainable development in Georgia” contributed to improved forestland governance through actions such as: (1) evaluating forestland governance in Georgia; (2) awareness raising on responsible forestland governance and sustainable forestry development; (3) building and maintaining alliances for effective advocacy efforts; and (4) media outreach. The **Assessment of forestland governance** was based on the Indicator Framework elaborated by the Governance of Forests Initiative (GFI) of the World Resource Institute to identify strengths and weaknesses in forest governance. Based on best practices, the **Guidebook on responsible land governance** (FAO Guidelines (2012) adapted to the Georgian context), the **Policy brief** on a specific policy area (mining in forest areas) and the **White paper on “Categorization forestlands of Georgia”** (based on MCPFE recommendations) were prepared. The above-mentioned publications, together with seminars, meetings and round tables, helped to harmonize sector policies and coordination of various institutions in charge of land use and forestry governance. Thus, the project provided incentives for reducing the pressures and competition between land use systems and resolution of conflicts related to the forestland governance. The project improved NGOs/CSOs capacity to effectively participate in decision-making processes related to forest governance. It also contributed to development of Governmental agencies’ and other stakeholders’ capacity to address land use and forest issues: the Ministry of Environment, the State Audit Office and other state agencies benefitted from seminars, trainings, recommendations and publications/research results elaborated during the project. As a result of discussions and advocacy work within this project, the Ministry of Environment accepted the forest categorization scheme proposed by Green Alternative. Based on this categorization system, the Ministry elaborated the draft law “Forest Code of Georgia”. Green Alternative’s recommendations related to the improvement of civil society participation mechanisms were also accepted by the Ministry and reflected in draft laws.¹



Borjomi Gorge

¹ Draft Laws: “Forest Code of Georgia”; “EIA Law”, “Biodiversity protection Law”

Environmental Background and Context

Forestland covers about 40% of Georgian territory. Forests have an exceptional importance at the national, regional and global level: they not only conserve the unique biological diversity, but also ensure continuous delivery of direct or indirect benefits (ecosystem services) and resources to local communities. The quality of forestland governance is an important determinant of the number and scale of environmental problems. Ecosystem services, such as fuel wood and timber supply, non-timber products and drinking water supply, as well as prevention of erosion, floods and landslides are of high importance for a significant portion of the population. Good environmental governance is key for the protection and sustainable use of natural resources for poverty alleviation, suspension of environmental degradation, and ensuring social and economic development.



Forest ecosystems of Lesser Caucasus

One of the determining factors of poor management is the absence of a forest categorization (zoning) system based on modern principles of sustainable management and an ecosystem approach.² This has a negative impact on the development of protected areas and on biodiversity conservation in general. Overexploitation of timber resources, uncontrolled pasturing and development of infrastructure projects in vital ecosystems, including protected areas, are among the results of bad governance. Several studies related to forest legislation and forest management in Georgia have already been conducted, including those by Green Alternative.³ Yet, there has not been any analysis of this complex issue of forestland management legislation and practices. Local civil society groups and NGOs only have limited opportunities to advocate and participate in related decision-making processes due to the absence of a policy and legislation analysis related to forestland governance.

Project description and Key objectives

Recognizing the importance of sustainable forest management in the protection of biodiversity and human well-being in Georgia, the primary objective of this EU-NGOs-supported project was the improvement of forestland governance in order to foster sustainable development in Georgia. Specific objectives of the project were to: (1) Contribute to elaboration of effective mechanisms of forestland governance; (2) Promote dialogue in policy planning and implementation among civil society groups, public authorities and other stakeholder groups; (3) Increase effectiveness of civil society groups' and other (local) stakeholders advocacy efforts; and (4) Improve knowledge of civil society groups' and other (local) stakeholders in sustainable forest land governance and its role in biodiversity/forest conservation.

Target groups of the project were: Georgian civil society groups active in related fields (land and forestry, agriculture, human rights, environment, EU Neighborhood Policy); National and local authorities involved in land governance and forestry development, as well as donors providing assistance in land and forest sector; and the communities of different regions. Final beneficiary of the project was the Georgian society at large, which benefits from improved policies, greater transparency and better governance in land and forest sectors of Georgia.

The following four sets of activities were conducted within the framework of this action, which are interlinked to achieve the different project objectives: (1) Evaluating forestland governance in Georgia; (2) Awareness raising on responsible forestland governance and sustainable forestry development; (3) Building and maintaining alliances for effective advocacy efforts; and (4) Media outreach.

Project outcomes helped to harmonize policies of related fields (i.e. forestry, biodiversity protection, agriculture, and economy) approaches by different institutions and their coordinated activities; and strengthen the advocacy capacity of civil society, private sector and the local population, which will facilitate more effective cooperation with central and local governments.

² Ecosystem approach – according to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) the ecosystem approach is a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way. It is based on the application of appropriate scientific methodologies focused on levels of biological organization which encompass the essential processes, functions and interactions among organisms and their environment. (<https://www.cbd.int/ecosystem/>)

³ See www.greenalt.org

Implementation

Key activities, Results and Innovations

The project was designed to strengthen NGOs/CSOs capacity to participate in consultation processes and decision-making process related to forestland and sustainable forest governance. It further contributed to development of Governmental agencies' and other stakeholders' capacity to address land use, land use change and forestry issues. The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection was actively involved in the project activities, with the Ministry itself, State Audit Office and other state agencies benefitting from seminars, trainings, recommendations and publications/researches elaborated during the projects.

For the first time, an assessment of forestland governance, legislation and practice in Georgia was carried out. The research was based on the Indicator Framework⁴ elaborated by World Resource Institute Governance of Forests Initiative (GFI) to diagnose strengths and weaknesses in forest governance. This modern tool was so far only used for the assessment of forest governance in few countries. Based on the best practice in forestland governance, the Guidebook on responsible land governance (FAO Guidelines⁵ adapted to the Georgian context) and the White paper on forest land zoning ("Categorization of forestlands of Georgia") were prepared. These activities as well as roundtable meetings, discussions, seminars, and exchange of information and data with other organizations involved in forest/land use management gave Green Alternative the opportunity to improve their knowledge in forest/land use governance and management.

Project activities, including the development and publishing of research results, policy papers and guidelines, as well as comments on draft legal acts, helped to strengthen participatory processes related to forest/environmental governance. In the guidebook on responsible land governance, five core principles of good forest governance are explained. Transparency, participation and accountability are among the above-mentioned principles. These indicators were widely discussed during the seminars and other meetings with representatives of governmental agencies; participants were also trained in how to use these guidelines in decision-making processes.

The assessment of forest land governance, the policy paper, the White paper on forest land zoning, as well as trainings and meetings increased capacity of civil society groups in environmental advocacy and protecting their rights. More than 15 NGOs/CSOs participated in workshops and seminars. Four joint letters and position papers of CSOs were formulated. CSOs were also involved in the preparation of the forest categorization document and reviewing new legislation drafted by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection.



Meeting with local community representatives, village Disveli, Bolnisi district, East Georgia

The project further strengthened Green Alternative's capacity to collect and analyze large amounts of environmental information. Valuable information was collected during the field trips and site visits. During the project, Green Alternative members exchanged knowledge and experiences with other NGOs, government representatives, and the Public defender's office. Eight people (Green Alternative members and experts) were involved in planning and implementation of project activities (3 men and 5 women).

About 500 decision-makers and civil servants, as well as representatives of other institutions responsible for and interested in land use and forestry issues were reached through publications elaborated during the project. More than 20,000 citizens gained awareness of forestland governance problems and proposed solutions (accomplished through publications, TV programmes, newspapers, website and social media); 200 organizations received a hard copy of the policy brief (on mining in forest areas). Additionally, public awareness on responsible forestland governance policies and practices was increased. Citizens and members of local self-governments⁶ now more actively participate in the ongoing process of public hearings on the draft Forest Code. Members of parliament and staff of parliamentary committees gained information about key problems and challenges of forestland governance and related environmental problems and supported the draft law "Georgian Forest Code" during the preliminary presentation in the parliament.

⁴ http://www.wri.org/sites/default/files/gfi_guidance_manual.pdf

⁵ Committee on World Food Security (CFS). April 2012. Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security. CFS's Thirty-eighth (Special) Session, Rome, Italy, 11 May 2012, available at : <http://www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/025/md708e.pdf>

⁶ See The Organic Law of Georgia on Local Self-Government: <http://waste.gov.ge/admin/editor/uploads/files/Organic%20Law%20FinalEng.pdf>

Project events, results and publications were promoted through media-advisories and national web-portals dedicated to environmental issues, as well as social media. Digital versions of the documents prepared by the project are available online at Green Alternative's website (www.greenalt.org). During the project period (January 2015 – February 2016) Green Alternative's website had 59,700 unique visitors, and Green Alternative's official Facebook page was liked by 21,600 visitors. Green Alternative further continues communication with project target groups and beneficiaries after the project completion.

Policy Impact

Meetings, seminars, and roundtables helped Green Alternative to advocate environmentally sound solutions to existing problems related to forest governance. Furthermore, the assessment of legislation, policy and practices of forestland governance, and the data collected during the interviews, research, field trips and meetings helped Green Alternative in the preparation of the forest categorization system, which was accepted by all stakeholders, including the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection.

Based on this categorization system, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection elaborated the draft law "Forest Code of Georgia". Green Alternative also prepared comments and recommendations on new legislation formulated by this Ministry, including the "EIA Law", the "Biodiversity protection Law" and the "Forest Code of Georgia", as well as the draft "Law on the amendment in Law on Public register" by the Ministry of Justice. Additionally, Green Alternative formulated recommendations related to the improvement of participation



Seminar for decision makers and civil servants. Tbilisi 14.06.2015

mechanisms, which were also accepted by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection and reflected in draft laws. The Ministry of Environment further distributed Green Alternative's comments on the draft Forest Code via their official website and presented them during public hearings in different regions of Georgia.

It should be noted, that the forest categorization system as well as participation mechanisms proposed through this project meet requirements of state forest policy (the National Forest Concept of Georgia, and the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) of Georgia) as well as international commitments (i.e. the Convention on Biodiversity, the EU Association Agreement, and the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE) <http://www.foresteurope.org/>, among others).

Elaboration of the new forest categorization system is one of the direct commitments of Georgia under the EU Association Agreement. This categorization system gives Georgia the opportunity to create the "Emerald network", which is another important step to harmonization with EU legislation.⁷

Challenges

Some main challenges that the project faced can be outlined as follows:

- Traditionally, media is not very much interested in environmental problems. They are more focused on political news. To meet this challenge Green Alternative tried to link their activities to the ongoing public/media agenda, regularly providing media with valid and reliable information. Information about project activities was distributed timely through social media, information agencies and Green Alternative's website. About 30 journalists (14 men and 16 women) participated in seminars and other project activities. After the seminar, Green Alternative also offered mentorship to journalists during preparation of respective articles and/or stories, providing high quality expertise

⁷ The **Emerald network** is a network of nature protection areas to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats of Europe. Its implementation was launched by the Council of Europe as part of its work under the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats or Bern Convention, with the adoption of Recommendation N 16 (1989) of the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention (<http://www.coe.int/en/web/bern-convention/emerald-network>). Creation of the "emerald network" by 2017 is one of the important commitments of Georgia under the EU Association Agreement.

and information. Representatives of media organizations were regularly informed and updated regarding problems of forest and forestland governance. As a result, more than 50 articles and stories (including internet and TV reports) were released based on interviews with project team members. Green Alternative members participated in more than 10 TV programmes to discuss problems that were studied during the project.

- Sudden changes in the top management of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection, the National Forestry Agency and the Agency of Protected Areas was another challenge. To avoid problems, Green Alternative uses a transparent, public, non-partisan communication strategy with all relevant state institutions.
- Decision-makers, civil servants, parliamentarians, and political parties are not always interested in participating in meetings, seminars and roundtables.. To meet this challenge, Green Alternative regularly provided them with convincing and reliable information. They further linked their activities to on-going policy discussion and representatives of media and civil society were always mobilized, which encourages participation by state agencies. For a continued dialogue with decision makers and advocacy, Green Alternative is active on official platforms such as the National Forest Program, the FLEG program, meetings of advisory boards of state agencies, and public hearings of draft legislations, among others. Overall, 61 officials (32 men and 29 women) took part in seminars and roundtables during the project.
- The tragic events caused by flash floods in Tbilisi 13 June 2015 caused the project to adapt its work plan in collaboration with stakeholders from state institutions and partner NGOs involved in rescue and other activities. However, some planned project activities could not be conducted during that month. Parallel to project activities, Green Alternative elaborated an analysis of causes of such a disaster, which was published on website and distributed through the media. The study was presented to the Minister of Environment and the Mayor of Tbilisi. Joint work during this period further helped to strengthen the dialog between Government and civil society groups.

Project Sustainability

The project is a part of Green Alternative's programs "Environmental Governance" and "Biodiversity and Forests", which the organization has been working on since its establishment. During the project Green Alternative established and strengthened alliances with other civil society organizations and different stakeholder groups, and defined advocacy as one of its key directions. This created a positive multiplication effect even after the end of this COMDEKS-supported project, as other CSOs will continue their work and use their skills to participate in various processes, both at the local and national level. Project sustainability is further ensured by the fact that achievements are in compliance with state policy documents such as the NBSAP and the National Forest Concept. Project results contributed to the empowerment and amendment of Georgian regulations as well as fulfillment of tasks in related sectors, which are proposed by state policy documents and committed in international agreements.

Partner agencies (e.g. the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection, and the State Audit Office) and NGOs that benefitted from the project outcomes are further contributing to project sustainability.

Communication, Replication and Upscaling

One of the key elements of the project was the assessment of forestland governance in Georgia. The participatory process engaged for the assessment of the existing forestland governance system can be replicated – the information about the process, methodology of assessment, and indicators of good forest governance is provided in the assessment report, thus allowing other groups to learn from this experience.

The project further supported knowledge transfer and capacity development of state institutions and students. At this stage, a number of master students in the "Sustainable natural and forest resources management" (MBA) program at the Ilia State University, who actively participated in seminars, trainings and other events organized by the project, are working on their master's theses related to assessments of different aspects of forest governance. They are using the assessment methodology elaborated by the project. Additionally, various universities are using Green Alternative publications in their curricula.

In January 2015, the State Audit Office started working on a report with the title "Audit of efficiency of use of timber resources for needs of local population" and continues to work in close cooperation with Green Alternative. The project strengthening this and other partnerships and facilitated a policy dialogue between civil society and the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection, the National Forest Agency, the Ajara Forest Agency, and the Agency of Protected Areas, among others.

Dissemination of materials such as the report, white paper, guidebook, and policy brief through the website, environment/land related internet portals and social media will further stimulate replication. Green Alternative is motivated to replicate good practices from other groups and vice versa. The lessons learned from such activities were already shared at CSO events during the project. Thus, the project helped to encourage stronger advocacy and activism

at the local level, which could also be observed during the public hearings of draft legislation in the regions. Green Alternative is planning to continue activities aimed specifically at awareness raising and information and experience-sharing among civil society groups.

Lessons Learned

- Lack of public participation, accountability and coordination between state institutions are problematic issues related to forest and forestland governance in Georgia. The assessment of forest governance carried out will help state agencies in the elaboration of new regulations to solve existing problems.
- The project team examined problems of mining in forest territories, the results of which it published to share this knowledge. The challenges identified were further discussed during presentations and roundtable meetings organized within the project and a special case study on this problem was prepared. All stakeholders agree that mining activities pose a fast growing threat for forest ecosystems in Georgia and substantial policy changes are urgently needed. Green Alternative's main recommendation to solve these problems is to harmonize forestry legislation (i.e. the Forest Code) with EIA Legislation and in accordance with requirements of EU Association Agreement.
- Representatives of government agencies, NGOs, CSOs, international organizations and independent experts (56 persons" 22 women, 34 men) were involved in the elaboration of the new forestland zoning/



Mining in endangered chestnut forests, Chiatura District, West Georgia

categorization. Green Alternative used the experience of all stakeholders to advocate a consistent opinion. For the first time, some forestry experts expressed concerns regarding the new forest categorization system. Many stakeholders were not aware of modern principles of international policy and practices related to forest zoning/classification. Consequently during the discussions, Green Alternative clarified that the proposed categorization meets the requirements of state forest policy (the National Forest Concept of Georgia, and the Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan of Georgia) and international commitments (CBD, EU Association Agreement, MCPFE⁸, etc.), through which all key recommendations by Green Alternative were eventually accepted by Government Agencies. The draft law "Forest code of Georgia" prepared by the Ministry of Environment is based on the forest categorization system proposed by Green alternative. Hence, Green Alternative acknowledges that clear communication and information to stakeholders is key to implementing sound environmental governance frameworks.

⁸ <http://www.foresteurope.org/>

- A transparent public communication strategy and good media coverage achieved acceptance of project outcomes and main recommendations by state agencies during the elaboration of new environmental legislation and harmonization of national legislation with EU directives and other international commitments.

The project engaged capacities to monitor and evaluate not only civil society groups but also state institutions, namely the State Audit Office, which was a positive new experience. Representatives of State Audit Office participated in project activities (seminars, roundtables) as well as meetings discussing issues in forest governance, exchanging information and sharing experiences. The State Audit Office further used research and assessment results developed by Green Alternative for the elaboration of the report “Audit of efficiency of commercial use of timber resources” (the report can be found at: www.sao.ge). The level of collaboration and achievements by far exceeded Green Alternative’s expectations during the preparation of project proposal.

Recommendations and way forward

As mentioned above, Green Alternative carried out the assessment of forestland governance based on GFI Framework indicators. However, due to limited time and financial resources it was possible to evaluate only some thematic areas of forest governance (land use planning, sectoral land use, forest classification, forest ownership and use rights, state forest ownership). Currently, the government is working on new legislation regulating forestry and nature conservation. For this it will be necessary to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of forest governance with all its thematic areas in accordance with the GFI Framework Indicators.

The new forest categorization system will contribute to the development of new protected areas and “Emerald Network” in Georgia. Civil society organizations could advocate and monitor this process.



Gold Mining in Forest Areas, East Georgia

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