Sustainable Development and Security in Georgia's Border Regions

2025

Sustainable Development and Security Challenges in Georgia's Border Regions: Gardabani, Lagodekhi, Sagarejo (Research)

This work was supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG) # BRG-I-23-037 „Study of Sustainable Development and Security Issues in the Border Regions of Georgia: The Cases of Gardabani, Lagodekhi, and Sagarejo“

Project Leader: I. Kokaia
Project Coordinator: Ts. Nazarova

Authors: M. Areshidze, I. Kldiashvili, Ts. Nazarova, G. Tsopurashvili
Editors: M. Iashvili, M. Salukvadze

People’s Harmonious Development Society
Tbilisi, 2025
ISBN: 978-9941-8-7421-5

Contents

Annotation 7

Introduction 9

Border security policy and its impact on the SD of border municipalities 11

Introduction 12

Summary of Recommendations 14

Challenges of the Law Enforcement System 15

Transboundary Infectious Risks and Biosecurity Challenges 15

Drug-Related Problems and Challenges of the Law Enforcement System 16

Staff Shortages in the Law Enforcement System and Challenges to Public Trust 17

Priorities of Law Enforcement Agencies 17

Shortcomings of Legal and Social Measures Against Domestic Violence 17

Legal Vacuum and Radical Narratives 18

Economic implications of the Cross-border movement limitations 18

Uncertainty of Georgia's Border: Challenges of Delimitation 19

Challenges in Border Regions and the Need for a Working Group 20

Recommendations and Solutions 20

Conclusion 24

The Weak Link of SD: Institutional and Economic Constraints of Local Self-Government 25

Local Self-Government and Regional Development: Experience, Challenges, and Directions for Reform 26

Local Self-Government and Sustainable Regional Development 36

1. Decentralization of Local Self-Government 36

2. Organizational and Personnel Challenges in Local Self-Government 40

3. Financial Management Challenges and Inefficient Budget Expenditure 43

4. Legal and Administrative Challenges in Local Self-Government 45

5. Social and Demographic Challenges as a Consequence of Weak Local Self-Government 47

6. Challenges in Agriculture and Ecology 50

7. The Role of Community and NGOs in Strengthening Local Self-Government 53

8. General Conclusions and Recommendations 56

Recommendations for Regional Advantage Analysis and Smart Specialization 57

Comparison of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Georgian Local Self-Government Code 58

Disproportionate Participation of Georgia's Border Municipalities in Transit Benefits 60

Strengthening Local Self-Governance and Developing a New Governance Model 62

Civil Society as the Foundation of Sustainability 65

Democracy as a Way of Life 66

Democracy as a Way of Life: Problems and Solutions 74

Democracy as a Way of Life: 10 Key Aspects 75

1. Underdevelopment of Border Villages — A Missed Opportunity for the State 75

2. SD of Border Villages, Equitable Resource Distribution, and the Need for Philanthropy Legislation 76
3. Decentralization, Civic Responsibility, and Rural Security 77
4. Civic Awareness, Education, and Accessibility of Local Organizations (CBOs) 78
5. Legacy of Ethnic Conflicts, Deficit of Civic Identity, and the Role of Education in Integration 79
6. Education as the Foundation of Social Freedom and an Open Society 80
7. Rethinking National Identity and Strengthening Shared Civic Consciousness 81
8. Strengthening Local Self-Government and Legal Foundations for Community-Based Development 82
9. The Need for a Legal Framework for Philanthropy and the Sustainability of Local Organizations 83
10. The Village as a Strategic Partner: Security, Dignity, and Restoration of Local Resources 84
Democracy as a Way of Life: General Conclusion 85
Democracy as a Way of Life: A Form of Thinking and Responsibility 87
Ethnic Diversity, Integration, and External Influences 88
Issues of Ethnic Minority Integration and Strategic Security Challenges 89
1. Introduction 89
2. Infrastructure of Influence and Competition Among External Actors 89
3. Radicalization, Identity, and Religious Conflicts 90
4. State Policy and Response Limitations 91
5. Diplomatic Interpretation and the Need for a Strategic Approach 91
6. Conclusion and Recommendations 92
Ethnic Diversity, Integration, and External Influences 94
1. Ethnic Minorities and Integration Challenges in a Changing Environment 94
2. Transformation of Ethnic Minorities and Strategies of External Actors 97
Systemic Social Crisis of Violence and Inequality 104
1.Domestic Violence: Legal, Social, and Psychological Aspects 105
2.Early Marriage 112
3. Child Labor 119
General Conclusions and Recommendations 124
Sustainable Development Concept and the 2030 Agenda 126
Definition and Evolution of the Concept 127
The Role of Security in SDG Implementation 130
Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions 131
Human Security Components According to UNDP 133
Localization of Sustainable Development Goals: Outcomes in Georgia 139
Georgia's Localization Model: Key Principles and Existing Challenges 139
Enhancing the Role of Local and Regional Governments in Sustainable Development 140
Lack of Feedback from Target Municipalities: A Reflection of Systemic Challenges 141
Institutional Challenges of SDG Localization 142

Localization of Sustainable Development Goals: A Global Approach 143
Foundations of Localization 143
Role of National Legislation in the Localization Process 143
UN Guidelines: Decentralization and Access to Services 144
Georgia's SDG Coordination and Monitoring System 144
Inter-Agency Council for SDG Monitoring and Working Groups 145
Analysis of National Documents and Limited Role of Local Governments 145
State Audit Service Assessment and Recommendations 145
Lag in Local-Level Implementation and Efforts to Address It 146
Strategic Framework for Localization and International Guiding Principles 147
Legal Basis: Subsidiarity Principle 147
Main Objectives of the Strategy 148
Financial Strengthening of Local Governments Within the Decentralization Strategy 149
SDG Implementation at the Local Level 150
Policy Planning Standardization 151
Support for Municipal Planning 151
SDG Localization in Municipalities 151
Conclusions and Recommendations: Strategic Approaches to Problem Solving 154
Social Issues: Conclusions and Recommendations 155
Education Quality and Infrastructure 155
Vocational Education 155
Intensification of Georgian Language Teaching in Multiethnic Regions 156
Integration Issues in Multiethnic Regions 157
Healthcare Services and Demographic Challenges in Multiethnic Regions 158
Environmental Issues and Quality of Living Environment 159
Infrastructure Deficits and Access to Public Services in Municipalities 160
Accessibility of the Social Protection System 161
Economy: Conclusions and Recommendations 162
Economic Challenges and Development Prospects in Border Regions 162
Economic Development in Border Regions 163
Financial Literacy and Sustainable Agricultural Development 163
Employment and Economic Challenges 164
Economic Impact of Migration 165
Agricultural Development and Local Production Enhancement 165
Tourism Sector Development 167
Processing Industry and Agricultural Development 168
Industrial Development Challenges and Economic Growth Prospects 168
Investment and Economic Development Prospects 169
Land Registration, Ownership, and Pasture Management 170

Ecological Challenges and Sustainable Development in Border Regions 171
Economic-Related Ecological Challenges 172
Ecological Challenges and Sustainable Development in Lagodekhi Reserve 173
Infrastructure: Education, Sports, and Healthcare 175
Education and Sports Infrastructure 175
Healthcare Infrastructure 176
Transport and Road Quality 177
Drinking Water Infrastructure 178
Sanitary Infrastructure and Air Quality 179
Waste Management Infrastructure 180
Energy and Industrial Infrastructure 181
Tourism Infrastructure Development 182
Infrastructure Project Development and Planning 183
Conclusion 185

List of Causal Relationship Scheme

Depopulation in border zones of multi-ethnic municipalities in Georgia …….13

Challenges of Decentralization and Sustainable Development in Multiethnic Municipalities…….41

Scarcity of Vital Resources and Social Barriers in Border Multiethnic Municipalities ……...52

Transformation of Ethnic Minorities and External Influence Causal Relationship Scheme…….98

Language barrier for ethnic minorities in Georgia's border municipalities – 1……...……102

Language barrier for ethnic minorities in Georgia's border municipalities – 2……...103

Loss of Nature-Centric Culture as a Source of Environmental and Social Issues……...174

Annotation

The book *Sustainable Development and Security in Georgia's Border Regions* offers a groundbreaking exploration of the interplay between sustainable development and security in Georgia's border municipalities of Gardabani, Lagodekhi, and Sagarejo. Against the backdrop of complex global and regional challenges, this study addresses critical social-economic, environmental, and governance issues that shape the resilience and security of these border areas. By integrating sustainable development goals (SDGs) with practical policy mechanisms, the research seeks to foster sustainable progress while ensuring a secure and inclusive environment for local communities.

This work stands out as one of the first comprehensive analyses of Eastern Georgia's border regions, combining rigorous academic inquiry with the lived experiences of local residents. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, and content analysis, it moves beyond statistical data and official reports to capture the perspectives of those directly affected by border policies. The study reveals systemic challenges, including uneven infrastructure development, environmental risks, migration trends, ethnic minority integration, and a shrinking civic space, which have slowed sustainable development and strained social cohesion.

Key findings highlight the need for a balanced approach to border security that aligns national interests with local social-economic development and human rights. The book critiques past policies that prioritized short-term security measures over long-term sustainability, leading to weakened municipal resilience. It proposes evidence-based recommendations to strengthen local self-governance, enhance civic engagement, and promote inclusive economic and environmental strategies, offering a roadmap for policymakers, local authorities, civil society experts and international stakeholders.

The project's significance extends to the academic community by providing original data and a multidisciplinary framework that bridges social sciences, economics, ecology, and security studies. It lays a foundation for future research, fosters collaboration between Georgian and international scholars (including Georgia-Azerbaijan academic networks), and underscores the role of research in shaping regional policy. By amplifying local voices and connecting local realities to global SDGs, this book serves as a vital resource for researchers, policymakers, and communities committed to sustainable and secure development in Georgia's border regions.

Acknowledgements

The research team expresses its sincere gratitude to the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia for the financial support of the project (BRG-I-23-037) “Sustainable Development and Security in Georgia’s Border Regions: Analysis and Policy Framework for Gardabani, Lagodekhi, and Sagarejo”.

We would like to thank our partners and colleagues who supported us at various stages of the research — in organizing field visits, expert interviews, and material collection — for their professionalism, support, and engagement.

We express special appreciation to the respondents — experts, civil society activists, members of the academic community, and residents of the studied municipalities — for their trust, openness, and meaningful conversations that enriched our understanding of the ongoing processes.

We express our gratitude to the interviewer for their professional data collection, which formed the foundation for the analysis in this study.

We are also grateful to the editors and the technical team, whose work was especially valuable in the transcription and editing of texts. Editors ensured the accuracy of terminology and adaptation of the text, including AI-generated content, while preserving the authors’ intent.

With appreciation, we acknowledge the use of the language models ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Grok as auxiliary tools for translation, preliminary editing, and content analysis.

Introduction

Context and Relevance of the Study

Amid the diverse challenges of the modern world, the development of strategies aimed at ensuring sustainable development and security has become particularly relevant. Achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 remains a complex task, especially in border regions, home to more than one-sixth of the global population. These areas often face poverty, economic underdevelopment, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental vulnerability, including susceptibility to natural disasters and biodiversity crises. Additionally, border regions frequently serve as epicenters for 45% of global armed conflicts and numerous territorial disputes. Addressing these challenges requires collaboration among neighboring countries, local authorities, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, local communities, and academia.

Georgia's border municipalities—Gardabani, Lagodekhi, and Sagarejo—encounter unique challenges that demand comprehensive analysis and practical solutions. Socio-economic development, environmental issues, and governance matters are closely interconnected, forming a unified security system.

Objectives and Approach

The study aims to identify key socio-economic, environmental, and politico-administrative challenges in these municipalities and propose recommendations to address them. A central focus is integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with practical mechanisms to enhance regional resilience. As one of the first comprehensive analyses of sustainable development and security in Eastern Georgia's border municipalities, this research draws on both expert assessments and the voices of local residents. This approach transcends statistical data and official documentation, grounding conclusions in human experiences and everyday observations.

Research Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative, human-centered, and multidisciplinary approach to explore the dynamics of Gardabani, Lagodekhi, and Sagarejo. It employs a mixed qualitative model, combining primary data collection with secondary source analysis to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges.

Research Design: The municipalities were selected based on their geographic location, demographic composition, and socio-economic diversity. The goal is to identify systemic barriers to sustainable development and security, assess the impact of border policies, and develop evidence-based recommendations.

Data Collection:

- **Semi-Structured Interviews**: Conducted with residents, community leaders, municipal officials, and experts to gather diverse perspectives on socio-economic, environmental, and security issues. Topics included migration, ethnic relations, infrastructure challenges, and environmental threats.
- **Focus Groups**: Organized with youth, ethnic minorities, and women to foster dialogue and identify shared concerns. Discussions covered socio-economic and environmental issues, security, ethnic minority integration, local self-governance, community and organizational development, sensitive social issues (early marriages, domestic violence, child labor), and perceptions of municipal sustainable development policies and border security measures.
- **Stakeholder Consultations**: Engaged civil society and academic representatives to contextualize local findings within national and regional frameworks.
- **Secondary Data Analysis**: Examined official statistics, municipal reports, national strategies, action plans, prior studies, and legislation to cross-reference primary data. The process was hindered by discrepancies between official and local data and limited access to state information.

Data Analysis: Interview and focus group data were analyzed using content analysis, a systematic method to identify key themes, patterns, and contradictions. This approach enabled:

- Classification of major challenges (e.g., economic and social service development, infrastructure issues, environmental degradation, shrinking civic space).
- Assessment of community perceptions of local self-governance and border policies, revealing widespread skepticism about their effectiveness.
- Linking local issues to global SDGs, ensuring recommendations are relevant locally and internationally.

Use of Digital Tools: Technical assistance within the project included the use of language models — ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Grok — as auxiliary tools for translation, preliminary editing, and content analysis. All interpretations, analytical conclusions, and final formulations are the sole responsibility of the authors of the study.

Key Challenges:

- **Limited Information Availability**: State institutions often lacked data needed to assess sustainable development in border areas, complicating comprehensive analysis.
- **Low SDG Awareness**: Local authorities showed limited understanding of SDGs, hindering alignment with international frameworks.
- **Data Discrepancies**: Official statistics occasionally contradicted field observations, requiring verification through primary sources.
- **Weak Civic Engagement**: Reduced collaboration between NGOs and local self-governments, coupled with growing stigmatization of the civic sector, limited community involvement.

Ethical Considerations: The study prioritized ethical engagement, ensuring informed consent, anonymity, and respect for diverse perspectives. Special attention was given to vulnerable groups—ethnic minorities and women—to amplify their voices without risk. Transparency was maintained by clearly noting limitations and potential biases.

Results and Validation: The data formed the basis for a comprehensive monograph, validated through triangulation—cross-checking interviews, focus groups, and secondary sources. The resulting recommendations are practical, addressing the needs of policymakers, local authorities, and communities while fostering academic discourse. Interview excerpts highlight the centrality of local voices, enhancing the study's authenticity and impact.

Structure and Logic of the Book

This research seeks to listen to people: how they perceive their lives, what concerns them, and how they envision their future. These voices shape a social portrait of the region. The book is structured to guide readers through the research logically. The first chapter examines the political and practical context of security, exploring how border policies affect social cohesion, economic stability, and environmental sustainability. It underscores that regional security hinges on residents' well-being—access to education, healthcare, a safe environment, and adequate infrastructure (e.g., water, irrigation, roads, youth centers), as well as effective policing, fair conflict resolution, and ethnic minority integration. Subsequent chapters analyze weaknesses in local self-governance as a systemic barrier to development.

Further sections address ethnic minority integration, social challenges (early marriages, domestic violence, child labor), and the shrinking civic space. The study notes the weakening of the NGO sector, particularly locally, the curtailment of municipal-community collaborations, and increased stigmatization of organizations supporting vulnerable groups, environmental protection, economic development, or Georgian language learning among minorities.

The analysis then connects security to the SDGs, linking local realities to global priorities. The concluding section offers an analytical interpretation of sustainable development and detailed recommendations. The book ends with interview excerpts—voices of residents sharing experiences that shape collective knowledge.

Thus, the book presents a novel analytical approach, viewing sustainable development through human experiences and security as a social, institutional, and cultural foundation for progress.

*"[In a] pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, * * * [a] common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole; a communication and concert results from the form of government itself; and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual. Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."*

The Federalist No. 10 (Madison)

Border security policy and its impact on the SD of border municipalities

Introduction

Border policies along the Georgia-Azerbaijan frontier have evolved to address key priorities, including enhanced border security, migration management, and cooperation with local populations. Over the past two decades, uneven policy implementation by Georgian authorities has led to scant sustainable development in the targeted regions, often neglecting long-term national interests.

This approach has significantly impeded sustainable development in the border municipalities of Lagodekhi, Sagarejo, and Gardabani, exacerbating socio-economic challenges and introducing new security risks. Since Soviet times, communities along the Georgia-Azerbaijan border have faced persistent restrictions on civil and human rights, including limitations on freedom of movement and land use. These restrictions persist today, particularly with the expansion of the border zone from 500 to 5,000 meters[1] in May 2024, which has created an additional barrier to regional development.

Georgia's border policies have primarily focused predominantly on a physically securing the Georgia-Azerbaijan frontier in these municipalities to regulate the flow of people and goods. While preserving the region's historical transit role, these policies have marginalized the economic interests of local populations. Moreover, municipal budgets are constrained, as transit revenues, which are directed to the central budget under legislation, are not allocated to support the long-term development of local municipalities, exacerbating their financial limitations.

In recent years, an overemphasis on border control within Georgia's national security framework has overshadowed the need for sustainable socio-economic development along the Georgia-Azerbaijan border. This study demonstrates that such prioritization has weakened the resilience of border municipalities and complicated efforts to safeguard local interests.

The para-militarized border along the Georgia-Azerbaijan frontier has, paradoxically, increased regional vulnerability and worsened socio-economic conditions for local communities. Our findings indicate that these policies have undermined social and economic systems and eroded protections for human rights.

To investigate these issues, our team organized focus groups and interviews with local experts and representatives of local communities and community-based organizations in Lagodekhi, Sagarejo, and Gardabani. These discussions highlighted the socio-economic consequences of policies along the Georgia-Azerbaijan border. However, full interviews with representatives of local self-governments were not feasible due to various constraints, underscoring the need for greater dialogue and openness in future research.

The dialogue revealed a critical attitude among border communities not only toward the content and form of state policy but also toward the process of its formation at legislative and administrative levels, where the voice, opinions, and needs of local residents are practically ignored.

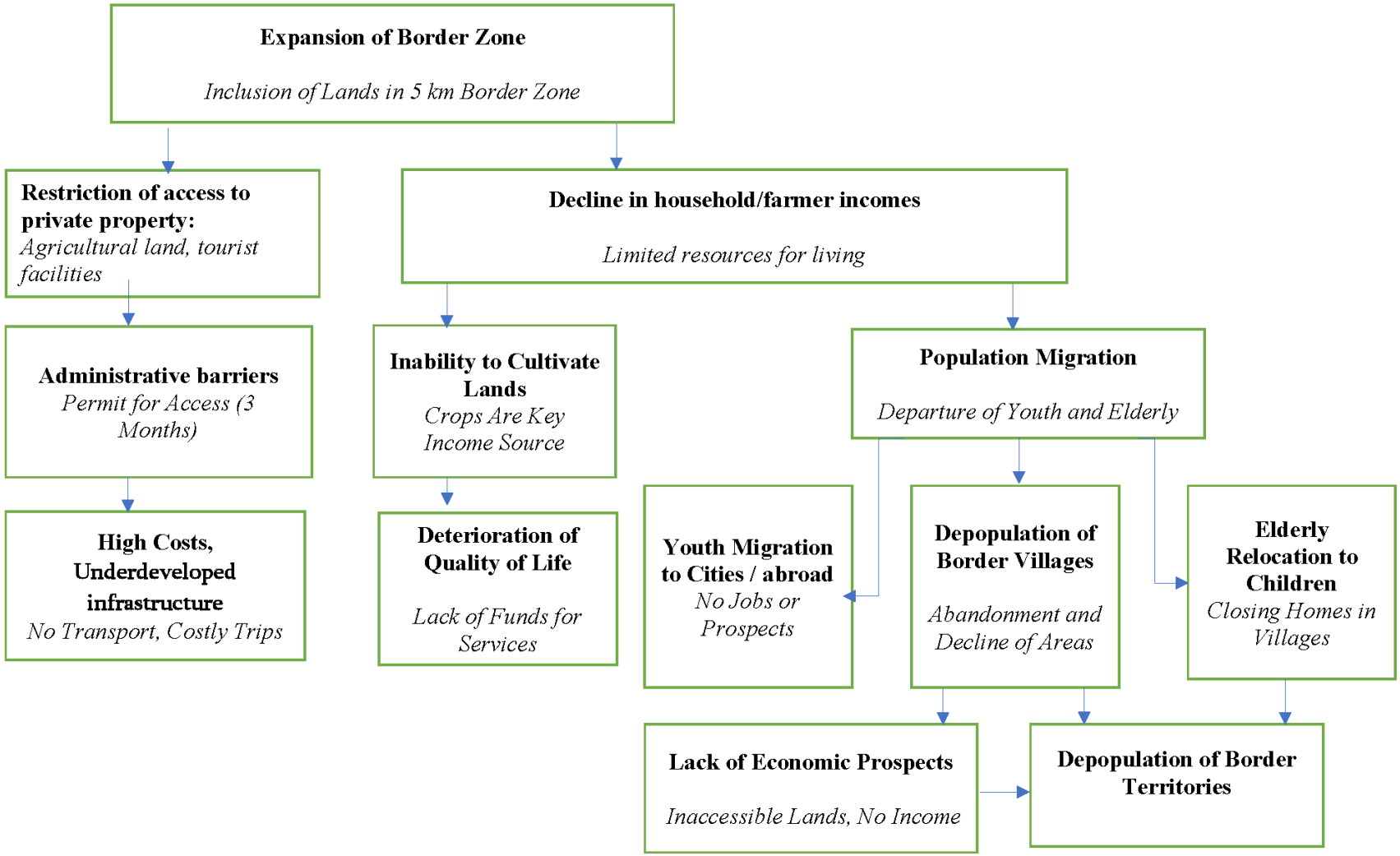
Moreover, these discussions showed that almost all social groups in border regions share common dissatisfaction with the results of border protection and development policies. The existing practice not only fails to ensure sustainable socio-economic development of these regions but also violates historically established vital interconnections in neighboring settlements.

A significant concern is the alienation of agricultural lands, with state authorities disposing of state-owned lands without prior consultation or notification of local communities. This practice restricts access to critical agricultural resources, undermining the economic stability of municipalities along the Georgia-Azerbaijan border.

In these border regions, home to diverse ethnic groups, socio-economic policies must balance local interests with national objectives. Such alignment would enhance sustainable socio-economic conditions and strengthen security along the Georgia-Azerbaijan frontier. Consultations revealed that

[1] Border Zone – A land strip extending into the territory of Georgia from the state border line or coastline, with a width of no more than 5 kilometers, as well as parts of the territories of international airports (airfields), railway stations, international river and seaports, where border control related to crossing the border is carried out. In exceptional cases, taking into account the terrain, the border zone on the land section of the state border of Georgia may be defined by a decree of the Government of Georgia as extending up to 30 kilometers from the state border line. Law of Georgia on the State Border of Georgia, https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/31966?publication=32

Causal relationship scheme of depopulation in border zones of multi-ethnic municipalities in Georgia



residents believe national security and human rights protection should be mutually reinforcing, forming integral components of sustainable regional development and improved border policies.
This study underscores that the Georgia-Azerbaijan border is a dynamic, living entity. Our conclusions and recommendations recognize the historical connections between Georgia and Azerbaijan, which shape unique opportunities and significant challenges for border municipalities and broader national interests.

Summary of Recommendations

The research team has developed targeted recommendations to improve the management of Georgia-Azerbaijan border regions. These recommendations are designed to become an integral part of discussions on legislative and policy reforms, ensuring actionable steps to enhance policy implementation, reduce risks of civil and human rights violations, and increase the involvement of local populations and self-governments in security-related decision-making. Development of the border municipalities should extend beyond physical infrastructure to prioritize sustainable development and address critical local needs in alignment with long-term national interests.
Implementing these recommendations requires revising ineffective and fiscally unsustainable policies. Instead of focusing solely on strengthening physical border infrastructure, priority should be given to developing civic infrastructure to support long-term community interests and regional stability along the Georgia-Azerbaijan frontier.
These recommendations must actively contribute to ongoing discussions on legislative reforms for border security, empowering local self-governments and fostering a reassessment of strategic policy frameworks. This process should establish a foundation for a national strategy rooted in systemic engagement, actively involving central and local administrative bodies, the business sector, religious communities, public and community organizations, and local populations. Such an approach will create a platform where groups with diverse perspectives can reach consensus and develop a shared vision for regional security, development, and coexistence along the Georgia-Azerbaijan border.
This study represents a step toward a new paradigm for collaborative policy development, fully acknowledging the interests of all stakeholders in reforming border policies and promoting sustainable development.
We recognize that effective border security policy, integral to national security, requires comprehensive and practical measures to prevent and combat crimes such as human trafficking, drug smuggling, and other serious offenses. However, addressing these challenges effectively depends on fostering trust between law enforcement agencies and local communities along the Georgia-Azerbaijan frontier.
The recommendations developed in this study advocate, on one hand, updating national security policy to reflect the needs of border municipalities and, on the other, establishing a robust foundation for their sustainable socio-economic development. Municipal development strategies must prioritize social, economic, and environmental sustainability, fully integrated with national policy and implemented by local self-governments with comprehensive support from the central government.
Acknowledging that local population security and sustainable regional development are essential to national security is critical. Strengthening cooperation mechanisms with government structures to protect the rights and interests of local residents is therefore vital. Current approaches often treat local populations as potential risks, limiting their participation in shaping security policy. This perspective requires urgent reconsideration and revision.
Ethnic groups must be recognized as integral to a unified Georgian society. Although the official state strategy promotes civic integration, practices persist that hinder the full engagement and recognition of the role of ethnic minorities and local populations in current processes. Additional efforts are needed to ensure ethnic minorities are not labeled as “risk groups,” as this undermines national interests. Government institutions must build greater trust with local communities, treating them as partners in critical tasks related to border security and crime prevention, rather than potential threats.
"Previously, ethnic and religious diversity in Georgia was seen as a national asset, and NGOs actively worked in this field. Now this is no longer the case. Negative narratives dominate society, and many NGOs have shut down and ceased operations. The very idea of diversity is becoming a problem...

...During elections, those who couldn't read or write were simply told: this is blue, this is red — choose one. For 20 years, people have been choosing between colors. Who is behind these colors, who is on the list — no one really cares. We've become used to looking superficially at elections, and it's already ingrained in the mentality that you're a second-class citizen in this country. And this is not a problem of the locals — we could overcome that quickly. This is a systemic problem, and the whole system makes you feel that you are secondary, a second-class citizen." (G-4)

Perceiving local ethnic minorities as "risk groups" not only complicates the work of law enforcement agencies but, in some cases, makes it practically impossible. Building trust with local ethnic communities would naturally alleviate the excessive burden on local law enforcement agencies. In some regions, there is a practice where patrol and criminal police units assume the functions of border services, which complicates their work and raises questions about the scope of their authority and legal frameworks. Such practices may contravene rule-of-law principles, creating risks of rights violations for both law enforcement personnel and citizens.

Comparable challenges are evident in the operations of civilian state institutions. Rather than pursuing policies rooted in broad national economic interests, these institutions often adopt approaches driven by narrow departmental priorities. For example, customs authorities frequently enforce restrictive formal procedures, such as setting low import quotas, conducting protracted inspections during unloading, demanding excessive documentation, or imposing inflated duties. These measures aim to boost short-term fiscal metrics but ultimately restrict opportunities for small entrepreneurs, impede local trade, and undermine the social and economic interests of Georgia's border regions.

Undoubtedly, regions serving as the country's economic gateways possess significant development potential for development. Effective governance of these regions is essential for both national economic growth and the stability of border areas. In this context, restrictive economic policies hinder the attraction of substantial investments and impede the development of critical economic and civic infrastructure. Under these circumstances, incorporating a critical resource like land, into civic circulation on fair and equitable terms is of paramount importance. This would bolster local economic initiatives, foster a favorable investment climate, and ensure sustainable socio-economic development of Georgia's border regions.

Challenges of the Law Enforcement System

Strengthening border regulations creates additional pressure on local populations. Such an approach is often aimed at maximizing the clearance of the border zone from social and economic activities, transforming it into a more sterile environment. To maintain this sterility, law enforcement structures continuously seek to expand the scope of control and monitoring, officially aimed at preventing hazardous activities. As local residents note, "You can't enter there without a permit" (L-4), and "We have to get a permit in Ulianovka… they give us a three-month one" (L-6), which is perceived unevenly by the population. In practice, the current three-month permit system has become a bureaucratic barrier, restricting economic activities in some cases, including agrotourism initiatives. One respondent stated, "They paid $25,000 for 12 hectares… but all this has lost its appeal; how are tourists supposed to enter there?" (L-4). These practices require further evaluation to determine whether they adequately address security objectives and ensure long-term socio-economic stability.

Transboundary Infectious Risks and Biosecurity Challenges

Georgia's border regions face a significant biosecurity challenge: the unrestricted movement of wild animals across national borders increases the risk of infectious disease transmission. These risks threaten ecosystems, rare species such as the West Caucasian tur, agriculture, and the local economy. The absence of systematic monitoring mechanisms, limited information exchange with neighboring countries, and weak international cooperation exacerbate these issues, making the country highly vulnerable to biosecurity threats.

Georgia currently lacks systems for comprehensive infectious disease monitoring, and access to data from neighboring countries is often restricted.

"A West Caucasian tur[2] left Georgia and spent 180 days in the Russian Federation… (after returning to our territory), a few days later we received a signal that it had stopped moving" (L-1). Rangers located it using GPS. The animal had died from an infectious disease that had already killed approximately 200 West Caucasian turs in Dagestan. *"We were lucky it had a GPS tracker—otherwise, we would have never found it" (L-1).* This allowed the Georgian side to prevent further disease spread, but such cases are exceptional, as monitoring systems are generally absent.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these challenges. Prior to the pandemic, Georgia had active cooperation with its neighbors in biodiversity monitoring: *"We had a good cooperation experience with Azerbaijan… but after COVID, the borders were closed" (L-1).* The suspension of this cooperation hampered information exchange and hindered rapid response.

Transboundary infectious risks pose a serious threat to Georgia. They damage ecosystems—particularly rare species—and harm the economy, especially the agricultural sector. Moreover, such risks may also stem from biological terrorism, as controlling cross-border movement is complex—particularly in the case of insects that harm plants, animals, or other insects such as bees.

Transboundary infectious risks require swift and systematic action. The case of the West Caucasian tur illustrates that without monitoring, cooperation, and serious measures to ensure biosecurity, Georgia remains highly vulnerable. Addressing this issue demands joint efforts from the state and local communities to protect ecosystems, the economy, and public well-being.

Drug-Related Problems and Challenges of the Law Enforcement System

In many municipalities across Georgia, drug-related issues, particularly the illegal cultivation of cannabis, have significantly worsened in recent years. This problem not only threatens the safety of local communities but also deepens distrust toward the law enforcement system and local authorities. Widespread suspicions of possible patronage or negligence by authorities hinder cooperation between communities and state institutions, complicating efforts to resolve the issue.

Local residents report that cases of illegal cannabis cultivation have become particularly frequent over the past two years. *"Over the last two years, drug-related problems have intensified. Cases of cannabis cultivation are especially notable" (L-3).* Rumors circulate within communities that some cases may occur under "protection"—that is, with the tacit support of authorities. *"There is information that certain individuals are trafficking drugs, and this is seemingly 'protected' by local authorities. I personally observed instances where something else was growing in greenhouses alongside 'legal' plants" (L-4).* These reports, based on local observations, lack official confirmation, fueling uncertainty and distrust.

The response of law enforcement agencies is often insufficient, reinforcing the perception that the authorities do not fully control the situation.

Exploitation of Socially Vulnerable Groups

Interviews conducted in municipalities reveal local residents' accounts that highlight the complexity of this issue. A common scheme involves cases where the registered owner of cannabis plantations discovered on agricultural plots is a socially vulnerable individual—for instance, an elderly woman with limited financial resources. During investigations, such individuals are unable to pay fines, leading to cases being "frozen," while the true owners of the plantations remain undetected. These incidents not only hinder effective investigations but also deepen local residents' sense of injustice, as the system appears to fail in targeting the real culprits and instead shifts responsibility onto vulnerable groups. Ineffective actions by the law enforcement system, including inadequate responses to the exploitation of socially vulnerable individuals, perpetuate drug-related problems. Insufficient oversight of cannabis cultivation and drug distribution increases security risks and fosters an atmosphere of uncertainty and distrust within communities. Suspicions of "protection" by authorities and the system's inability to identify true organizers undermine the legitimacy of law enforcement agencies. This, in turn, complicates cooperation with local communities, heightens social tensions, and exacerbates security challenges.

[2] Capra caucasica cylindricornis

Staff Shortages in the Law Enforcement System and Challenges to Public Trust

In Georgia's border communities, the law enforcement system faces significant challenges: a shortage of qualified personnel undermines police effectiveness and amplifies public distrust. The exodus of experienced officers and the resulting lack of professionalism lead to delays in legal responses, fostering feelings of alienation and injustice within communities. This issue is particularly acute in areas where citizens expect swift and fair action from the police.

"Many police officers are leaving Lagodekhi and eagerly seeking work abroad" (L-4). This outflow creates a staffing vacuum that new recruits—often inexperienced and inadequately trained—cannot fill. *"The police also suffer from a shortage of qualified staff, which affects both professionalism and communication with the public" (L-4).* As a result, law enforcement operations become less effective, and the quality of engagement with local communities deteriorates.

One case vividly illustrates the severity of the problem: parents of underage girls victimized by online bullying (so-called deepfakes) were unable to secure an adequate response. *"From morning until six in the evening, no investigator showed up… Eventually, one investigator arrived and spoke with the parents of one of the girls. That was the 'response'—nothing more" (G-4).* Such delays and inaction reinforce local residents' perception that law enforcement is ill-equipped to address modern challenges, particularly impacting vulnerable groups like youth and their families.

The shortage of qualified personnel and systemic inertia significantly erode the credibility of law enforcement agencies. Growing distrust fuels legal nihilism, which, in turn, hampers law enforcement efforts and undermines public stability. When citizens feel their concerns are ignored or endlessly deferred, they lose confidence not only in the police but in all state institutions.

Priorities of Law Enforcement Agencies

Local law enforcement agencies in Georgia face significant challenges due to excessive functional workloads stemming from a disorganized approach to responsibility allocation. They must simultaneously manage crime rates and ensure border security, a problem particularly acute in border regions, where it severely impacts patrol and criminal police departments. The local criminal police department bears the heaviest burden. Given the differing mandates of these units, the criminal police, in executing its broad mandate, is more prone to human rights violations. Moreover, overlapping mandates among law enforcement bodies result in duplicated operational zones, leading to either redundant efforts or evasion of accountability.

Uneven distribution of control zones creates focused and neglected areas, systematically overlooking critical security challenges and generating long-term risks for both local community safety and national stability.

Alongside human rights concerns, the overloading of criminal police undermines efforts to combat serious crimes, such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, and organized criminal activities. According to local residents and analyses of crime reports in the media and statistics from the Ministry of Internal Affairs website, investigations are protracted over time. Additionally, the quality of investigations within the criminal police's jurisdiction has deteriorated. Despite citizen complaints, law enforcement often fails to deliver timely and appropriate responses to documented criminal acts.

Shortcomings of Legal and Social Measures Against Domestic Violence

Despite the existence of legislative frameworks to protect women's rights and prevent domestic violence, responses in practice often remain superficial and lack a systematic analysis of issues, local customs, and ethnic traditions.

Over the past decade, legal mechanisms to combat domestic violence have been strengthened, notably through the introduction of restraining orders. This has simplified the process for law enforcement agencies in handling such cases, thanks to standardized administrative protocols. "It is very easy for the police to handle these cases—there is a standard restraining order form approved by law" (G-4).

While state institutions have become more proactive in addressing domestic violence, criticism of law enforcement practices persists. Key challenges include weak prevention systems and the absence of reliable infrastructure for victim rehabilitation.
The automatic application of legislation without effective social support mechanisms can lead to adverse Consequences. Despite significant improvements in legal frameworks and formal recognition of women's rights, the social support system remains fragile. Police intervention alone is insufficient—comprehensive measures are needed, including psychological support, financial stability through vocational training, and robust social rehabilitation mechanisms.

Legal Vacuum and Radical Narratives

In Georgia's border communities, distrust in the law enforcement system and its ineffectiveness create a legal vacuum, leading residents to rely increasingly on informal mechanisms. When police fail to deliver prompt and fair responses, locals turn to local "authorities" acting as arbitrators in disputes: *"When there's no hope in the police, people have only one option—turning to criminal figures or religious clans, such as Wahhabis, who resolve issues their own way but often demand substantial payments from citizens" (G-4).*
These practices strengthen a parallel justice system, disconnected from state legislation, weakening the rule of law. This legal vacuum also heightens risks of ideological radicalization. Particularly alarming is the growing popularity of extremist symbols among youth, propagated through social media.
"The panturkist 'Grey Wolves' symbol[3] has gained traction among young people. Teenagers share it on social media, unaware that in Europe it is linked to a terrorist organization, banned and punishable by law. Here, they post it simply because they like it" (G-4).
Used by ethnic minority youth in Georgia without awareness of its significance, this symbol—associated with an extremist group in Europe, Iran, Azerbaijan[4], and other countries[5]—highlights deficiencies in education and informational awareness. Media and social networks, often inadvertently, amplify these narratives, escalating interethnic tensions and internal security risks. The spread of extremist symbolism further harms Georgia's international reputation.

Economic implications of the Cross-border movement limitations

The closure of the Georgian-Azerbaijani border, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, has significantly disrupted the socio-economic situation in border municipalities. Restrictions on cross-border mobility and the severance of trade and economic ties have triggered a sharp decline in activity across key sectors of the local economy. A study conducted in the Lagodekhi municipality identified multiple challenges stemming from movement restrictions and the institutional inaccessibility of economic resources.
One of the most pronounced impacts has been the marked reduction in economic activity in tourism, cross-border trade, and agricultural product exchange. Local residents report: *"The border closure reduced economic activity, particularly in tourism, trade, and the exchange of local products. Previously, we exported honey, while greenhouse produce was imported from Azerbaijan" (L-3).*

[3] The salutation of the Grey Wolves is "a fist with the little finger and index finger raised" Turkic hand gesture, described by founder Alparslan Türkes, as: "The little finger symbolises the Turks, the index finger symbolises Islam, the ring – or snout – symbolises the world. The point where the remaining three fingers [sic.] join is a stamp. It means: we will put the Turkish-Islamic stamp on the world." (Connolly, Kate. "Germany summons Turkish ambassador over 'wolf' goal celebration". The Guardian.)
[4] In 1995, the "Grey Wolves" were banned in Azerbaijan for their involvement in a rebellion against Heydar Aliyev.
[5] It was banned in Austria in February 2019. In Germany, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Left Party proposed banning the salute in October 2018, calling it fascist. ("Germany seeks to ban Turkish 'Gray Wolves' far-right symbols". Deutsche Welle. 9 October 2018. Archived from the original on 15 December 2021. Retrieved 15 February 2019.)

Before the closure, a well-established system of small-scale trade supported the incomes of beekeepers, farmers, and traders. The disruption of these ties has led to stagnation in the agricultural sector and reduced incomes for vulnerable households. The cessation of tourism, a vital income source for local small businesses, has dealt an additional blow to the regional economy. According to respondents: *"The region once saw a vibrant tourist flow; now, it has come to a standstill" (L-3).* This has adversely affected the hospitality sector, services, transportation, and related industries. The border closure has drastically curtailed the influx of both foreign and regional tourists, exacerbating the economic isolation of border areas. A further issue raised during interviews is the lack of transparency in fiscal policy and the unequal distribution of revenues from transit flows. As one respondent emphasized: *"Revenues from transit flows go to the central budget, while the municipality receives no direct benefits" (L-3).* This centralization of tax and budgetary revenues deprives local authorities of the financial resources needed to support socio-economic development and infrastructure projects. Consequently, municipalities are relegated to the role of service territories, without adequate compensation for providing strategically critical infrastructure.

Uncertainty of Georgia's Border: Challenges of Delimitation

Border delimitation in international law is a complex and often contentious process, intertwined with cultural, economic, and social challenges. Globally, territorial disputes frequently arise from shifting river courses or historical monuments, necessitating precise legal and political approaches. In Georgia's border regions, this uncertainty is particularly pronounced, intensifying vulnerability among local communities.

The David-Gareji monastery complex[6], a unique cultural heritage site with substantial tourism potential, faces obstacles to development due to the unresolved border status. The absence of delimitation constrains the region's economic and cultural prospects, creating additional challenges for local communities. Geographical ambiguity is exacerbated by shifts in the Alazani River's course, which legally defines the border. As research highlights, *"in the lower Alazani, which marks the border between Georgia and Azerbaijan, the shifting of the riverbed occasionally raises questions about the location of the state border" (EUWI+, 2019).*[7]

"The Alazani River's course shifts periodically, particularly in spring. When it moves toward Georgia, the Azerbaijani side promptly reinforces its bank with concrete structures, appropriating sections of territory along the river. Local residents report that a decade ago, the river was 10 km from their farm; now it is 5 km, violating Georgian regulations requiring farms to be at least 10 km from the border. They risk fines during inspections" (Presentation, Irina Pkhovelishvili, 2023).

Riverbed changes are a common phenomenon in the Alazani-Iori river basin, especially in the middle and lower reaches of the Alazani River. This natural process, intensified by human activity and climate change, leads to riverbank erosion and the loss of agricultural lands (EUWI+, 2019). This results in gradual territorial losses, including river islands coming under Azerbaijani control, and heightens economic risks for local farmers.

Insufficient political engagement exacerbates dissatisfaction and alienation among residents. Historical fears, entrenched in Soviet-era control mechanisms, continue to suppress openness.

"It is a deeply ingrained fear, though in Gardabani we have partially overcome it. Nevertheless, people remain reluctant to discuss even everyday concerns in the border zone" (G-1).

These factors obstruct public dialogue on the border issue and intensify the complexities of delimitation.

---

[6] Academician R. Metreveli, David Gareji Monastery Complex – an Integral Part of Ancient Cultural Heritage of Georgia, Georgian National Academy of Sciences, October 19, 2020 http://science.org.ge/?p=8247&lang=en#

[7] European Union Water Initiative Plus for Eastern Partnership Countries. (2019). Development of draft river basin management plan for Alazani/Lori river basin in Georgia: Thematic summary – Part I characterisation, p.16. ENI/2016/372-403. Retrieved from http://euwipluseast.eu

Challenges in Border Regions and the Need for a Working Group

The stringent border security policy has transformed border regions into zones of heightened control, where long-term national interests are frequently overlooked. Measures aimed at ensuring "border security" have led to systemic violations of the civil and human rights of residents in these territories, as well as an increase in uninhabited areas instead of preserving the local population.
Our engagement with the local population and the analysis of identified issues clearly indicate the need to establish a state working group endowed with an appropriate mandate. This group should consolidate and analyze the opinions of various sectors operating in border regions, including governmental, expert, public, and professional circles, and process the collected information to shape a political vision that integrates border security, human and civil rights of the local population, public safety, and the sustainable development of border territories.

Recommendations and Solutions

This study has identified a critical issue: the prospects for sustainable development in the border municipalities of Georgia with Azerbaijan and the vital interests of communities must be integrated into the strategic framework of unified national policy. Our findings confirm the need to reassess approaches to implementing national policy in border regions, as current practices have caused considerable harm to local populations, whose voices are often disregarded in national-level and state-level discussions.
The aim of our recommendations is to promote the development of policies that integrates local historical and social interests into a unified national security strategy.
The study's conclusions highlight practices that not only violate contradict declared fundamental laws requiring farms. national priorities but also directly undermine the interests of both local communities' and regional government's national interests and security.

Accountability and Oversight
When considering proposals implementation approaches of recommendations aimed at addressing preventing violations of civil and human rights in order to border regions:

- It is essential to ensure the protection of fundamental principles every individual's rights, regardless of their ethnic background, religious affiliation, or social affiliation status;
- It must be recognized that the absence lack of implementation of these approaches increases accountability increases the risk of such violations.

Accountability and oversight should be viewed as constraints but are not limitations but as guarantees of effective law enforcement guarantees and of effective legal frameworks and public safety. These principles ensure that executive authorities ensure their actions are directed towards addressing core priorities tasks, guided by principles of transparency and openness.
Moreover, these practices accountability and oversight foster accountability, fostering trust, laying the foundation groundwork for robust closer collaboration between local communities and government structures, rather than fostering barriers instead of barriers.

Establishment of a Commission for Assessing Sustainable Development and Security in Border Regions
To comprehensively assess the current situation and implement meaningful changes, it is essential to establish a platform that enables all stakeholders to participate in shaping a new national dialogue and developing an updated, unified national strategy.
To coordinate this process, a special commission should be formed, equipped with sufficient resources and a mandate to consolidate existing expertise and formulate a new vision for enhancing national security policy.

- The commission should be granted authority to develop and provide recommendations to the executive government for effective planning and implementation of security policy;
- Its mandate should encompass the full utilization of local potential — dialogue between society and government must become a strategic imperative;

- The commission should annually prepare and submit a report and recommendations to relevant state authorities;
- The commission should devise a long-term action plan for the sustainable development and security of border regions with a 3–5-year perspective.

Educational Programs

Special attention should be given to public education. It is essential to initiate a unified public education program that provides for the introduction of a learning system tailored to the interests of local communities and the goals of sustainable regional development.

- A core component of the program should be raising awareness among border region populations about civil and human rights;
- Establishing formats for close cooperation with relevant state authorities;
- Particular focus should be placed on teaching the Georgian language and developing educational infrastructure (kindergartens, schools);
- Teacher retraining is necessary;
- The creation of bilingual textbooks in Georgian and Azerbaijani languages is important;
- For law enforcement personnel, unified certification programs in ethics, civil and human rights, and public engagement should be introduced;
- Municipalities require adequate resources to fund information campaigns that inform border communities about citizens' rights when interacting with law enforcement and human rights issues;
- Funding campaigns that promote trust and solidarity between border communities and law enforcement/border structures is crucial;
- Clear communication regarding the connection between border control and the safety of local communities is necessary, both for law enforcement and the public.

Access to Border Territories

Access to border territories for local communities remains a significant challenge. Maintaining existing regulations may negatively impact both public safety and the sustainable socio-economic development of border regions.

- It is essential to ensure that local communities retain access to traditionally significant border territories without administrative barriers;
- Particular importance should be given to issuing long-term permits to local residents for access to protected border areas;
- Centralized checkpoints should establish procedures that prioritize local communities during movement;
- All checkpoint personnel must undergo retraining on human rights issues to safeguard the interests of the population and establish a foundation for mutual understanding.

Transborder Infectious Risks and Biosecurity Challenges

Transborder infectious risks demand prompt and systemic action. Cases of animal infections demonstrate that existing mechanisms are inadequate. Without monitoring, cooperation, and biosecurity integration, Georgia remains vulnerable. Addressing this issue requires collaborative efforts from the state, local communities, and international partners to safeguard ecosystems, the economy, and public well-being. To address these challenges, the following is necessary:

- Strengthen monitoring: employ modern technologies, such as GPS, to track the movement of wild animals, particularly in border zones;
- Renew cooperation: restore information exchange and joint monitoring systems with neighboring countries, especially Azerbaijan;
- Develop security strategies: integrate biosecurity issues into national security plans, particularly to prevent biological terrorism;
- Engage communities: involve border communities in monitoring and prevention processes to raise awareness;

- Protect the economy: safeguard agriculture from diseases through specialized programs.

Patrol and Criminal Police

The overreach of authority by local law enforcement agencies beyond their mandated powers remains a significant challenge, leading to abuse of power both directly and indirectly. This practice is particularly evident in responses to specific crimes. Actions outside the scope of their mandate reveal law enforcement's inadequate preparedness to effectively enforce existing laws. Such an approach creates an unjustified burden on the limited resources of law enforcement agencies and negatively impacts their core functions. Human rights and civil liberties must become the fundamental standard for policy development and implementation.

- The competencies and boundaries of law enforcement mandates must be clearly defined;
- It is necessary to increase human resources;
- Relevant training programs should be implemented as needed.
- Historically, policies in border regions relied on civil and administrative law mechanisms. However, in recent years, the trend has shifted, with a predominant use of criminal law mechanisms.
- The involvement of local law enforcement agencies in border control tasks should be reduced;
- Patrol zones should be defined to minimize pressure on the daily lives of local communities;
- The efforts of law enforcement units should focus on ensuring public safety and protecting human rights.

Drug-Related Issues and Challenges for the Law Enforcement System

Drug-related issues, particularly the illegal cultivation of cannabis and the use of representatives from socially vulnerable groups as a cover, remain a serious challenge for many communities. Ineffective responses from the law enforcement system and distrust toward authorities hinder the resolution of this issue. A transparent, systemic, and fair approach, aimed at both identifying true perpetrators and restoring community trust, is essential for creating a safe and stable environment.

- Strengthen control over cannabis cultivation at the local level through regular inspections of greenhouses and field plots, involving civilian monitoring and modern technologies, such as drones;
- Improve investigation mechanisms within law enforcement structures, focusing on identifying true organizers through the analysis of financial flows and connections;
- Establish a transparent investigation system to address suspicions of "protection" or patronage, thereby restoring public trust;
- Develop mechanisms for social support and amnesty for socially vulnerable individuals formally involved in drug-related cases, such as social assistance or alternative measures (community service, education) instead of fines;
- Implement preventive measures, including information campaigns in communities, to raise awareness about how perpetrators exploit socially vulnerable groups and provide opportunities for anonymous reporting;
- Empower community-based organizations as tools for prevention, education, and dialogue with authorities.

Staff Shortages in the Law Enforcement System and Challenges of Public Trust

Staff shortages in the law enforcement system and public distrust create a vicious cycle that hinders community safety and the provision of justice. The outflow of professional staff, inadequate training, and delayed responses increase alienation. Addressing this challenge requires systemic efforts focused on strengthening human resources, transparent communication with citizens, and restoring trust.

- Strengthen human resources in regional police through motivation mechanisms, including salary increases, as well as providing basic and training support for local staff;
- Establish standard response times and a behavioral protocol for interactions with citizens, compliance with which will be monitored;
- Systematically analyze feedback from citizens and ensure prompt responses to critical cases, especially those involving socially vulnerable groups;

- Develop continuous professional development programs for police officers, including training on modern challenges, such as digital crimes;
- Conduct information campaigns in communities to inform the public about efforts to improve police work and engage them in the trust-building process.

Legal Vacuum and Radical Narratives

The legal vacuum and the strengthening of informal influence centers indicate that state institutions fail to ensure community safety and justice. This practice not only undermines the rule of law but also increases the risks of social instability and radicalization. Addressing this challenge requires restoring trust in the law enforcement system, strengthening formal mechanisms, and fostering inclusive cooperation with communities.

- Enhance trust in the law enforcement system through prompt and transparent response mechanisms, enabling the population to feel state support;
- Establish community-based mediation systems under state oversight and within the legal framework;
- Identify criminal structures and weaken their influence through legal mechanisms;
- Conduct information campaigns to help communities understand the risks of informal structures and support formal legal systems.

Border Infrastructure

Border checkpoints serve as vital historical routes for the local population, but their inefficient operation creates barriers to interaction. The shortage of transport and infrastructure projects, coupled with financial constraints on local self-governance bodies, hinders the economic development of border regions. Strict policies and the prioritization of security projects lead to the neglect of long-term national interests, increasing pressure on the local population. The historical interconnectedness of populations on both sides of the border is of particular importance and must be considered in economic and social initiatives.

- Ensure the efficient operation of border checkpoints through investments in their modernization and expansion, minimizing obstacles for the local population;
- Balance border protection, avoiding an exclusive focus on infrastructure development and the tightening of regulations;
- Review the size of protected perimeters adjacent to the border zone to facilitate access for the local population;
- Introduce the issuance of long-term permits for agricultural activities in the border zone to support farmers' economic stability;
- Accelerate the determination of the status of the David-Gareji complex and develop tourism infrastructure around it;
- Increase investments in transport and logistics networks to stimulate the economic development of border regions;
- Reallocate state resources, prioritizing education, healthcare, and civilian infrastructure projects;
- Promote the development of trade and the free movement of capital, while ensuring the safety and protection of the local population's rights in the border context;
- Implement early warning systems for natural disasters to enhance the safety of border territories;
- Revise Georgia's policy to reduce the prioritization of security infrastructure in border regions, redirecting resources toward the social and economic empowerment of these territories.

Public Safety

Representatives of local and central state agencies are obligated to respond promptly to instances of xenophobia and related discrimination.

- Public safety must be regarded as an integral part of national and border security;
- Residents of border regions should not be preemptively treated as potential offenders, and their marginalization is unacceptable. Security measures should target only dangerous criminals and organized crime groups, not law-abiding citizens;

- Law enforcement officers should undergo additional training, and their involvement in local issues should be increased to build greater public trust in official legal mechanisms;
- Regular oversight and intensified legal measures are needed to prevent informal groups from establishing parallel governance structures;
- Information campaigns targeting youth should be strengthened to provide comprehensive and accurate information about the true nature of extremist symbols and ideologies, as well as the risks they pose.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, policies in Georgia's border regions, particularly in the municipalities of Gardabani, Lagodekhi, and Sagarejo, have primarily focused on ensuring border security, which has negatively impacted the realization of the local population's historical and vital interests. This has led to social and economic constraints, hindering the development of the local population's potential and adversely affecting the regions' sustainable development.

The policies implemented in Georgia's border regions have not been integrated into a broader national security strategy and have largely ignored the need for long-term sustainable economic and social development, undermining the social and economic stability of border municipalities.

As a result of this approach, a para-militarized border has emerged in border regions, with intensified actions by law enforcement agencies, leading to increased violations of the local population's rights and rendering border regions less safe.

The ethnic diversity of border regions has not been adequately leveraged to ensure, on the one hand, alignment of the local population's interests with Georgia's national interests, and, on the other, improvements in the regions' socio-economic conditions and security.

It is evident that only a harmonious policy, integrating the principles of national and local security, socio-economic development, and respect for human rights, can potentially yield positive consequences. It is crucial that national security and human rights protection are not mutually exclusive but function as interdependent systems, fostering sustainable regional development and serving as essential components for improving border policies.

"[T]he strength of free nations resides in the local community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within people's reach, they teach people to use and enjoy it. Without local institutions, a nation may establish a free government, but it cannot have the spirit of liberty. Transient passions, momentary interests, the chance of circumstances, may create the external forms of independence; but the despotic tendency which has been repressed into the interior of the social body will, sooner or later, appear on the surface."

Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

The Weak Link of SD: Institutional and Economic Constraints of Local Self-Government

Local Self-Government and Regional Development: Experience, Challenges, and Directions for Reform

Interview with Expert Gocha Tsopurashvili

***Exp-1**: Gocha Tsopurashvili*
***Exp-2**: Tsovinar Nazarova*
***D**: Interviewer*

D: Why is it difficult for local self-government to fully exercise its constitutional powers?
Exp-1: First and foremost, it must be noted that strengthening local self-government has not been a priority for many years. This trend began after 2005 and persists to this day. Political parties promote the interests of their own groups, which prevents genuine municipal leaders from emerging. Those who enter local self-government are not independent figures—they are more often conduits of party interests than drivers of meaningful change for society. This is why elections to local self-government bodies are won not by competent, proactive, and experienced individuals, but by those who align with party agendas.

The ideal scenario would see professionals in office—individuals with deep knowledge, a clear vision, relevant skills, and concrete practical experience. However, the choice typically falls on candidates who represent party interests and exhibit less independence.

Regrettably, the central government seeks to maximize its control over local self-government. To this end, it often favors compliant and manageable personnel over professional and independent leaders. It appears that the constitutional principle, which states that local self-government should not serve as an extension of central authority but function as a horizontal governance structure with independent and exclusive powers, is not fully recognized.

Current practices reflect a contradictory application of this principle. Local self-government has effectively lost its administrative and managerial independence and cannot operate without central government involvement. Against this backdrop, a shortage of qualified, change-oriented personnel at the local level leads to managerial disorganization. Creative approaches are not adopted, initiatives are rare, and in most cases, individuals do not even grasp the full scope of their responsibilities.

This issue is not confined to self-government—it is systemic and affects nearly all sectors. In this situation, the only solution is political will to genuinely activate decentralization mechanisms. This topic has remained relevant since 2006, when the government itself acknowledged that progress would otherwise stall, and some steps were taken. However, these efforts were largely superficial, and in practice, decentralization remains on hold.

Georgia has acceded to several international agreements, including the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Based on this framework, decentralization strategies have been developed, including the current Decentralization Strategy for 2020–2025, which expires this year. Yet, despite years of discussion, no significant systemic changes have occurred. Implemented measures have been mostly cosmetic, with no real transfer of powers—neither financial nor functional.

Over the past 12 years, these issues have been actively debated, but tangible results and positive expectations are virtually absent. Interestingly, 25–30 years ago, when I served as head of administration, local authorities had far greater real powers, and central government interference was significantly less. A local leader, appointed within the presidential vertical, was accountable solely to the president and coordinated with all central agencies, including security structures like the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This ensured comprehensive operational coordination and effective governance.

Today, local self-government has effectively become a depersonalized, formal structure, as the action plan for implementing the decentralization strategy is not being followed. The Municipal Development Fund was established, ostensibly to support municipalities. In reality, however, this entity merely controls financial resources allocated for regional budgets. Millions of lari earmarked for local development are concentrated in Tbilisi—at the central level.

As a result, municipalities become even more dependent on the central government and cannot fulfill their constitutional functions or make independent decisions. Currently, the central government

directly manages financial resources intended for local budgets, for instance, in Sagarejo[8], Gardabani[9], Lagodekhi[10], and other regions of the country. Many ongoing projects demonstrate that the center handles financing itself, rather than allowing resource allocation and priority-setting to occur locally. This further weakens self-government and reinforces centralized control.

Exp-2: In the example of the kindergarten construction in the village of Chiauri, Lagodekhi Municipality, documentation indicates that consultations with the local community began in 2019. The initial document package, which comprised 24 pages in 2020, grew to 225 pages by 2024, yet the kindergarten remains at the project stage[11]. The children who were meant to attend this kindergarten have already grown up and started school.

Exp-1: The most critical document is the Decentralization Strategy, which should outline trends for strengthening local self-government. However, at this stage, its practical implementation has effectively been halted.

Global experience demonstrates that robust local self-government is a prerequisite for effective governance. For instance, in the United States, during the Trump administration from 2017 to 2021, the federal functions of the Department of Education were partially reduced, granting states greater authority over educational programs. This model is rooted in the principle of subsidiarity, which aligns with the approach to self-government enshrined in the Constitution of Georgia (Articles 7 and 70).

The principle of subsidiarity holds that decisions should be made at the level closest to the issue, best accounting for local needs. This implies that the central government must transfer powers to local self-government bodies, enabling them to independently manage projects and address local challenges. In practice, however, particularly in Georgia, the opposite trend prevails: excessive centralization remains the dominant governance tool, obstructing the effective implementation of local initiatives and the fulfillment of community needs.

Local self-government bodies are better equipped to understand the needs and specifics of their communities than the central government. To effectively implement social, economic, and agricultural policies, the powers of local self-government must be expanded, and its active participation ensured. For example, in land resource management, international practice in countries with advanced decentralization distributes functions across three levels:

- The central government defines the strategic political vision and legislative framework.
- Regional bodies (states, provinces, or equivalent, depending on the country's structure) handle spatial planning and regional development.
- Local self-government directly manages local land use processes and other delegated functions.

In Georgia, this policy is almost entirely concentrated at the central level. The Ministry of Economy manages land resources as if they were commercial goods. Numerous examples of this can be found in Lagodekhi, Sagarejo, and Gardabani. Local self-government, with rare exceptions, plays no role in this process, which unequivocally violates both the principles of decentralization and effective governance.

At the local level, land resources should be accompanied by a development plan and accountability. This should not be a mere technical process of "selling," as it is today, but a strategically considered political and economic decision that promotes sustainable socio-economic regional development.

The economic policy introduced under the previous government remains unchanged today. Land resource management is entirely centralized, with local self-government bearing virtually no responsibility or influence over the process.

---

[8] Information not found

[9] Third stage of construction works for the water supply system in five villages of Gardabani Municipality, 2022. http://mdf.org.ge/?site-lang=ka&site-path=documents%2F&munic=19&donor=0&year=0

[10] Construction of a kindergarten in the village of Chiauri, Lagodekhi Municipality, 2024; Construction of a kindergarten in the village of Chabukiani, 2024; Construction of a kindergarten in the village of Chiauri, 2021. http://mdf.org.ge/?site-lang=ka&site-path=documents%2F&munic=35&donor=0&year=0

[11] Decentralization of Local Self-Government; 1.9. Case Study: Delay in the construction of a kindergarten in the village of Chiauri, Lagodekhi Municipality

One of the main issues relates to the establishment of land taxes. Currently, local authorities are effectively excluded from this matter. Under the previous government, from 2003 to 2012, an unprecedented decision was made: without any research or justification, the land tax was set at 100 lari for everyone.

In the early 2000s, a three-tiered taxation system (good, average, and poor land) was in place, which was fairer as it accounted for land quality and potential evaluation criteria. A bonitation system, which assesses land quality to set corresponding taxes, could potentially function today. However, current practice shows that this issue is simply ignored. In reality, such a system should operate at the local level, as municipalities have better knowledge of both the quality of land resources and their economic potential.

The inertia of local self-government is directly tied to its functional limitations. When self-government lacks the ability to act, it cannot assume responsibility for ongoing processes. Without functional responsibilities, self-government remains a formal structure, incapable of fostering initiatives or implementing meaningful policies. Consequently, there is often a preference for appointing "compliant" personnel rather than strong leaders who would raise critical questions and demand expanded local powers. Due to systemic issues, the decentralization process is distorted, and local development is effectively stalled.

A system overhaul is necessary, as the current model fails to ensure effective governance. Local authority representatives lack sufficient knowledge and initiative, further slowing progress. Those of us studying these issues may see the problems more deeply than the officials in leadership positions. Systemic changes are therefore essential to ensure that local governance bodies are staffed not with compliant but with competent and proactive individuals.

Land reclamation is a key area where central government control restricts regions' ability to act independently. Reclamation reform began as early as 1997, when I served as head of administration in Bolnisi. At that time, the minister and deputy minister visited several times to discuss projects. The focus was on specific reclamation channels, for which a systemic-structural reform with local involvement was planned.

The primary task of reclamation is to maintain the central water supply line and ensure its efficient distribution. Water must come from designated sources and be properly allocated across various directions. For example, if 1,000 hectares of land span two or three villages, providing these lands with irrigation water requires a well-thought-out water supply regime.

This process should be managed by consumer associations, but today this mechanism is virtually non-functional. In the past, consumer associations received water from the reclamation system, kept records, and monitored consumption using meters. Associations could analyze village needs and determine which crops to plant and when, avoiding excessive water use. This model has been tested globally.

A principle must be introduced whereby reclamation management efficiency is divided across two main levels:

- Central reclamation, responsible for mainline supply, control, and active maintenance of water collection systems;
- Local consumer associations, managing water distribution in specific villages, accounting for needs, and ensuring optimal water use.

Currently, this system is almost non-operational in Georgia. Local self-government bodies and municipalities are practically uninvolved in the process. If municipalities had more powers and support, they could establish consumer associations, fostering proper reclamation management and agricultural development.

In the 2000s, centralized management of the reclamation system exacerbated its problems. The system was fully transferred to central control to attract international loans, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars for infrastructure modernization. However, the lack of transparency in the use of these funds made the system vulnerable to corrupt practices. Hiring in the reclamation sector was also marked by opacity and unqualified appointments based on personal connections. As a result, system efficiency declined: research data shows water losses in irrigation systems increased from 15% in 2013 to 19% in 2021 (387 million m^3), indicating infrastructure degradation and the inefficiency of centralized management.

Addressing these issues requires properly guiding the decentralization process. Strengthening local governance is critical to enable municipalities to manage reclamation systems themselves. Decentralization must not be limited to the formal transfer of powers—local levels need adequate financial and administrative resources.

The Ministry of Agriculture operates several programs, including *Plant the Future* and other projects aimed at rural development. However, the problem is that these projects are fully centralized. Local self-government is barely involved in these processes, reducing program effectiveness. This approach contradicts international practice, where the local level is actively engaged in rural development projects[12].

Due to centralized management, project implementation is often hindered. For example, when a decision is made in Tbilisi to launch an agricultural project in Gardabani or another district, numerous bureaucratic obstacles may arise locally. As a result, the project stalls, and its implementation becomes complicated due to the absence of necessary mechanisms at the local level.

Many obstacles are related to local self-government, where officials claim: "We're not involved; this isn't our responsibility." But if it's not their responsibility, then whose is it? The development of these territories is still necessary.

Therefore, local self-government must be functionally engaged in the process. Moreover, according to the principle of subsidiarity, certain powers should be delegated to the local level. Currently, this connection is severed, resulting in a lack of active and targeted actions.

Another critical issue is the management of rural development programs:

- Rural development programs are created by the Ministry of Agriculture and are formally aimed at village development, but they largely remain at the strategic level;
- The Ministry sets general guidelines, but local self-government bodies are not given a significant role in the process, which limits the effective implementation of programs;
- Villages are often not considered priority areas for development programs, hindering their economic and social progress.

Thus, despite the formal existence of rural development programs, centralized planning and a lack of communication and coordination at the local level pose a serious challenge.

There are instances when officials visit villages, gather residents, and ask: "We have a certain amount of funding; what do you want us to do?" However, such communication is often superficial, as some program conditions require public discussions at the local level. These discussions are ostensibly intended to identify village development priorities, but the Consequences frequently diverge. In most cases, residents request not projects vital for socio-economic development, but the fencing of cemeteries. This nationwide trend points to several factors: limited financial resources, village depopulation, cultural values prioritizing the preservation of ancestral graves, and practical needs, such as protecting cemeteries from livestock. This approach reflects the shortcomings of centralized planning for rural development programs and the absence of effective local-level communication, which obstructs long-term and sustainable development.

This raises the central questions:

- If the head of administration is a puppet, does the population have any opportunity to effect change?
- Is there a mechanism that would empower people to demand the implementation of meaningful projects?

A mentality that discourages active civic engagement has taken root in the regions. Socially vulnerable groups receiving various forms of assistance avoid conflicts, as maintaining "good relations" is a priority for many. A clan-based system has emerged, where certain groups control access to tenders—some in cleaning services, others in different sectors. The population is consequently kept under control, adopting a provincial mindset: "Better not lose what we have." Ultimately, everyone seeks to adapt to the situation and gain some benefit, rather than demand change.

---

[12] Mikaela Vasstrøm, The role of local government in rural communities: culture-based development strategies, Local Government Studies, Volume 45, 2019 - Issue 6.
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03003930.2019.1590200

If someone voices active protest or loudly highlights problems, they are simply labeled a complainer. This means that initiatives from the population are unlikely, as participation in this system feels comfortable, while change is perceived as a threat.

The solution lies in political will: changing the current situation is only possible with the political resolve of the ruling team. Proper decentralization would unlock more targeted program funding and opportunities for job creation. This would reduce migration, discourage people from leaving regions, and alleviate demographic challenges.

Since the early 2000s, the stripping of powers from local self-government bodies has reached a critical threshold. Even drinking water management was taken over by Tbilisi with the establishment of the United Water Supply Company, signifying central control over regions. The primary motivation was international loans and credits from organizations like the World Bank, the EBRD (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development), and others, which provided targeted funds with promises of development and the eventual return of functions to regions. However, this never materialized.

Ultimately, the funds were spent inefficiently, regions remained functionally weakened, and promises to restore powers went unfulfilled. The amounts allocated for water supply and other infrastructure projects are unjustifiably large, though they could have been implemented at lower costs. For example, tens of millions were spent on water supply for Norio and surrounding settlements, while, according to locals, one million would have sufficed for cheaper and higher-quality water. Unfortunately, the existing centralized system does not allow for such efficiency.

The main causes of the problem are:

1. **Centralized budget management**

- Funds are consolidated at the center, where they are inefficiently distributed;
- Local self-government bodies lack the authority to independently determine expenditures and select projects, which is highly inefficient.

2. **Deprivation of local powers**

- Self-government has been stripped of the ability to manage its own budget, as all decisions are made centrally;
- In the early 2000s, despite smaller local budgets, there was still room for independent decision-making;
- Today, significantly larger sums are spent in regions, but they are controlled by the center.

3. **Conformism and clan-based governance**

- Under the current system, the population has grown accustomed to patience and adaptation, seeing no alternative;
- Heads of administrations, mayors, and other local leaders are appointed based on familial, friendly, or personal connections;
- This is particularly evident in Gardabani, Lagodekhi, Sagarejo, and other regions, where officials are linked by kinship or past positions. Examples abound, and personalization here yields no results. The key issue is the persistence of clan-based governance, nepotism, and the formation of influence centers at the state's expense.

In summary, some people in power have focused on personal enrichment. Society, impoverished and apathetic, merely observes, reluctant to speak out, knowing nothing will change. It prefers to cling to the 200–300 lari received as social assistance rather than risk losing it.

D: What solutions do you see? Can legislation help? Let's not discuss changing the mentality—it's currently impossible.

Exp-1: A political force that seriously engages with this process must offer the population an alternative—a different perspective, a different daily life, a new opportunity. Only then might people reflect and support an alternative force, or the current leadership recognize the changed situation and initiate a new phase of "reform."

Of course, voting issues and electoral fraud are separate matters, but our research must demonstrate the need for a new political platform with a different approach. It's also crucial for local groups to emerge that, while not necessarily engaging in protest, discuss what I often address in the media: how to analyze resources and more effectively utilize local potential.

Community-based organizations could be a vital tool for this. However, since 2021, local NGOs in Georgia have had virtually no real influence.

Exp-2: Since the early 1990s, representatives of NGOs in Georgian have undergone extensive training in human rights, civic protection, and methods for working with diverse social groups. Over the past thirty 30 years, they have accomplished significant work—from participating in action plan development to legislative drafting and lobbying for reforms. Hundreds of training sessions have been held, and local networks of like-minded individuals have been established.

Unfortunately, the majority of the population remains passive, but there is a small, highly active segment—educated and proactive individuals respected in their communities. They could become the backbone of change. The involvement of women, in particular, is particularly impressive—theirs activity is particularly noteworthy.

NGOs possess modern methodologies for project planning, policy development, monitoring, and evaluation, and training delivery. International NGOs organizations have greatly invested heavily in their capacity-building. Some of the most engaging training sessions I've attended were organized by the EU and OSCE.

Exp-1: NGOs must raise issues in a way that leads to tangible Consequences. For example, a municipality has a four-year development plan, within which the leadership head is supposed to operate. But there's no mechanism to assess progress: what was achieved in the first year, what changed in the second, what improved in the third, and so forth. No one even raises such questions.

The municipality doesn't consider this their responsibility, and NGOs often prefer silence. The situation worsened after the mayor's position became elective, as municipal councils' powers were reduced, effectively eliminating oversight of municipal services. A range of issues requires reevaluation: reporting systems, transparency mechanisms, and local government activity. But in the current conditions, resolving these is impossible without political will. We observed this during meetings and interviews—dissatisfaction exists, but initiatives are absent. People lack demands that would drive real problem-solving.

Exp-2: In Lagodekhi, we met representatives from two NGOs who shared details about several implemented projects:

- **Solar panel installation**—placed on public buildings and provided to low-income families, aiming to promote solar energy and support regional development.
- **Waste management**—procurement of waste collection vehicles, installation of bins, and an awareness campaign on waste sorting. Today, Lagodekhi boasts one of Georgia's best municipal waste management systems.
- **Flood prevention**—following the Shovi tragedy, a water level monitoring project was launched. Poland supplied equipment, which was installed and transferred to local self-government. However, the system is non-functional because authorities haven't decided who is responsible for its maintenance. The only requirement is periodic battery replacement, which isn't being done.

These initiatives are significant, but their sustainability depends directly on effective collaboration with local authorities.

How are projects developed?

Donors announce grant competitions with clear guidelines on what can and cannot be funded. Upon receiving funding, a detailed project outline is attached to the donor contract, specifying goals, tasks, and a budget with every tetri accounted for. In my 25 years of experience, no donor has ever funded something like cemetery fencing.

Key regional challenges:

- Poor road conditions;
- Shortages of drinking water;
- Inadequate school and kindergarten infrastructure;
- Limited healthcare access.

Road conditions are particularly critical, determining whether villagers can reach district centers for documents or medical care. Poor roads inflate transport costs threefold, forcing reliance on taxis. Emergency ambulances may not arrive in time. Additional issues include waste management, irrigation canals, and air pollution, especially from industrial waste.

Children and youth lack basic amenities: development centers; sports fields; recreational facilities. After 6 p.m., villages "shut down," contributing to families relocating to Tbilisi.

Another serious issue is the expansion of the border zone, previously 500 meters but now nearly a kilometer. Many agricultural lands now fall within this zone. Local residents receive only three-month permits to access these lands. Obtaining a permit requires traveling to the district center, submitting an application, and returning. A one-way trip costs 30 lari, and the return is another 30 lari—60 lari total. With pensions at just 300 lari, this is a heavy burden, especially for the elderly. These are real and pressing issues in border municipalities. But the key question remains: who should address them?

D: What can you say about projects implemented at the local level by non-governmental organizations?

Exp-2: NGOs play a significant role in regional development, but their work is both impactful and contradictory. On one hand, they have clear strengths:

- They employ professional approaches, with expertise in planning, implementing, and monitoring projects;
- They receive support from international partners;
- They engage the most active segments of the local population, particularly women;
- They build networks of initiatives and promote values grounded in human rights.

On the other hand, practical challenges often arise:

- Weak coordination with local self-government bodies;
- Formal activities that fail to lead to tangible change;
- Focus on symbolic or secondary issues;
- Widespread passivity among the broader population;
- Limited influence on systemic, long-term change.

As a result, NGOs remain an important element of local democracy, but without political will, institutional support, and genuine integration into systemic processes, their potential remains untapped.

Exp-1: Financial resources allocated for rural development are often used inefficiently. For example, funds may be directed toward developing public spaces—parks, playgrounds, or bus stops—in settlements with minimal populations. In such contexts, cemetery improvement projects may be deemed more practical and prioritized. Such funding allocations may be driven by the need to expend budgets, which does not always align with strategic goals of improving quality of life in villages. At the same time, cemetery maintenance remains a pressing need, even in sparsely populated areas. This is tied to the cultural and emotional significance of these sites—people, despite population decline, continue to visit relatives' graves, maintaining ties to their ancestral lands.

Several major projects operate in Georgia, one of the most significant being ENPARD. Lagodekhi was among the first municipalities included in this program. Initially, ENPARD covered four regions, later expanding to eight, and then twelve municipalities. Lagodekhi became a "focus district," where NGO involvement significantly surpassed other municipalities.

The situation is starkly different in Sagarejo, Gardabani, and Kvemo Kartli in general, where NGOs exhibit minimal activity. NGOs cannot overhaul the system (nor is that their primary function) if local authorities lack sufficient responsibility and initiative. This mismatch results in projects being implemented formally but not systematically integrated with local governance. Consequently, their Consequences cannot be fully utilized in the long term.

In some cases, even minimal measures to ensure project sustainability are neglected. For instance, local self-government bodies often lack the authority to establish services responsible for maintaining new infrastructure. Equipment or technology provided through projects may go unused or break down because no individuals or structures are designated to manage them. Moreover, one of the most pressing issues for municipalities remains drinking water supply. This sector, which should fall under local authority, is now fully centralized, severely limiting effective local management. Central authorities lack the flexibility to address local issues promptly, while self-governments have neither the budget nor the legal mechanisms to make independent decisions. As a result, communities wait years for the implementation of vital infrastructure projects.

A similar situation exists with road infrastructure. The central budget funds only major highways, leaving minimal resources for municipal budgets to maintain internal, rural, or inter-settlement roads. Furthermore, the Municipal Development Fund manages projects that should, in principle, be

executed directly by local authorities. Ultimately, centralized management undermines the very purpose of the self-government institution.

Environmental protection issues are also entirely centralized, falling under the purview of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture. Municipalities lack sufficient authority to effectively oversee this area and, in some cases, are not even permitted to raise these concerns, as they fall outside their jurisdiction.

For example, in Gardabani, issues related to cement production, the thermal power plant (GRES), and other large enterprises posing environmental risks cannot be addressed by the municipality, as these matters are legally beyond its competence. Local leaders hesitate to raise such issues, as decisions are made in Tbilisi. However, local authorities should have the right to initiate such matters and demand compliance with environmental standards.

Irrigation management should follow the same principle. Today, the reclamation system is fully centralized, yet local self-governments need their own levers to regulate this sector. While discussions about transferring these powers have persisted for years, decentralization has not been realized in practice. Decentralization is critical, as municipalities require both functional and financial independence.

The system currently operates on inertia, with no motivation for change. If the central government decides to transfer more powers to self-governments, initiative will automatically shift to the local level.

D: How can local initiative emerge?

Exp-1: Initiative will arise when regions see that the central government is genuinely promoting decentralization. Then they will no longer tolerate the appointment of unqualified gamgebeli (district administration heads) and their deputies. Local self-government will begin to optimize administrative processes on its own.

Previously, personnel policies were far stricter. In the 1990s and 2000s, the first deputy head of a municipality was required to be an economist. This person interacted with the Ministries of Finance and Economy, and their candidacy was reviewed and approved by a ministerial board. In 1995, I myself was appointed to this role through such a process—following an interview. This practice enhanced the qualifications of personnel across the country.

Today, the situation has changed dramatically: local authorities lack both initiative and qualification requirements. Everything is dictated by the center. In the past, information was gathered locally, strategies were developed based on indicators, budgets were formed, and professionals were involved in the process. Now, everything is handed down “ready-made” from the center, with local self-government reduced to the role of a “compliant executor.”

This system does not strengthen self-government but erodes its actual functions. Politically, decentralization is discussed, but in practice, the opposite occurs. Regions can no longer make critical decisions on issues that directly affect them.

This issue demands urgent resolution if we are talking about genuine self-government rather than a formal structure. It’s not just a standalone topic—it’s a systemic problem evident at the local level. It feels as though much could be achieved, but local authorities are utterly powerless and incapable of independent action.

D: Why was the water supply situation in Iormuganlo particularly severe?

Exp-1: This is not new—since Soviet times, water supply systems in this region have been underdeveloped. Residents complain that lands were sold off, with some passing into Iranian ownership as early as the 2000s. Owners installed water systems at their own expense due to the lack of state support. For example, a few years ago, entrepreneur Temur Ugulava, linked to the Adjara Group and Rooms hotels, purchased land in Sagarejo. He invested 11 million lari to extend water supply over 11 kilometers.

The region’s climate is hot and arid, making agriculture nearly impossible without water access. The economic efficiency of water supply projects must be considered. Iormuganlo, part of the Sagarejo municipality, suffers acutely from water scarcity, while nearby Manavi faces no such issue. The Iori River, full-flowing and nearby, could address the problem, but challenges persist not only in Iormuganlo. Similar villages—whether Azerbaijani, Armenian, or Georgian—have been neglected for years. State resources have focused on district centers, stalling village infrastructure development.

Efforts to improve drinking and irrigation water supply remain grossly inadequate, limiting prospects for agricultural growth.

People cope as best they can: some fetch water from neighboring villages, others buy it from water delivery trucks, which is costly. The same situation exists in Marneuli, Gardabani, and other regions—forgotten villages, unresolved issues, and the same administrative helplessness.

Moreover, no large-scale water supply projects have been implemented in recent years. Neither the current nor the previous government has taken meaningful steps. Aging systems barely function, if at all. Without state-level acknowledgment of the problem and a reprioritization, nothing will change.

D: Tell us about the challenges of rural development in Georgia.

Exp-1: Rural development is critically important, but policies must be deliberate. Villages should be strong and sustainable, without aiming for an artificial 50/50 balance between urban and rural populations. Global trends show that modern civilization leans toward urbanization—a natural process. In Europe, the rural population is 9–12%, while in Georgia, it remains 40–42%. If the state aims to preserve rural populations, it must do so not artificially but by improving quality of life: infrastructure, economic opportunities, social services, and well-designed development plans that ensure not mere survival but village vitality. Rural policy should not be left to spontaneous processes—it must be strategically crafted and development-oriented. For example, peach production for export in the region has formed a kind of cluster, though farmers are not formally organized into cooperatives. This is a naturally evolved structure based on shared interests and infrastructure—warehouses, cold storage, and packaging facilities.

Such cluster development was enabled by the region's economic and natural potential. High-quality, in-demand products allowed for expansion: one farmer's initiative inspired others. This is an example of organic growth driven by competitive advantages. However, replicating this model in other regions is challenging due to insufficient financial resources. Systemic and programmatic approaches are needed to support organized production and sustainable development.

Local self-government should play a leading role in these processes, acting as the initiator and architect of local economic projects. A key priority should be a "bottom-up" programmatic approach. Unfortunately, in all three pilot municipalities we work with, such strategic vision and initiative are currently absent. Intensive orchards are currently left without water precisely when they need it most. This issue should be addressed at the local government level, as intensive orchards require water as early as March, along with constant nourishment, plant protection, and drip irrigation. However, the reclamation system is structured so that water supply only begins in late May or early June. There are no water storage reservoirs or reserves created early in the season—when they are most critical.

The centralized reclamation model negatively impacts farmers. Many farms have lost intensive orchards due to water shortages. This underscores the importance of active local government involvement. A responsible and competent leader, familiar with farmers' challenges, could take concrete steps, such as demanding: "Let's allocate funds for water storage systems so that water collected in March and April isn't scarce in May and June."

Water is distributed irrationally: much of the water from Marneuli flows to Azerbaijan in February and March, leaving local farmers short when it's most needed. This is why we emphasize the need for reclamation reform. Reclamation requires a second tier—local self-government bodies must be involved. The centralized system cannot address these issues; municipalities need the authority to resolve them independently.

When local authorities are invested, they demand change and act. For instance, when issues related to copper ore and quartzite mining were discussed, I served on the Supervisory Board under the ministry. I had the opportunity to voice opinions and demand clarifications. Although I lacked voting rights by law, as a district head, it was critical for me to address key issues—such as water discharge, pollution, environmental risks, and setting tax standards for mineral extraction, which directly impacted the local budget and socio-economic matters. Today, municipalities are entirely excluded from such processes: they have no right to participate, no ability to make demands, and certainly no authority to oversee. The example of Rustavi is telling. As a self-governing city, Rustavi independently developed several projects and allocated funds for air quality improvement and greening. The city negotiated directly with major polluters—cement, nitrogen, and other plants. Without local government involvement, these processes would have been impossible.

D: Why can't other municipalities do the same? It seems logical that if Rustavi can, others should be able to as well, right?

Exp-1: The problem is that local authorities fear raising contentious issues. A municipality hesitates to send an official notice about environmental pollution by a company or the need to impose fines, even though sustainable regional development should be a priority.

The reasons for this are:

- **Corruption and backroom deals**—informal agreements exist between businesses and authorities;
- **Conformism**—local leaders avoid changing the status quo or escalating conflicts;
- **Citizen passivity**—people are either uninterested in these issues or fear conflict, believing excessive activism could harm them.

The core issue is that citizens are unaware of their rights and responsibilities: they lack information, are not engaged in processes, and cannot defend their interests. As a result, the system remains inert, and change does not occur. Some residents take no action because they believe protest carries more risks than tangible benefits. This fear is amplified by local authorities' extensive leverage over communities.

There's another side to the problem. It's no secret that many people in the region are involved in shadowy or criminal schemes. The state uses this information as a tool for pressure. "The authorities hold people by this"—meaning information is leveraged to suppress resistance when needed. However, the solution lies not in destructive actions or confrontation but in forming groups that operate professionally and constructively, uniting honest and dedicated individuals genuinely committed to problem-solving. The key is political will. Without the ruling party's commitment to real change, progress will stall. The ruling force must take responsibility, and these issues should be central to the electoral agenda. If you commit to a decentralization strategy, implement it. Otherwise, it remains just useless paper.

Exp-2: What systemic factors hinder the effective resolution of violations identified by the Audit Service (e.g., poor-quality work by local self-government bodies), despite public reports? How can political will and the decentralization strategy be strengthened to ensure effective financial resource management and accountability at the local level?

Exp-1: The effectiveness of state audits and the implementation of their findings face several systemic challenges. Based on my experience as head of a department in the Chamber of Accounts, overseeing up to 120 auditors, I can confirm that the State Audit Service diligently performs its duties. The Law on State Audit strictly requires auditors to accurately document all identified violations, as any deviation from facts could lead to criminal liability. The facts presented by auditors must be objectively reflected in reports, while interpretation and decision-making fall to leadership.

Nevertheless, despite the high standard of audits, identified violations often go unaddressed. For example, publicly available reports highlight inefficient or poor-quality work by local authorities, yet no corresponding measures are taken. This problem is systemic and largely tied to a lack of political will, which obstructs accountability mechanisms. In some cases, individuals involved in violations—such as organizers of fraudulent tenders—not only evade responsibility but, with political backing, continue to hold high positions. This further exacerbates systemic flaws.

Addressing this requires not only maintaining high audit standards but also active civic engagement. Municipal residents and civil society organizations must intensify pressure, demanding public discussion of violations and appropriate action. Historically, during certain periods, such as under Shevardnadze's administration, these issues were discussed more transparently. However, since the 2000s, this process has significantly slowed, deepening systemic opacity.

I am convinced that accountability and effective governance can only be achieved through the combined efforts of civil society and political leaders. Identified violations must not remain dead letters in reports—they should serve as the basis for real change.

Local Self-Government and Sustainable Regional Development

(Analysis Based on Interviews with Experts and Respondents)

1. Decentralization of Local Self-Government

1.1. Low Effectiveness of Local Self-Government

Problem: Local authorities fail to fulfill their core functions, leading to social and economic challenges.

Description of the Problem: Municipal governance exists formally but, in practice, cannot effectively address infrastructure, economic, or social issues. Many decisions are made at the central level, disregarding local contexts.

Consequences: Municipalities are unable to implement meaningful policies, and residents perceive little benefit from local authorities' activities, negatively impacting regional development.

"Today, self-government has become a detached, formal structure because the decentralization plan is not being implemented." (Exp-G.Ts.)

"Local self-government in Georgia has become a fiction. If an order comes from above, they act; if not, nothing happens." (G-2)

Solutions:

- Strengthen the role of local authorities by granting them expanded powers;
- Enhance the qualifications of municipal leadership;
- Increase citizen participation in local decision-making processes.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Improving the effectiveness of local self-government is critical for citizens to feel its impact. Municipalities must gain greater autonomy and the ability to make decisions locally.

1.2. Centralized Management of Local Self-Government

Problem: Municipalities cannot make meaningful decisions due to control by central authorities.

Description of the Problem: Despite legal provisions for the independence of local self-government bodies, decisions are, in reality, made at the central level. Local authorities lack the tools to plan and implement projects essential for their regions.

Consequences: Regions cannot develop their own policies and remain dependent on central decisions, stifling local initiatives.

"The inertia of local self-government is directly tied to its functional limitations. Without the ability to act, it bears no responsibility. Lacking functional responsibilities, self-government is merely a formal structure, incapable of initiating or implementing real policy." (Exp-G.Ts.)

"Everything comes from above. If the top echelon fails to fulfill its obligations, the lower one certainly won't either." (G-1)

Solutions:

- Strengthen decentralization and ensure financial independence for local budgets;
- Transfer a greater scope of decision-making powers to municipalities;
- Develop local-level planning mechanisms.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Local development is impossible without decentralization. Self-government bodies must be empowered to make independent decisions and operate free from direct central government control.

1.3. Insufficient Funding and Misaligned Priorities

Problem: Local self-government bodies are financially dependent on central authorities, and local budgets are spent inefficiently.

Description of the Problem: Regions lack their own revenue sources, relying on funds allocated by the central government. As a result, many critical projects remain unimplemented, and available funds are often spent on non-priority objectives.

Consequences: Vital local initiatives are not realized, and resources are diverted to secondary purposes.

"We voice our opinions in commissions, include them in minutes, but no one listens—the decision has already been made by a few people." (G-1)
"The Municipal Development Fund manages projects that, in theory, should be carried out by self-government itself." (Exp-G.Ts.)
Solutions:
- Increase the financial independence of local budgets;
- Establish spending priorities based on community needs;
- Enhance citizen involvement in budget planning processes.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Financial independence and transparency in local budgets are essential for rational and effective resource allocation.

1.4. Low Efficiency in Municipal Service Delivery

Problem: Local authorities in municipalities often fail to deliver municipal services effectively due to bureaucratic procedures and systemic constraints.
Description of the Problem: Local self-government structures lack flexibility and responsiveness, hindering timely and high-quality service provision to citizens. Bureaucracy, prolonged decision-making processes, and insufficient qualifications or motivation among staff reduce the efficiency of municipal services. This fuels public dissatisfaction and limits local authorities' ability to address citizens' needs.
Consequences: Residents frequently do not receive essential services on time, eroding trust in local governance. Systemic constraints prevent self-government bodies from resolving issues promptly and effectively, hampering municipal development.
"Decentralization must not be limited to the formal transfer of powers—local levels require adequate financial and administrative resources." (Exp-G.Ts.)
Solutions:
- Reform municipal services and introduce staff retraining programs;
- Simplify bureaucratic procedures and optimize decision-making processes;
- Expand citizens' access to high-quality municipal services.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Citizens must have access to efficient and quality services. This requires modernizing management systems and training professional staff.

1.5. Lack of Local Policy and Suppression of Initiatives

Problem: Municipalities do not develop their own development strategies, and local initiatives are often blocked by central authorities.
Description of the Problem: Local self-government does not engage in long-term socio-economic planning. Activities are limited to short-term, primarily infrastructure-focused projects. Moreover, initiatives originating from regions are frequently rejected by central authorities, obstructing municipal autonomy.
Consequences: Regional economies and social sectors stagnate, local initiatives go unrealized, and self-government bodies are reduced to performing administrative functions.
"Local authorities have effectively lost managerial autonomy and can no longer act independently of the center." (Exp-G.Ts.)
"European experience shows that centralized policies require counter-initiatives from the local level." (Exp-G.Ts.)
Solutions:
- Empower local self-government bodies to develop and implement long-term development plans;
- Reduce bureaucratic barriers to approving regional initiatives;
- Encourage local economic and social initiatives based on actual community needs.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Local self-government must have greater autonomy and the ability to implement its own initiatives to ensure regional development tailored to local specifics.

1.6. Municipal Infrastructure Challenges

Problem: Municipal infrastructure is either underdeveloped or in disrepair, with many facilities poorly designed or misaligned with community needs.

Description of the Problem: Residents regularly face issues such as dilapidated roads, shortages of water supply and sewage systems, and neglected or non-functional municipal facilities. Infrastructure projects are often implemented without prior studies or needs assessments, leading to inefficient resource use.
Consequences: Infrastructure deficiencies hinder regional development, degrade quality of life, and limit business opportunities.
"First, you need to investigate what's underground—whether there are drinking water and sewage systems. Only then should you lay asphalt, not the other way around." (G-1)
Solutions:

- Plan infrastructure projects based on thorough studies and assessments of local needs;
- Strengthen monitoring and quality control of infrastructure project implementation;
- Ensure targeted use of funds allocated for infrastructure.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Infrastructure development must be a priority for local self-government, as it directly impacts improving living conditions and stimulating economic activity in regions.

1.7. Low Level of Economic Development

Problem: Municipalities experience stagnation in business development, lack investor interest, and offer few employment opportunities for local residents.
Description of the Problem: There is a lack of systematically planned economic development programs at the local level, resulting in a severe shortage of jobs in regions. Priority is often given to foreign investments, while support for local businesses remains minimal.
Consequences: Residents are forced to seek employment in other regions or abroad, exacerbating migration and reducing regional economic potential.
"Business does not thrive where a favorable environment is not created for it." (Exp-G.Ts.)
Solutions:

- Develop programs to support local businesses, providing growth opportunities for small and medium entrepreneurs;
- Revise investor attraction policies and create favorable conditions for them;
- Strengthen local economic planning institutions to ensure a stable and predictable business environment.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Sustainable economic growth is unattainable without supporting local businesses. Long-term programs aimed at job creation and fostering an entrepreneurial environment in regions are essential.

1.8. Insufficient Involvement of Municipalities in State Programs

Problem: The central government does not grant local self-government bodies a sufficient role in planning and implementing state programs.
Description of the Problem: Social and economic programs are developed at the national level without municipal involvement, resulting in a disconnect from the actual needs of local populations. Additionally, citizens are often unaware of existing state initiatives.
Consequences: Local authorities cannot effectively distribute aid, and residents remain without access to intended services.
"Rural development programs are currently designed by the Ministry of Agriculture, but only at a strategic level. The Ministry sets general directions, while local self-government is barely involved in the process. Villages lack official status, further hindering their development." (Exp-G.Ts.)
Solutions:

- Include municipalities in the planning and implementation of state programs.
- Strengthen cooperation between central and local authorities.
- Ensure widespread access to information about state programs through targeted awareness campaigns.

Conclusions and Recommendations: State programs cannot be effective without local self-government participation. Expanding municipal powers and actively involving them in regional development processes is essential.

1.9. Case Study: Delayed Kindergarten Construction in Chiauri Village, Lagodekhi Municipality

The prolonged delay in constructing a kindergarten in Chiauri village, Lagodekhi municipality, vividly illustrates systemic administrative issues that hinder improvements in local quality of life. Based on information from the official website of the Municipal Development Fund of Georgia, the following preliminary conclusions can be drawn:

Bureaucratic Inefficiency

The dramatic increase in project documentation—from 24 pages in 2020 to 225 pages in 2024—without tangible construction progress highlights excessive bureaucratization. Given that the project is funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), financial shortages are unlikely. This suggests:

- Low efficiency of the Municipal Development Fund, which centrally manages projects nationwide;
- Lack of clear procedures or overly complex processes, causing significant delays;
- Poor coordination among central authorities, the municipality, and donors.

Insufficient Accountability and Oversight

The project's incompletion five years after initial consultations (since 2019) indicates weak monitoring mechanisms. Despite active donor program involvement by the Fund, the situation reveals:

- Absence of effective tools for tracking progress;
- Limited accountability of implementers to the local community;
- Potential organizational or administrative failures in project execution.

Neglect of Local Community Needs

The needs of the rural community appear to have been inadequately considered in setting implementation priorities. This points to:

- Superficial consultations in 2019, lacking genuine incorporation of community input;
- Low relevance or urgency of the project from the perspective of local residents;
- Loss of public trust in authorities and the Development Fund due to unfulfilled promises.

Social and Demographic Consequences

The construction delay negatively impacts the village's social fabric:

- Limited access to preschool education reduces children's educational prospects and complicates daily life for families, particularly young parents;
- Increased migration, especially among young families, exacerbates demographic decline;
- Lack of social infrastructure diminishes the village's appeal as a place to live.

Administrative and Procedural Failures Despite Adequate Funding

Given ADB funding and active donor support, the issue is not financial. Delays indicate:

- Inefficient resource management during implementation;
- Technical, legal, or administrative complexities, reflected in the exponential growth of documentation;
- Insufficient adaptation of the Fund's centralized procedures to local conditions.

Missed Opportunities for Sustainable Development

The delay represents a loss of significant opportunities:

- To strengthen social infrastructure, which could enhance quality of life and support the local community;
- To develop human capital through access to preschool education, critical in rural areas;
- To demonstrate the effectiveness of donor programs, potentially attracting further regional investment.

Recommendations Based on Findings:

- **Streamline Administrative Processes**: The Municipal Development Fund must simplify bureaucratic procedures, establish clear timelines and project standards, and minimize excessive documentation.
- **Enhance Accountability**: Develop mechanisms for public oversight of project implementation, including regular reporting to residents and transparency in the use of donor funds.

- **Genuine Community Engagement**: Conduct meaningful consultations with local populations to ensure their needs and priorities are integrated throughout the project cycle.
- **Adapt to Local Conditions**: Ensure flexibility in the Fund's centralized procedures to account for the specifics of rural municipalities like Lagodekhi.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns**: Inform residents about project progress, participation opportunities, and donor roles to build trust and engagement.
- **Improve Coordination**: Establish effective collaboration among the Municipal Development Fund, local authorities, and international donors to address organizational bottlenecks.

This case clearly demonstrates systemic challenges in implementing infrastructure projects in Georgia, despite available funding and donor support. Resolution requires administrative reforms, increased accountability, and a focus on the actual needs of local communities.

2. Organizational and Personnel Challenges in Local Self-Government

2.1. Inefficient Management Structure

Problem: The structure of local self-government is not optimally organized, reducing its functional efficiency and slowing decision-making processes.

Description: Overloaded management systems, complex bureaucratic procedures, and poorly coordinated distribution of responsibilities hinder the effective operation of municipalities.

Consequences: Reduced administrative responsiveness leads to delays in project implementation and limits local authorities' ability to enact timely and impactful changes.

"Millions of lari that should have remained in local budgets are concentrated at the center. As a result, municipalities become even more dependent on central authorities and cannot fulfill their constitutional functions or make decisions independently." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Review and optimize the management structure of local self-government.
- Simplify operational processes and reduce bureaucratic barriers.
- Grant municipalities greater autonomy in decision-making processes.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Without modernizing the management system, local self-government cannot function effectively. A flexible, decentralized, and results-oriented management model must be implemented.

2.2. Staff Shortages and Lack of Qualifications

Problem: A shortage of qualified personnel in municipalities is a major barrier to effective governance.

Description: Local self-government bodies lack systematic staff retraining programs, and current employees often do not possess the necessary professional skills or competencies, hindering quality decision-making and efficient administration.

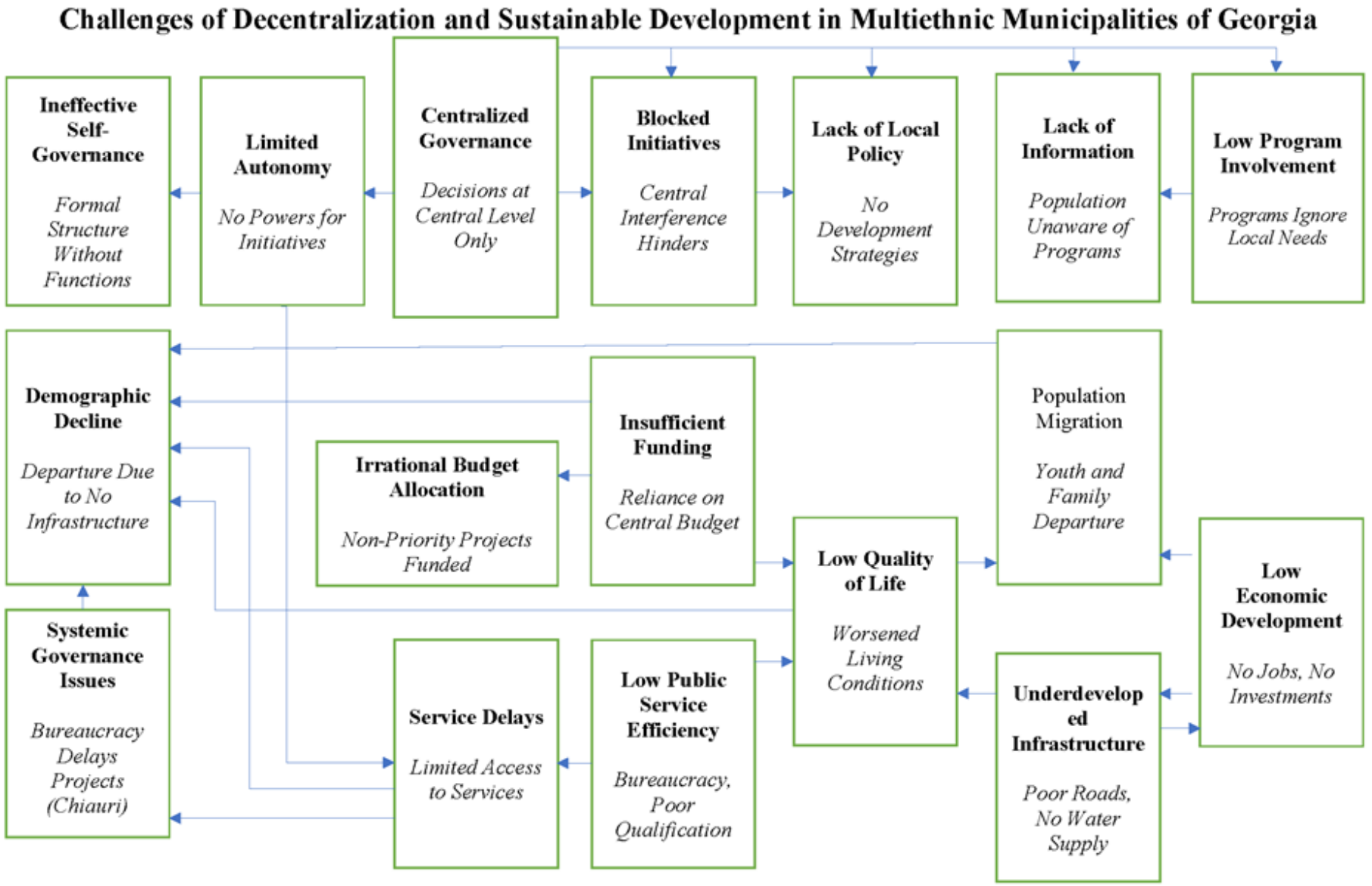
Consequences: Low professionalism results in diminished governance quality, inconsistent projects, and inefficiencies.

"Central authorities seek to subordinate local self-government as much as possible, so they appoint compliant, controllable personnel rather than professional, independent leaders." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Develop and implement effective mechanisms to attract qualified personnel.
- Establish regular retraining and professional development courses for public sector employees.
- Create analytical and advisory groups to support local self-government in improving management processes.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Staff shortages pose a systemic challenge for municipalities. Overcoming this requires proactive personnel policies focused on developing professional capacity, ultimately strengthening the institutional foundations of local self-government.


Challenges of Decentralization and Sustainable Development in Multiethnic Municipalities of Georgia
Ineffective Self-Governance
Formal Structure Without Functions
Limited Autonomy
No Powers for Initiatives
Centralized Governance
Decisions at Central Level Only
Blocked Initiatives
Central Interference Hinders
Lack of Local Policy
No Development Strategies
Lack of Information
Population Unaware of Programs
Low Program Involvement
Programs Ignore Local Needs
Demographic Decline
Departure Due to No Infrastructure
Insufficient Funding
Reliance on Central Budget
Population Migration
Youth and Family Departure
Irrational Budget Allocation
Non-Priority Projects Funded
Low Quality of Life
Worsened Living Conditions
Low Economic Development
No Jobs, No Investments
Systemic Governance Issues
Bureaucracy Delays Projects (Chiauri)
Service Delays
Limited Access to Services
Low Public Service Efficiency
Bureaucracy, Poor Qualification
Underdeveloped Infrastructure
Poor Roads, No Water Supply

2.3. Low Motivation in the Public Sector

Problem: Employees in local self-government lack effective motivation mechanisms, negatively impacting their work quality and initiative.

Description: Low salaries, limited career advancement opportunities, and bureaucratic obstacles significantly reduce the motivation of public sector workers.

Consequences: Decreased employee initiative and efficiency undermine the overall quality of municipal governance.

"At the local level, personnel are insufficiently qualified and lack initiative, leading to complete disorganization." (Exp-G.Ts.)

"We voice our position in commissions, include it in minutes, but no one listens because the decision has already been made by a few people." (G-1)

Solutions:

- Increase salaries for self-government employees and create tangible career advancement opportunities.
- Develop programs to incentivize professional development and boost motivation.
- Introduce performance evaluation systems and differentiated compensation to enhance motivation and the appeal of the public sector.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Low motivation remains a significant obstacle to improving local governance quality. Comprehensive reforms, including salary increases and strengthened internal motivation mechanisms, are needed to create a more effective, citizen-oriented municipal governance system.

2.4. Overburdened Management Processes with Bureaucracy

Problem: Excessively complex and inefficient bureaucratic procedures hinder local self-government operations and delay decision-making.

Description: Administrative processes are plagued by excessive bureaucracy, formal barriers, and prolonged decision-making timelines. Management practices are poorly oriented toward flexible and responsive administration, leading to systemic failures.

Consequences:

- Critical projects are not implemented on time;
- Citizens do not receive prompt services;
- Self-government bodies lose their capacity for effective action.

"Due to centralized management, project implementation is often obstructed. For example, when Tbilisi decides to launch an agricultural project in Gardabani or another district, numerous bureaucratic hurdles may arise locally. As a result, the project stalls, and implementation is complicated due to the absence of necessary mechanisms at the local level." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Implement programs to streamline bureaucratic procedures.
- Leverage digital technologies to enhance the speed and flexibility of administrative processes.
- Decentralize management to minimize the number of documents and approvals required locally.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Reducing bureaucratic barriers is a key condition for improving local self-government efficiency. An agile, flexible, and results-driven management model must be adopted to ensure higher-quality municipal governance.

2.5. Insufficient Autonomy of Local Self-Government

Problem: Municipalities lack sufficient financial and administrative autonomy, increasing their dependence on central authorities.

Description: Local self-government bodies are constrained in making independent decisions, as key issues—including financial and strategic ones—are resolved centrally. This stems from centralized resource allocation and limited municipal powers, reducing their ability to implement initiatives aligned with local priorities.

Consequences:

- Regions cannot pursue policies tailored to their actual needs;
- Local development potential is curtailed;

- Centralized approaches undermine self-government accountability to residents.

"People appointed to local self-government are not independent figures—they represent party interests more than they deliver real change for society." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Reallocate powers to grant municipalities greater autonomy.
- Reform local budget formation to ensure financial independence and enable independent development planning.
- Strengthen center-region collaboration, granting local authorities real powers and accountability for decisions.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Effective local self-government is impossible without autonomy. Enhancing municipal independence is not only a functional but also a democratic necessity. Local authorities must be empowered to set development priorities and act in the interests of their communities.

3. Financial Management Challenges and Inefficient Budget Expenditure

3.1. Lack of Transparency in Budget Formation and Expenditure

Problem: Municipal budgets are unevenly distributed, and citizens lack access to detailed information about financial allocations.

Description: Despite formal public access to budget information, residents have little insight into how funds are spent. Open data only lists broad expenditure categories, omitting details about contractors, project costs, and the appropriateness of budget use.

Consequences:

- Low transparency prevents effective public oversight mechanisms;
- Risks of corruption and inefficient budget expenditure increase.

"The budget lists 'infrastructure projects,' but what exactly was done and where—residents don't know." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Implement public monitoring mechanisms for budget expenditures;
- Make data more accessible and understandable to citizens, including through digital platforms;
- Require local self-government bodies to regularly report on project implementation.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Enhancing budget transparency is a critical factor in reducing corruption and ensuring financial efficiency.

3.2. Lack of Financial Independence

Problem: Local self-government bodies are fully dependent on central budget transfers, limiting their autonomy.

Description: Municipalities have insufficient own-source revenues, making it difficult or impossible to implement local projects.

Consequences:

- Financial constraints hinder the realization of long-term development strategies;
- Socio-economic stagnation risks emerge.

"A sustainable system of municipal financial independence is essential, where central transfer policies balance disparities while not obstructing local budget growth through own initiatives. The current model fails to address the challenges facing self-government." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Strengthen mechanisms for generating local revenues;
- Grant municipalities greater authority in tax administration;
- Pursue financial decentralization to enhance regional autonomy.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Financial independence of local budgets is the foundation for effective self-government operations and sustainable territorial development.

3.3. Inefficient Expenditure and Misaligned Priorities

Problem: Budget expenditures often do not align with actual priorities, leaving significant issues unresolved.

Description: Municipalities tend to allocate funds to short-term, politically expedient projects, while strategically vital infrastructure initiatives are delayed or underfunded.

Consequences: The absence of long-term development strategies leads to regression in municipal infrastructure and economies.

"Funds allocated for rural development are sometimes misallocated or spent inefficiently. For example, money goes to parks, playgrounds, and bus stops in villages where hardly anyone lives." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Reassess priorities to ensure expenditures meet community needs;
- Develop long-term infrastructure and economic development strategies;
- Ensure active public participation in budget planning to enhance engagement and accountability.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Accurate prioritization and strategic planning are essential for sustainable regional economic development.

3.4. Insufficient Oversight of Work Performance

Problem: Work performed by contractors lacks adequate oversight, leading to poor quality and misappropriation of budget funds.

Description: Budget funds are often spent on infrastructure projects executed with violations and substandard quality. Due to inadequate oversight mechanisms, municipalities cannot ensure proper monitoring of completed work.

Consequences:

- Poor-quality projects emerge;
- Resources are wasted;
- Infrastructure requires constant rehabilitation.

"If a project is done incorrectly, no one asks why or analyzes the results."

"Raising this issue would expose the entire local self-government system. But at the political level, no one addresses these questions—they lack the competence. Even the opposition is unqualified. They don't know where to strike or what the real problem is." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Strengthen municipal oversight mechanisms for contractors;
- Involve the public and independent auditors in project monitoring to enhance transparency and reduce corruption risks;
- Implement transparent mechanisms for public procurement contracts.

Conclusions and Recommendations: High-quality and transparent management of infrastructure projects is a prerequisite for sustainable and effective regional development.

3.5. Challenges in Financing Infrastructure Projects

Problem: Insufficient funding for critical infrastructure projects delays the implementation of vital initiatives.

Description: Due to limited budgetary resources, essential projects (e.g., road repairs, water supply, sewage systems) are either postponed or partially implemented with delays.

Consequences: Irregular funding causes persistent disruptions in municipal infrastructure operations and fuels public dissatisfaction.

"Central authorities lack the flexibility to address issues quickly. Local authorities have neither the powers nor the budget to resolve anything. As a result, people wait years for critical infrastructure projects." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Develop long-term financial strategies for infrastructure project implementation;
- Seek alternative funding sources at both local and international levels;

- Establish clear prioritization mechanisms to direct resources to the most critical projects.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Sustainable infrastructure development requires stable financial resources. New funding models are needed to ensure continuous municipal progress.

3.6. Politicization of Finances and Prioritization of "Privileged" Projects

Problem: Local budget expenditures are often driven by political interests rather than actual community needs.

Description: Municipal funding is frequently allocated to politically advantageous projects rather than those genuinely needed by residents.

Consequences: Politically influenced decisions leave critical community projects underfunded.

"Projects are funded based on connections, while ordinary citizens are ignored."

"This harmful practice will only change through public exposure and high transparency." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Implement an objective and transparent budget allocation system based on actual needs;
- Reduce the influence of political interests on local self-government operations;
- Strengthen public monitoring mechanisms for fair and effective financial resource distribution.

Conclusions and Recommendations: A politically neutral budgeting system ensures fair and effective expenditures, strengthens local self-government, and enhances its effectiveness.

4. Legal and Administrative Challenges in Local Self-Government

Legal and administrative challenges in local self-government undermine its independence, efficiency, and flexibility in governance. Limited municipal powers, an unstable legislative environment, low democratic participation, and bureaucratic barriers significantly hinder the functioning of local authorities.

4.1. Limited Powers of Local Self-Government

Problem: Despite proclaimed decentralization, municipalities lack sufficient authority to make independent decisions.

Description of the Problem: Local self-government bodies cannot pursue independent policies, as key decisions are made at the central level. Local decisions are often formal and do not reflect genuine autonomy.

Consequences:

- Municipalities are unable to respond to local population needs;
- The effectiveness and public trust in self-government decline.

"Local self-government bodies cannot make independent decisions on many issues. Almost all significant decisions are made at the center." (Exp-G.Ts.)

"The Ministry of Economy manages land resources as if they were commercial commodities. Cases like this occur in Lagodekhi, Sagarejo, and Gardabani. Local self-government, with rare exceptions, plays no role in these processes. This clearly contradicts the principles of decentralization and effective governance." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Expand municipal powers in line with local needs;
- Limit central authority interference in local decision-making;
- Strengthen decentralization through legislative reforms.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Genuine autonomy for local self-government is critical for regional development and sustained response to community needs.

4.2. Formal Nature of Legislation and Lack of Implementation

Problem: The legislative framework is formalistic and fails to drive systemic change, leading to instability in the self-government system.

Description of the Problem: Georgia has joined a number of international agreements that call for strengthening local self-government and institutional development. However, despite years of discussion, no significant systemic reforms have been implemented. The existing legal framework

remains largely formal, characterized by frequent changes and weak enforcement, which undermines its effectiveness.

Consequences:

- Formal regulations create instability, reducing self-government effectiveness;
- Municipalities cannot implement strategic plans, limiting development;
- The absence of systemic reforms erodes public trust and increases dependence on central authorities.

"Georgia has signed several international agreements, including the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Based on this, multiple decentralization strategies have been developed, including the current Decentralization Strategy for 2020–2025, which expires this year. However, despite prolonged discussions, no significant systemic changes have occurred." (Exp-G.Ts.).

Solutions:

- Develop a clear and long-term legislative framework to ensure stable local governance;
- Implement legislative changes through public consultations and democratic oversight;
- Involve local self-government representatives in drafting legislative reforms.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Legal stability for municipalities is a key condition for long-term local development planning.

4.3. Challenges in Local Self-Government Elections

Problem: Municipal elections often occur in low-competition environments, limiting democratic governance.

Description of the Problem: Public trust in local elections is low, enabling many local leaders to retain positions for years, while electoral competition remains weak.

Consequences:

- Local power structures stagnate;
- Community interests are inadequately represented.

"Elections to local self-government bodies are often formal, and people don't believe their vote can change anything." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Increase public engagement in the electoral process;
- Implement independent and transparent election monitoring;
- Reduce the use of administrative resources to prevent electoral manipulation.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Fair and competitive elections are the foundation of democratic legitimacy for local authorities.

4.4. Corruption and Nepotism

Problem: Corruption and nepotism remain persistent issues in the local self-government system.

Description of the Problem: Hiring in public institutions is often based on personal connections, undermining governance efficiency. Tenders and budget allocations frequently favor a narrow circle of influential individuals.

Consequences:

- Nepotism and corruption erode self-government effectiveness;
- Public trust in state institutions declines.

"The main problem is that local positions are often allocated based on family ties and personal interests, depriving governance of efficiency." (Exp-G.Ts.)

"A clan-based system has emerged in regions, where certain groups control tenders—some in waste management, others in different sectors. As a result, the population is also controlled, with nearly every family trying to adapt to this reality and extract some benefit." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Strengthen audit and oversight mechanisms in local self-government;
- Introduce strict penalties for corruption and nepotism;
- Establish independent anti-corruption bodies to review tenders and public appointment procedures.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Combating corruption and implementing transparent governance will enhance trust and efficiency in local self-government bodies.

4.5. Administrative Bureaucracy and Delayed Decision-Making

Problem: Cumbersome bureaucratic procedures hinder the adoption of new initiatives.

Description of the Problem: Significant changes or initiatives must navigate numerous administrative stages, delaying processes. This reduces the speed of decision-making and the responsiveness of municipalities.

Consequences:

- Bureaucratic routines impede timely responses from local authorities;
- Implementing innovative projects becomes challenging.

"Many decisions require navigating such complex bureaucratic procedures that self-government bodies cannot respond in a timely manner." (Exp-G.Ts.)

"Budget allocations may be driven by the need to expend planned funds, which does not always align with strategic goals for improving rural quality of life." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Simplify administrative processes and decision-making mechanisms;
- Introduce electronic governance systems to reduce bureaucratic delays;
- Strengthen systems for evaluating municipal administrative efficiency.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Streamlining bureaucratic procedures and enhancing governance flexibility are essential for improving the functionality of local self-government bodies.

5. Social and Demographic Challenges as a Consequence of Weak Local Self-Government

The inefficiency of local self-government bodies directly exacerbates social and demographic challenges. Municipalities struggle to address critical issues such as employment, youth support, ethnic minority integration, and social service development. As a result, regions face rising unemployment, migration, social isolation, and family breakdown.

5.1. Unemployment and Migration: Weaknesses in Local Economic Policy

Problem: Municipalities lack effective mechanisms to promote employment. There are no plans for local economic development, no new jobs are created, and programs to support small and medium-sized businesses are absent.

Description: A primary driver of migration is the slow development of local economies. Due to a lack of jobs and low wages, residents are forced to seek work in other regions or abroad. Local self-government bodies fail to formulate effective economic policies, leading to low employment levels and economic stagnation.

Consequences:

- Residents migrate abroad for work, causing local labor shortages.
- Local economies stagnate due to insufficient investment.

"They leave Karajala to work in Poland, Germany… What else can they do? There's no work here, and they need to feed their families." (G-3)

"Many have left. Before, mostly Georgians went to Russia and Kazakhstan, but now the trend has changed—people from our village are even going to America and Mexico." (L-2)

Solutions:

- Develop local economic programs focused on supporting employment and small businesses.
- Attract investments by simplifying business registration procedures and creating a favorable environment for investors.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The economic role of self-government must be strengthened to curb migration and retain populations.
- Local incentives to support small and medium-sized businesses are essential for job growth.
- Reducing migration depends on self-government's ability to develop local economies and create viable employment opportunities.

5.2. Seasonal Employment: Lack of Local Labor Market Regulation

Problem: Much of the population is employed only seasonally, and municipal programs to ensure stable, guaranteed jobs are absent.

Description: In agrarian regions, most work is seasonal, with many employed for only a few months annually, after which they lose income sources. This leads to economic instability and forces residents to migrate to other regions for work.

Consequences:

- Unstable employment leads to poverty and financial uncertainty.
- Residents are compelled to migrate seasonally to other areas.

"Dependence on seasonal products creates serious problems." (L-3)

"The main issue is the lack of processing industries. We're not developed enough to fully utilize seasonal produce. Plus, imported products are often cheaper, making competition difficult." (L-3)

"Shepherds are currently in the mountains, herding sheep and cattle in Javakheti." (S-1)

"Only 40% of residents remain locally; the rest have gone to Javakheti, Tusheti, Tabatskuri, the Bakuriani mountains, and Upper Adjara." (S-2)

Solutions:

- Regulate seasonal employment by creating alternatives for stable jobs.
- Support small enterprises through local programs to foster small business development.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- High seasonal employment highlights labor market instability, increasing economic risks and migration.
- Policies to support stable employment in municipalities are needed to improve living conditions and reduce seasonal migration.
- Supporting small enterprises must be prioritized to create permanent jobs.

5.3. Youth Migration: Lack of Education and Opportunities

Problem: Local levels lack programs to support vocational education, and economic opportunities for youth are severely limited.

Description: Youth in regions have little access to vocational education or local employment opportunities, forcing them to relocate to cities or abroad, creating demographic challenges.

Consequences:

- Young people leave regions en masse to seek work abroad.
- The demographic situation worsens, with an increasing proportion of elderly residents.

"Youth from the region go abroad for manual labor jobs. Doctors leave the country, and regions face a shortage of them." (G-1)

"Youth mainly go to Poland and Germany. They used to go to Turkey, but not anymore—the Turkish lira has devalued." (S-1)

"Children and youth lack essentials: development centers, sports facilities, entertainment venues. After six in the evening, villages practically 'freeze.' This has driven many families to leave." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Develop vocational education programs to provide youth with local training and job prospects.
- Create economic incentives through targeted programs to retain youth in regions.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Youth migration from regions clearly indicates a lack of local educational and development resources.
- Establishing vocational centers and creating employment conditions are essential to give youth incentives to stay.
- Developing targeted youth programs should be a strategic priority for municipalities.

5.4. Challenges in Integrating Ethnic Minorities: Lack of Local Inclusive Policies

Problem: Municipalities do not implement effective policies for integrating ethnic minorities, with no corresponding programs in education or employment.

Description: Ethnic minorities lack access to quality education and state programs, leading to their isolation and exacerbating social issues.

Consequences:

- Ethnic groups remain isolated, potentially causing social conflicts.
- They lack full access to education and economic opportunities.

"Lessons are taught in Georgian, but outside school, at home, and in the village, everyone speaks Azerbaijani." (G-4)

"They talk about integrating the Azerbaijani people, but integration must be mutual. I don't feel it from the Georgian community." (S-2)

"Sadly, language is a barrier; people struggle even to write applications." (G-1)

"You have to know the language… This is our homeland too. We've lived here for centuries, our ancestors are here, our graves—there's no other homeland for us." (G-3)

Solutions:

- Implement inclusive education and employment programs to promote integration.
- Reduce language barriers by ensuring state programs provide comprehensive instruction in the state language.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The integration of ethnic minorities remains an unresolved issue, deepening social divisions and hindering coexistence.
- Inclusive education and employment policies must be integrated into local self-government efforts to ensure equal access to resources for all groups.
- Reducing language barriers is a prerequisite for social inclusion, requiring robust state support.

5.5. Family Breakdown and Lack of Social Support

Problem: Migration leads to children being left without parents, and municipalities lack social protection mechanisms.

Description: Amid social and economic hardships, families are increasingly unable to provide children with a healthy and safe environment. Local authorities lack sufficient resources and mechanisms to address this issue. The absence of psychosocial support and family vulnerability result in children being left without proper care, leading to psychological trauma.

Consequences:

- Cases of parents leaving children to seek work abroad increase, heightening the risk of psychological trauma.
- Local authorities cannot provide adequate socio-economic support to such families.

"In our village, out of 300 children, at least one family member is involved in labor migration." (L-2)

"Mothers and fathers go abroad, mainly to Greece and Italy, and children are left in the care of other family members." (L-2)

"Women in Turkey did heavy manual labor: working on plantations, carrying loads in terminals, or laboring in homes under harsh conditions." (S-2)

"Local authorities often fail to address the needs of ethnic minorities due to a lack of policies for their inclusion and representation." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Strengthen municipal child and family protection services to enhance social support.
- Reduce migration by creating local conditions that enable residents to stay and thrive.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Family breakdown and child vulnerability are among the gravest consequences of migration, requiring immediate municipal action.
- Developing social services and targeted family support must be central to local policy.
- Reducing migration is only possible if local self-government provides viable alternatives for families to remain in their communities.

6. Challenges in Agriculture and Ecology

The low efficiency of local self-government directly impacts agriculture, ecology, and natural resource management. The critical sectors of crop farming and livestock, vital to regional economies, face numerous challenges. Concurrently, deteriorating environmental conditions hinder both agricultural development and residents' daily lives.

6.1. Land Management Issues: Unregulated Property Allocation

Problem: Land privatization and distribution lack transparency, preventing local farmers from effectively utilizing land resources.

Description: Although some lands have been privatized, many farmers still cannot register their plots. Municipalities lack clear land management policies, and land transactions often favor foreign buyers, disregarding local community interests.

Consequences:

- Local farmers cannot register land, limiting access to agricultural subsidies.
- Municipalities lack comprehensive data on land use.
- Communities lose land resources, constraining agricultural development.

"You've seen those orchards - those used to be our pastures, but the Ministry of Economy sold them to Iranians" (S-1)

"Villages have pastures, but they are mainly used by individuals connected to the government. These users pay only an irrigation fee, avoiding other taxes, although officially, according to the registry, the land is registered on the balance sheet of the Ministry of Economy or local self-government.(G-1)

"In Georgia's case, land policy is almost entirely centralized. The Ministry of Economy treats land like a commodity. There are many examples—in Lagodekhi, Sagarejo, and Gardabani. Local self-government, with rare exceptions, plays no role in these processes. This clearly violates the principles of decentralization and effective governance. Land resource management is fully centralized, and local authorities bear little responsibility or influence." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Simplify land registration processes to ensure transparency and accessibility for local authorities.
- Develop municipal land allocation policies prioritizing local farmers.
- Create a long-term land management strategy to streamline property registration.
- Ensure transparent privatization and ownership transfer processes, focusing on local community interests.
- Establish a detailed cadaster and database with information on land ownership, use, and status.
- Provide free legal and advisory support to farmers during registration.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Centralized land resource management violates decentralization principles and limits opportunities for local farmers.
- Local self-government must play a stronger role in land allocation, prioritizing community needs.
- Simplifying land registration will unlock access to subsidies and other development opportunities.

6.2. Water Resource Scarcity: Inefficient Irrigation Systems

Problem: The shortage of irrigation water remains one of the most acute challenges for agriculture, caused by outdated or nonexistent irrigation systems.

Description of the Problem: Water resource management lacks a long-term strategy. Despite the presence of rivers in regions, irrigation channels are poorly designed or require rehabilitation.

Consequences:

- Farmers are forced to seek alternative water sources at their own expense, increasing costs and reducing economic efficiency.
- Crop quality and quantity decline, lowering agricultural profitability.
- Water scarcity limits the diversity of agricultural crops.

"You could say irrigation water is a problem. The Iori River is far from here, and corn needs watering too—it's tough." (S-1)

"Land reclamation is a key area where central government control limits regions' ability to act independently…" (Exp-G.Ts.)
"Irrigating one hectare costs 70 lari, but no infrastructure improvements have been made." (L-6)
"The system relied on integrity, which was fairer, but now taxes are set on broader principles." (L-3)
"When irrigation water is released, drinking water stops." (L-6)
"In the 2000s, centralized management of the reclamation system deepened its problems. The system was fully transferred to central control to attract international loans worth hundreds of millions of dollars for infrastructure upgrades. However, the lack of transparency in using these funds made the system vulnerable to corrupt practices." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Upgrade irrigation systems: Local authorities must develop infrastructure projects to restore and enhance irrigation channels.
- Implement municipal water management programs: A strategy for efficient water use and accessible farmer support mechanisms are needed.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The absence or inefficiency of irrigation systems significantly hinders agricultural development and increases poverty levels in regions.
- Modernizing irrigation infrastructure and involving local municipalities in water resource management are essential.
- Reducing centralized control and addressing regional needs will improve system efficiency.

6.3. Pasture Shortages: Decline in Livestock Production

Problem: The lack of pastures drives farms into economic crisis.

Description of the Problem: In many municipalities, pastures are either privatized or not managed or regulated by local authorities. As a result, farmers cannot adequately sustain livestock, impeding agricultural development.

Consequences:

- Farmers are forced to scale down livestock production.
- Local markets face growing shortages of meat and dairy products.

"There aren't even a pasture here… The village has no pastures. You can't even keep one cow for the family's or children's needs." (S-1)
"Land resource management is entirely centralized, and local self-government has practically no responsibility or influence over the process." (Exp-G.Ts.)
"At the local level, land must be accompanied by a development plan and responsibility. It shouldn't just be a technical 'sale' process, as it is today, but a strategically considered political and economic decision that promotes sustainable socio-economic development in the region." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Restore and manage pastures: Municipalities must establish clear regulations for fair pasture distribution and accessibility.
- Conduct an inventory of pasture status and ensure targeted use of common-use lands.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Pasture shortages not only jeopardize livestock prospects but also hinder regional economic development, degrade rural quality of life, and contribute to urban migration.
- A land-use policy based on social justice and agricultural management principles is needed to support stable livestock development and the preservation of border villages.
- Land use must be accompanied by local strategic planning and socio-economic responsibility.

6.4. Environmental Pollution and Mismanagement of Natural Resources

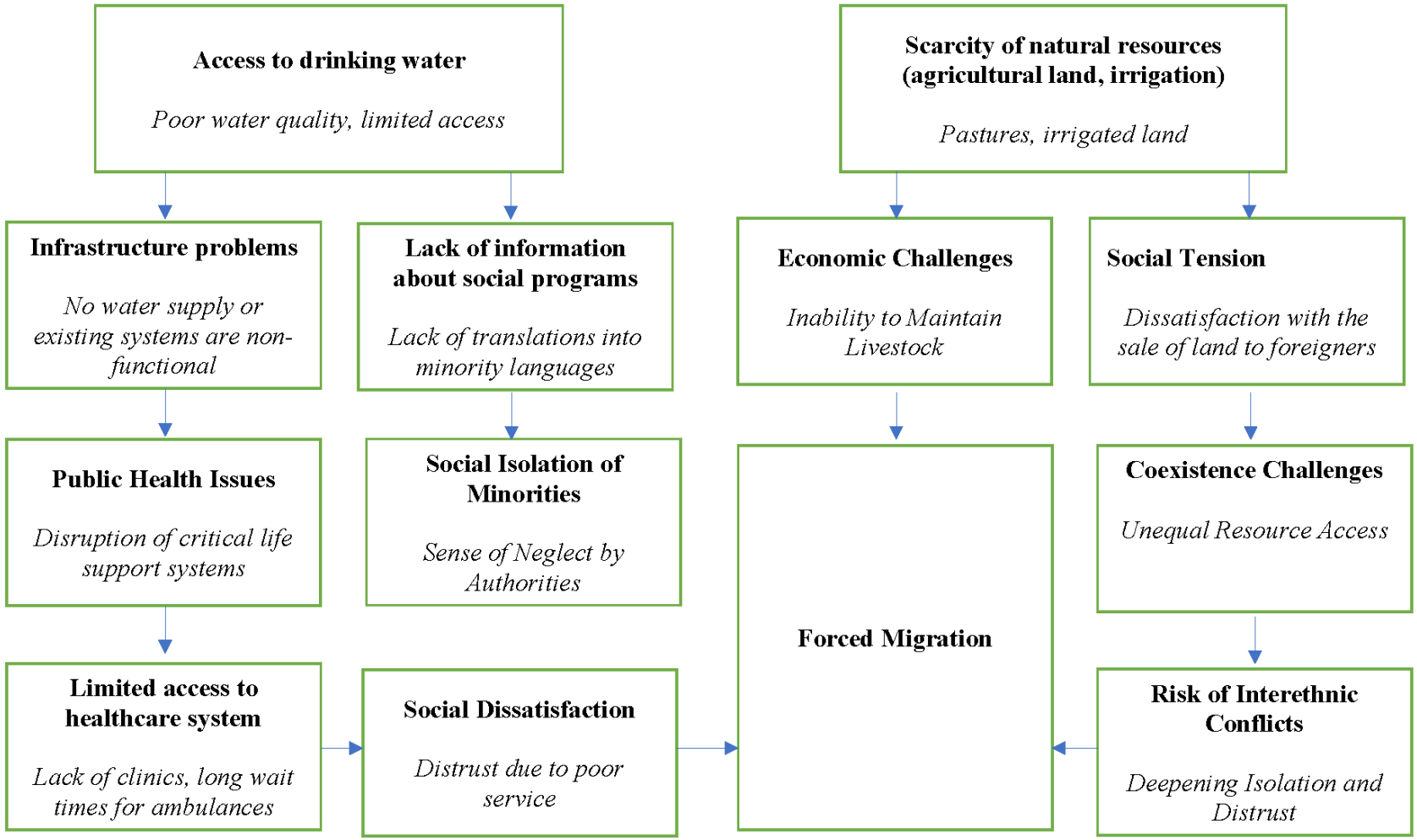
Problem: Industrial waste, uncontrolled use of chemicals, and inefficient waste management pose serious threats to the environment.

Description of the Problem: Local self-government bodies fail to enforce environmental standards. Drinking water, soil, and air are contaminated.

Consequences:

- Contaminated drinking water increases disease risks.

Causal Relationship Scheme: Scarcity of Vital Resources and Social Barriers in Border Multiethnic Municipalities of Georgia



"The Ministry of Agriculture runs several programs, including 'Plant the Future' and other projects aimed at rural development. However, the problem is that these projects are entirely centralized. Local self-government has practically no involvement in these processes, which reduces their effectiveness." (Exp-G.Ts.)

Solutions:

- Simplify the subsidy system for farmers by streamlining processes and reducing bureaucratic barriers to make subsidies and grants more accessible to small and medium-scale farmers.
- Establish agricultural consultation centers at the local level to assist farmers with documentation and accessing subsidies.
- Review agricultural financing mechanisms, prioritizing the needs of small-scale farmers to ensure they are not overshadowed by large agribusinesses.
- Increase the involvement of municipal self-government bodies, working in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture to develop region-specific programs.
- Strengthen informational campaigns to make subsidy opportunities clear and accessible, boosting farmer

7. The Role of Community and NGOs in Strengthening Local Self-Government

Community and non-governmental organizations play a significant role in advancing decentralization and strengthening local democracy. They contribute to socio-economic development, respond to community needs, and create models for citizen engagement.

However, collaboration with local self-government bodies often remains inertial or formal. Despite the potential of community groups to initiate meaningful change, they lack sufficient tools, access to decision-making processes, and legal guarantees for sustained involvement.

7.1. Collaboration Between Local Self-Government and Community Organizations

Problem: Collaboration between local self-government bodies and community/non-governmental organizations is neither systematic nor sustainable. One-off projects or campaigns fail to evolve into consistent practices.

Description of the Problem: The scope of work of community and non-governmental organizations is diverse, covering nearly all critical areas—education, violence prevention, ecology, infrastructure, and more. These projects are characterized by community-tailored approaches and practical Consequences. However, their weakness lies in the lack of long-term stability. Projects often cease after completion due to the absence of corresponding implementation mechanisms and resources from local authorities.

Moreover, collaboration with local self-government frequently remains at a technical level. There is no systemic vision for leveraging and empowering active community groups.

Consequences:

- Projects are not integrated into community systems after completion.
- Resources lose effectiveness once projects end.
- The potential for community empowerment is not fully realized.

"NGOs are trying, Zhvania's school is trying, the Teachers' House is trying to help teachers learn Georgian." (G-4)

"We handed the system over to local self-government… Now these systems are stalled." (L-3)

"Community organization projects work best because people genuinely care about the results. The main problem is that projects are too short—3 years isn't enough." (L-5)

"We're implementing environmental projects… We installed waste containers and purchased a garbage truck… Energy-efficient technology models have been introduced in schools." (L-3)

Solutions:

- Local self-government must become an active partner, not just a beneficiary.
- Municipalities should establish mechanisms for strategic collaboration with communities.
- Civic initiatives should be transformed into systemic components, such as part of education, social protection, or environmental standards.

- Project planning must include mechanisms for sustainability and subsequent phase development.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Community organizations are a vital resource for community empowerment, which local self-government should systematically rely on.
- Short project cycles and low accountability from self-government hinder long-term impact.
- The state and municipalities must ensure the sustainability of locally driven practices through appropriate budgets and effective administration.
- In all areas addressing community needs (education, environmental protection, social issues), local authorities should be defined as equal and accountable partners.

7.2. Potential of Community Organizations and Collaboration Challenges

Donor requirements can limit access to funding for local community-based organizations (CBOs), and projects implemented by foreign or Tbilisi-registered non-governmental organizations may not always fully align with the unique needs of local communities.

Description of the Problem: Donors often set stringent criteria, such as experience in managing large budgets, proficiency in foreign languages, and familiarity with technical terminology. As a result, grants are predominantly awarded to foreign or Tbilisi-based NGOs. While these projects typically meet donor standards, they may not fully address the specific priorities and characteristics of local communities. Meanwhile, local CBOs, composed of residents from villages and municipal towns, have a deep understanding of local challenges and enjoy significant community trust. However, limited technical resources, lack of specialized skills, and insufficient institutional support hinder their ability to meet donor requirements.

Consequences:

- Projects are often short-term and donor-driven, which may limit their long-term impact and sustainability.
- Local community needs may not be fully addressed, affecting project effectiveness.
- Public trust in initiatives and collaborative processes may decline.
- Limited community engagement risks reducing social cohesion.

"Community organization projects work best because people genuinely care about the results… Projects are too short—3 years isn't enough." (L-5)

"NGOs often come with some trainings… We need concrete, practical help." (L-2)

"A project not based on the community? It won't work. We need to ask people what they need." (L-5)

"The problem is the idea of diversity… As soon as you speak up, they label you a foreign agent.(G-4)

Solutions:

- Develop a legal framework and mechanisms for collaboration between local organizations and self-government bodies.
- Promote the development of CBOs and their partnerships with NGOs.
- Donors (foundations and individuals in Georgia) should simplify grant application processes for CBOs and provide technical training to enhance project management skills.
- Projects should be based on local community needs and designed for longer durations (8–10 years).

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- CBOs are valuable partners for local self-government and donors.
- To enhance effectiveness, projects should be long-term and community-needs-driven.
- Collaboration with local self-government, including co-financing of projects, fosters sustainability and strengthens donor confidence.
- Project evaluations should focus on tangible improvements in community life.

7.3. Framework for Sustainable Collaboration Between Local Self-Government and Community-Based Organizations

Problem: The lack of a systematic approach to collaboration and an underdeveloped legal framework limits the effectiveness of partnerships between local self-government bodies and community-based organizations.

Description of the Problem: In Georgia, one of the challenges for local self-government is the absence of an established model for effective collaboration with non-governmental and community-based organizations. Despite the successful efforts of many organizations in areas such as education, environmental protection, social support, and youth development, their initiatives are not fully integrated into the local governance system.

Local self-government bodies often view the non-governmental sector as a temporary partner rather than an integral part of community development. This perspective can constrain systematic collaboration, hinder the long-term sustainability of programs, and reduce the efficiency of resource utilization.

Members of community-based organizations (CBOs), who live and work in specific municipalities, frequently serve as the primary active force in their communities, initiating social projects, conducting trainings, supporting families and children, and engaging in environmental initiatives. They possess a deep understanding of local needs and maintain strong connections with the population.

However, their potential is not yet fully realized due to the following factors:

- The system for legal and financial support of their activities is underdeveloped.
- Standardized collaboration formats are lacking at the municipal level.
- Financial sustainability for community-driven initiatives is not ensured.

Consequences:

- Local resources are underutilized.
- Community-oriented programs may cease after funding ends.
- Community needs are not always reflected in municipal strategies.
- Public trust in self-government bodies may decline.

Quotes:

"Community organization projects work best because people genuinely care about the results. But projects are too short—3 years isn't enough." (L-5)

"Our organization collaborated with the municipality: we installed waste containers and introduced wind generators and biogas systems in schools." (L-3)

"The main issue is that organizations come temporarily, hold meetings, but the population remains in the same condition." (L-3)

Solutions:

Legal recognition and inclusion of community organizations in governance processes

- Municipalities should develop consultation and collaboration formats to systematically involve CBOs in strategic planning and local policy development.

Creation of financial sustainability mechanisms

- A system of national grant funds, supported by domestic resources, should be established to sustain local initiatives.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Community-based organizations (CBOs) are vital partners for local self-government. Supporting them fosters greater public trust in authorities and improves the quality of local decisions.
- Effective collaboration requires local self-government bodies to have access to tools, resources, and a legislative framework to ensure ongoing partnerships with CBOs.
- Local development should rely on active, legitimate, and sustainable participation from the civil sector, complementing state efforts.

8. General Conclusions and Recommendations

The complexities and challenges of the local self-government system highlight the need for fundamental reforms in the existing governance model. Strengthening local self-government, effectively implementing decentralization, and increasing public engagement are essential steps to ensure sustainable development and democratic governance.

8.1. What Needs to Change in the Local Self-Government System?

- **Real autonomy for municipalities** – Self-government bodies should be granted greater financial and administrative authority, enabling them to independently set priorities and manage local resources.
- **Financial decentralization** – Local budgets should include more financial resources, reflecting funding for activities based on the needs of the population.
- **Citizen engagement** – Local governance must ensure direct citizen participation in decision-making processes, which will enhance public trust.
- **Inclusive governance** – Strengthening the involvement of ethnic minorities, youth, and women is essential for democratic governance.
- **Efficient administration** – Bureaucratic processes should be simplified, municipal management capacities strengthened, and the qualifications of public servants improved.

8.2. Which Reforms Should Be Prioritized?

Governance Reforms

- **Strengthening decentralization** – Local authorities should be granted more powers and resources to improve local services.
- **Enhancing the role of municipal councils** – The independence of local representative bodies should be increased.
- **Implementing electronic management systems** – Automation of administrative services and greater transparency are necessary.

Social and Economic Reforms

- **Promoting employment** – Programs for local economic development should be created to support job creation and small businesses.
- **Strengthening social services** – Local governments should enhance socio-economic support programs.
- **Developing education and vocational training** – Access to professional and higher education for youth must be improved.

Environmental and Infrastructure Reforms

- **Environmental management** – Stricter environmental protection regulations and the implementation of ecological programs are needed.
- **Infrastructure development** – Municipal and rural infrastructure should be improved and modernized.
- **Efficient management of natural resources** – Mechanisms for the sustainable use of water, pastures, and land should be established.

8.3. Possible Development Scenarios

- **Optimistic scenario** – Strengthening local self-government, effective decentralization, and increased citizen engagement will drive economic and social development in the regions.
- **Realistic scenario** – Gradual reforms and the introduction of innovative models will improve governance, but this requires a long-term strategy and consistent political support.
- **Pessimistic scenario** – Maintaining the status quo will lead to the weakening of democratic institutions, deepening economic stagnation, and increased migration from regions.

Conclusion

Sustainable development and the creation of a safe environment are impossible without effective local self-government. A new policy must be developed to address contemporary challenges and ensure the well-being of the population and regional development.

Recommendations for Regional Advantage Analysis and Smart Specialization

Regional Advantage Analysis and Smart Specialization

- It would be advisable to consider conducting an analysis of the competitive advantages of the agricultural sector in each region, taking into account climatic, soil, and economic conditions.
- It is recommended to develop regional smart specialization plans focused on unique agricultural products (e.g., organic produce, local varieties, traditional products) to facilitate their integration into national and international markets.
- Strategies could benefit from incorporating digital technologies (e.g., IoT, drones, sensors) to enhance production efficiency and optimize resource use.

Adoption of Digital Technologies and Precision Agriculture

- It is suggested to gradually introduce precision agriculture technologies, such as GPS navigation, satellite monitoring, and automated farm management systems.
- Consideration could be given to developing platforms to support data sharing among farmers, agro companies, and research centers (e.g., for weather forecasting or soil analysis) to optimize processes.
- It would be beneficial to establish support mechanisms for agro-tech startups through grants and tax incentives.

Development of Agricultural Cooperation and Cluster Models

- It is advisable to encourage the formation of agricultural cooperatives that unite small and medium-sized farms to enable shared access to markets, technologies, and financial resources.
- It is recommended to foster the development of agro-industrial cluster infrastructure, encompassing production, processing, and logistics, while leveraging local innovations and resources.
- Supporting the development of regional brands (e.g., protected geographical indications) could enhance the value and recognition of products in the market.

Strengthening Human Capital and Education

- It would be valuable to organize training programs for farmers and rural entrepreneurs on modern technologies, marketing, and sustainable practices.
- Collaboration with universities and research centers to develop educational courses aligned with smart specialization in agriculture could be considered.
- It is recommended to create online platforms to facilitate distance learning and knowledge sharing, particularly with the involvement of rural communities.

Investment in Infrastructure and Green Technologies

- Modernizing rural infrastructure, including irrigation systems, storage facilities, and transport networks, could contribute to improving supply chain efficiency and supporting the sustainable development of the agricultural sector.
- It would be advisable to integrate renewable energy sources (e.g., solar panels, biogas systems) into agriculture to reduce costs and environmental impact.
- Supporting research and the adoption of sustainable practices, such as regenerative farming and organic production, could enhance ecological stability.

Integration with International Markets and Initiatives

- It is suggested to actively participate in international transport routes (e.g., the Middle Corridor) to expand agricultural exports and improve logistical efficiency.
- Facilitating product certification in line with international standards (e.g., ISO, GlobalGAP) could significantly enhance competitiveness in global markets.
- Developing partnerships with international organizations (e.g., FAO, EBRD) is important for attracting investments, strengthening technical assistance, and integrating regional expertise.

Support for Rural Communities and Economic Diversification

- Promoting the development of agritourism and ecotourism as components of smart specialization could create additional income sources for rural populations and better realize cultural and ecological potential.

- Encouraging non-agricultural economic activities (e.g., crafts, small businesses) in rural areas could support economic diversification and sustainable employment.
- It is recommended to establish targeted grant programs for young people focused on implementing innovative projects in agriculture and rural development, particularly within digital, ecological, and entrepreneurial frameworks.

Comparison of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Georgian Local Self-Government Code

The European Charter of Local Self-Government (1985) and the Georgian Local Self-Government Code (2014, with subsequent amendments) establish the legal framework for the functioning of local self-government bodies. Despite formal recognition of the Charter's principles in Georgian legislation, significant differences in the implementation of the subsidiarity principle, delegation of powers, and resource distribution create substantial obstacles to municipal autonomy.

1. Autonomy and Delegated Powers

Charter (Articles 3, 4, 5, 8):

- Emphasizes the need for local self-government bodies to have full and exclusive powers, with flexibility in their implementation to account for local conditions.
- Delegated functions must be accompanied by corresponding resources.
- Administrative oversight is limited to legality checks and must be proportionate.

Georgian Code (Articles 15–18):

- Distinguishes between own and delegated powers, but delegated functions are subject to strict control by sectoral ministries (Article 17.5). For example, the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development retains control over land resource management without transferring powers to municipalities, despite international and national practices confirming the effectiveness of local management in this area.
- The Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure has retained some exclusive municipal powers, including local infrastructure management, for two decades.
- Even for "own" powers, central authorities can impose mandatory standards and regulations (Article 18).

Problem: Centralized control and lack of flexibility in delegating powers limit municipalities' genuine autonomy, contradicting the subsidiarity principle enshrined in the Georgian Constitution (Article 7).

2. Financial Independence and Revenue Sources

Charter (Article 9):

- Municipalities must have sufficient own resources, including local taxes, with rates they can set independently.
- Financial equalization systems should not restrict autonomy.
- Local authorities should participate in the allocation of transfers.

Georgian Code (Articles 16, 17):

- Recognizes the right to local taxes and budgets, but tax rates are restricted by national legislation.
- Delegated resources are calculated and approved by the central government, without municipal involvement in determining formulas or distribution priorities.
- The absence of a transparent financial equalization system exacerbates inequality between wealthy and poorer municipalities.
- Border municipalities (e.g., Lagodekhi, Gardabani, Sagarejo) receive no revenue from transit activities (customs duties, excises), despite infrastructure wear and environmental impacts.

Problem: Dependence on state transfers, limited tax powers, and the lack of a share in transit revenues threaten municipalities' financial sustainability, particularly in border regions, violating the Charter's principles.

3. Legal Guarantees and Oversight

Charter (Articles 8, 11):

- Oversight must be strictly legal and proportionate.
- Municipalities have the right to judicial protection of their powers.

Georgian Code (Articles 7.4–7.6):
- Provides the right to appeal to General and Constitutional Courts to protect powers.
- However, central authorities can set standards for own powers, expanding oversight beyond legality.

Assessment: Formal compliance exists, but broad administrative control may undermine municipal independence.

4. Citizen Participation and Local Democracy

Charter (Article 3.2, 10):
- Requires direct elections of local bodies.
- Encourages inter-municipal and cross-border cooperation.

Georgian Code (Articles 6, 20–22):
- Fully complies with direct election norms.
- Supports the right to associations and joint projects, including international cooperation.

Assessment: Formal compliance exists.

5. Boundary Changes and Consultations

Charter (Article 5):
- Boundary changes require mandatory consultations with the population, preferably via referendum.

Georgian Code (Articles 10–12):
- Provides for consultations with sakrebulo (municipal council) and the population, but decisions are made by Parliament upon government proposal, without mandatory referendums.

Problem: The absence of mandatory referendums reduces citizens' influence on territorial changes, only partially aligning with the Charter.

Key Discrepancies and Risks

Area	Charter Requirement	Georgian Code Status	Assessment
Financial Autonomy	Freedom in tax collection and distribution	Limited rates, central dependence	🔴 Violation
Delegated Powers	Adaptation to local conditions	Strict ministerial control	🟠 Restriction
Administrative Oversight	Limited to legality, proportionate	Control based on expediency	🟠 Risk
Boundary Consultations	Mandatory consultations, preferably referendum	Consultations without binding force	🟠 Partial
Financial Equalization	Must not limit powers	Lack of transparent system	🔴 Deficiency
Transit Revenues	Share in locally generated revenues	No share for border municipalities	🔴 Violation

Managing Transit Processes in Border Municipalities: Challenges and Legal Inconsistencies

Border municipalities such as Lagodekhi, Gardabani, and Sagarejo receive no revenue from transit activities (e.g., customs duties, excises), despite significant infrastructure wear and environmental consequences. This contradicts Article 9 of the Charter, which requires municipalities to have a share in revenues generated on their territory and participate in managing related processes. Centralized management of transit flows (e.g., decisions on checkpoint construction or logistics) excludes local bodies from decision-making, reinforcing their marginalization and violating the subsidiarity principle.

Conclusion

The Georgian Local Self-Government Code formally incorporates the Charter's key principles, but significant discrepancies persist in several areas:

- Financial and functional autonomy is limited due to central government interference, particularly in delegated powers and transit revenue management.
- The lack of an effective financial equalization system exacerbates inequality among municipalities.
- Territorial change decisions are made without mandatory public participation, such as referendums.
- Centralized control by ministries (e.g., Economy and Infrastructure) hinders the implementation of the subsidiarity principle, despite its constitutional recognition.
- To achieve full compliance with the Charter, Georgia should:
- Strengthen municipal financial independence, including the right to set tax rates and participate in transfer allocation.
- Limit administrative control over own powers.
- Introduce mechanisms for public participation, including local referendums.
- Develop compensation mechanisms for border municipalities facing burdens from transit activities.

Disproportionate Participation of Georgia's Border Municipalities in Transit Benefits

Context

Within the framework of studying the development of Georgia's border municipalities (Lagodekhi, Gardabani, Sagarejo, Sadakhlo, etc.), it has been identified that local self-government bodies do not participate in the distribution of revenues from intensive transit flows across state borders. This contradicts international standards outlined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government and poses significant challenges to the sustainable development of these regions.

Key Facts

- Border municipalities host key transport routes: road, rail, and freight flows, including movements through border checkpoints (BCPs).
- Infrastructure projects (road construction, BCPs) are primarily funded by international donors or state programs, with no involvement of local authorities in decision-making.
- Municipalities bear the costs of ongoing road maintenance, street lighting, and sanitation of adjacent areas but receive no corresponding funding.
- Despite high economic activity related to transit, revenues (customs duties, excises) are centralized and not allocated to local budgets.

Problem: Local self-government bodies receive no direct revenues from transit activities and are excluded from:

- Distribution of customs revenues, excises, or fees for infrastructure use.
- Decisions on planning logistics zones, BCP placement, and development of service infrastructure.
- Opportunities to leverage transit potential for the local economy (e.g., creating logistics hubs, service stations, warehouses).

This leads to:

- Overloading and wear of local infrastructure (roads, utilities), increased noise, and emissions, particularly critical in ecologically and demographically sensitive areas.
- Social tensions, especially in ethnically diverse regions, where the lack of transit benefits exacerbates feelings of marginalization.
- Worsening demographic trends, including the risk of population outmigration from border areas due to limited economic prospects.

- Weakened trust in state institutions and reduced motivation for municipalities to engage in infrastructure development.

Legal Perspective

According to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, border municipalities are entitled to participate in revenues and management related to their territories. The current situation in Georgia contradicts these standards:

Provision	Charter Standard	Situation in Georgia
Financial Participation	Local authorities are entitled to adequate resources, including revenues from local activities (Art. 9.1–3).	Transit revenues are centralized, with municipalities receiving no share.
Consultation	Local authorities must be consulted in advance on matters affecting them (Art. 4.6).	Participation is limited; decisions are made at the central level.
Equalization	Financially weaker municipalities should be compensated without loss of autonomy (Art. 9.5).	No sustainable compensation mechanism exists; the current transfer policy is ineffective.

The violation of the subsidiarity principle, enshrined in the Constitution of Georgia (Art. 7), is evident in the fact that decisions affecting border areas are made without considering local needs and capacities. International practice shows that, even with the dominant role of central authorities in border management, municipalities receive a percentage of transit revenues, which is logical and supports infrastructure and communication development.

Recommendations

To address the identified issues and align practices with the Charter, a comprehensive approach is proposed, requiring coordination with the Ministry of Finance:

Compensation Mechanisms:

- Introduce percentage-based distribution of transit revenues (customs duties, excises) to border municipalities to cover infrastructure and environmental costs.
- Develop targeted transfers addressing demographic and migration challenges in border areas.

Participation in Management:

- Establish mandatory consultations with municipalities during the design and operation of BCPs, logistics zones, and infrastructure projects.
- Create interagency commissions with local authority participation to manage border corridors.

Local Economic Development:

- Promote the creation of transit-related service infrastructure (parking, service stations, warehouses, hotels) through local investment programs.
- Support programs aimed at population retention and reducing outmigration.

Transfer Policy Reform:

- Revise existing tax rates and norms to ensure additional revenues for border regions.
- Improve the financial equalization system, which currently does not account for the specifics of transit zones or compensate for their burden.

Conclusion

The centralization of transit revenues in Georgia's border municipalities contradicts the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and undermines the sustainability of local communities. The lack of financial resources and participation in management exacerbates infrastructure, environmental, and demographic issues, particularly in ethnically and socially sensitive regions. Introducing revenue-sharing mechanisms and strengthening the role of municipalities in decision-making will create conditions for equitable development of border areas, enhance public

trust, and ensure compliance with international standards. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach involving the Ministry of Finance and a revision of the current transfer policy.

Note: *This report was prepared within the framework of analyzing Georgia's compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government. It is updated based on expert and budgetary information.*

Strengthening Local Self-Governance and Developing a New Governance Model

Concept and Vision

Key Challenges

The local self-governance system in Georgia faces significant structural and functional challenges, including centralized decision-making, limited citizen engagement, and difficulties in ensuring transparency. These factors hinder the resolution of social, economic, and environmental issues, eroding public trust in local authorities. Additionally, the lack of political, economic, and administrative autonomy in municipalities restricts their ability to effectively address local needs.

To overcome these challenges, a comprehensive structural and institutional reform is required, grounded in the principle of subsidiarity. This principle entails redistributing authority and resources to enable decision-making at the level closest to citizens. Implementing subsidiarity necessitates decentralizing functions, deconcentrating governance, and strengthening local self-governance bodies both politically and financially.

Objectives

The goal is to establish an updated model of local self-governance rooted in democratic principles, which will:

- Develop robust local self-governance institutions with clearly defined functional responsibilities.
- Enhance the financial and administrative independence of municipalities.
- Expand opportunities for managing property and resources, while improving mechanisms for their assessment, evaluation, and administration.
- Promote active citizen participation through accessible, transparent, and inclusive mechanisms that ensure openness and accountability.
- Support sustainable regional development through targeted socio-economic programs and the integration of inclusive economic principles, with progress measured regularly using a well-being index.
- Embed the principle of subsidiarity to enable decision-making at the local level, improving efficiency and alignment with community needs.

Expected Outcomes

- Increased municipal autonomy in decision-making and resource management.
- Greater public trust in local authorities through enhanced citizen participation and transparent processes.
- Creation of conditions for sustainable and inclusive regional development based on local resources, expertise, and strategic programs.

Key Directions and Steps

1. Developing a New Governance Model

- **Expanded Authority**: Gradually transfer additional responsibilities to municipalities in areas such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, tailored to local contexts and needs.
- **Pilot Regions**: Select several municipalities to test the new governance model, followed by an analysis of outcomes and the dissemination of successful practices.

- **Support for Local Communities**: Facilitate the creation of community and professional associations to coordinate local initiatives and strengthen their role.
- **Citizen Engagement**: Develop a user-friendly digital platform for collecting proposals, facilitating discussions, and participatory budgeting, complemented by offline formats such as public forums and hearings.

2. Strengthening Local Budgets and Economies

- **Budget Transparency**: Establish mechanisms for public oversight of budgetary processes, ensuring open access to financial information.
- **Local Revenue**: Support municipal tax autonomy and the development of municipal enterprises to increase independent funding sources.
- **Economic Development**: Promote small and medium-sized enterprises by simplifying administrative procedures and creating favorable conditions for investment.

3. Managing Agriculture and Natural Resources

- **Agricultural Programs**: Develop initiatives to support agricultural production and processing, adapted to local conditions.
- **Agricultural Land Planning**: Implement a zoning system to optimize the use of agricultural land.
- **Sustainable Resource Use**: Analyze local resources (human, land, water, and mineral) to create plans for their rational utilization.
- **Land Policy**: Streamline land registration processes through transparent and accessible mechanisms.
- **Irrigation Infrastructure**: Gradually modernize irrigation systems to enhance agricultural efficiency.
- **Environmental Initiatives**: Support projects focused on environmental protection and sustainable development.

4. Social Policy and Demographic Issues

- **Youth Support**: Expand opportunities for professional education, scholarships, and employment to encourage youth engagement in regions.
- **Population Retention**: Improve social and economic conditions (e.g., employment opportunities, access to services, housing) to ensure sustainable residency and reduce rural migration.
- **Integration of Ethnic Minorities**: Develop inclusive education and cultural support programs to strengthen social cohesion.

5. Improving Administrative Processes

- **Anti-Corruption Measures**: Establish local anti-corruption mechanisms to ensure accountability and protect public interests. Community involvement in decision-making enhances legitimacy and oversight quality.
- **E-Governance Development**: Introduce accessible electronic services to reduce bureaucratic barriers and provide efficient, transparent citizen services.
- **Procurement Transparency**: Strengthen monitoring of procurement processes through open tenders, electronic platforms, and systematic public audits.

6. Empowering Civil Society Organizations and Citizens

- **Partnerships with CSOs**: Collaborate with civil society organizations to develop and implement programs supporting local initiatives.
- **Budget Monitoring Support**: Create opportunities for citizens to participate in overseeing budget expenditures.
- **Local Media Development**: Support independent media to enhance information accessibility and foster public dialogue.

Strategic Steps

1. Forming a Proactive Movement

- Establish regional groups to coordinate reform efforts.
- Prepare active citizens for participation in local elections to represent community interests.
- Develop civic education programs to raise awareness of participation opportunities.

2. Partnerships and Resource Mobilization

- Foster cooperation with national and international partners to secure financial and technical support.
- Study and adapt global best practices in decentralization and sustainable development.

3. Pilot Projects

- Select pilot municipalities based on geographic and socio-economic diversity (including rural, mountainous, and urban areas) to develop versatile approaches.
- Formulate a flexible strategy informed by pilot project outcomes, with regular evaluations and adjustments.

Conclusion

This plan provides a strategic framework for collaborative efforts to create a more effective and transparent local self-governance system in Georgia. It aims to foster strong partnerships among citizens, civil society organizations, and local authorities.

A fair, inclusive, and sustainable local governance system is achievable only through open dialogue, multi-level engagement, and a flexible, accountable approach to reforms.

"If a law on philanthropy and public partnership is enacted, civil society organizations will gain the ability to work consistently toward social justice and peace. Citizens will engage as philanthropists, fostering democratic development, while local organizations will be strengthened not only through grants but also through community-driven contributions, including targeted donations and volunteer engagement. This approach paves the way for a robust civil society that shares responsibility for the nation's future, grounded in collective accountability and collaborative efforts.
— Taso Foundation, 2014

Civil Society as the Foundation of Sustainability

Challenges and Prospects for Georgia's Border Communities

The socio-economic challenges in Georgia's border regions, particularly in rural communities, are marked by poverty, inadequate services, and persistent security concerns. These issues underscore the critical need for active public engagement. In this context, civil society organizations (CSOs), including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs), serve as essential bridges between the state and local populations, fostering democratic governance and sustainable development.

Community organizations play a pivotal role in villages inhabited by ethnic minorities, where access to institutional resources is often limited. By empowering communities to articulate their needs, advocate for their interests, and participate in local policy-making, these organizations enhance civic awareness. This transforms society from a passive recipient of political decisions into an active contributor to local and national development.

This chapter draws on an interview with expert Marina Tabukashvili (Exp. M.T.), focusing on the civil sector's role in strengthening rural communities through decentralized governance and collaborative management. It highlights ethnic diversity as a resource for integration and examines challenges faced by CSOs, including financial constraints and restrictions on civic space. The chapter explores how partnerships between community organizations and local self-governments can boost citizen participation and trust, particularly in multi-ethnic regions. It also emphasizes the need for legal frameworks to support philanthropy, ensure stable funding, and address the stigmatization of the civil sector, which hinders its potential. By blending theoretical and practical perspectives, this chapter envisions how Georgia can harness its diversity to build an inclusive, sustainable, and democratic society.

Democracy as a Way of Life

Interview with Expert Marina Tabukashvili

It's becoming clearer every day that danger is everywhere—not just in border villages, but even more so, and in a very specific way, in the administrative border zones. The threats, of course, come in all shapes and sizes, from food security to the safety of what we eat…

I've worked in Western Georgia, right on the administrative border with Abkhazia, as well as in the villages of Shida Kartli and Imereti. Some places were so tense you couldn't drive through—armed men were aiming at you from three sides. Locals would warn us about it. We had to trek long distances on foot. They'd shoot at cars, but not at people walking. I remember, just two days after we left the village of Dvani, a car exploded at the entrance—a young man died. Turned out, a mine had been planted. That kind of danger is still there today because the conflict isn't resolved; it's frozen.

Nobody seemed eager to end the conflict—has that changed now? Nobody tried to put an end to it, to make the dangers tied to these so-called ethnic conflicts disappear. There was hostility, and some had a vested interest in keeping these areas as constant danger zones. Take, for example, how convenient these zones were for those smuggling untaxed goods… Contraband. There were people who profited from it. And there were cases when "law enforcement" from both sides would strike deals and work together in these dirty schemes. What I mean is, it was mostly ordinary people, the local residents, who longed for peace and safety. There was no political will or action to match the situation. Armed folks moved back and forth across the lines, and so it went…

If you think about it, any ordinary person would get it: border villages need to thrive. If a country wants to peacefully reclaim those territories, you've got to show the people on the other side that your pensions are better, your schools and kindergartens are flourishing, everything's moving forward. That, despite the differences, there are similarities too—shared interests, shared problems that can be tackled together through cooperation. Take the invasion of the "American butterfly," or later, the marmorated stink bug. Both directly threaten people's livelihoods, wiping out their crops. This hits the border regions just as hard, if not harder. Those places need care, action, and collaboration to overcome these challenges.

Back then, I was working in Samegrelo when the "American butterfly" was rampant, and I was right there in the border villages. I knew for sure—people were crossing the border back and forth—that the situation was the same over there, especially in the Gali district, no doubt about it. I kept saying: this is it, the real chance for you, as a state, to tackle the problem on your side and theirs too. It's the kind of moment when you can come to an agreement—work together, cooperate.

In principle, if someone wants to peacefully reclaim lost territories, they've got to focus on the border regions—not just the villages right on the line. That's where you need to build a life that shows everyone: in this country, an ordinary person who works hard lives well. It shouldn't just be about scraping by from one autumn to the next. In almost every village, I heard the same thing: "If we make it through April, the grass will grow, we'll cook some pkhali (local plant based dish), and somehow get by…"

By April, all their supplies run out. They call it the toughest month. And that's when the question hits you: what's the state even interested in? When I said you can't separate the problems of border villages from the broader issues of rural Georgia, that's exactly when the question of local self-governance comes up—as a democratic institution. It's directly tied to the fair distribution of resources. It's about making sure a person, right where they live, feels like the master of their own land.

I see the same connection with environmental safety. Trash has taken over all of Georgia. Ten years ago, we didn't even have the bins we have now. In the gorges, by the rivers… plastic bags hanging from the trees… Nobody bothered to tell people: that cellophane you love so much, when the shopkeeper puts everything in a bag, and the shopkeeper's all pleased, thinking they're serving you in a "civilized" way—it's not good. That's why we need serious efforts, campaigns, to raise environmental awareness.

The media never cared about the villages—just like no government ever cared about the non-governmental sector, the civil society organizations. So, I'm both surprised and delighted that, for a

big chunk of the population—sadly, mostly just in Tbilisi and the big cities—protecting civil society has suddenly become important. These are democratic institutions, built and driven by people's initiatives, the work of responsible folks for the good of the whole society. A country without that… well, I don't know… it's authoritarian, and all that. Where citizens don't take part…

Now, another question: what resources do citizens use to get involved in all this? Where are the financial means that give people that chance? In the West, in different countries, those resources were gathered for nations in development, including from state budgets. And not just to support the work of civil society organizations, but mostly, the lion's share, went to governments to rebuild their countries. Support also came from powerful foundations set up by private individuals. And what strengthened those foundations was that people themselves donated to them, because they cared—and felt a responsibility toward all of humanity. Donors knew these foundations didn't just operate in their own country but internationally, in poorer nations too. These were, so to speak, resources given by people of good will.

As for aid from states, from governments—like Norway or the USA, for example—that was taxpayers' money. In other words, the people's money. And unlike in our country, in those places, taxpayers know where their money goes. That's crucial: taxpayers need to know where their money is going.

When I started thinking about legislation for philanthropy—and I thought about it for a long time—I had my reasons. Those reasons were obvious to everyone but rarely recognized as a problem: the glaring gap between the population and non-governmental organizations. Let me say one thing: back then, projects were mostly carried out in Tbilisi and big cities, not in villages. We deliberately started working in villages from 2004, and we knew exactly what we were doing and why—so that rural people wouldn't be left isolated, abandoned, or idle.

The second thing was that every time I wrote reports about these projects, I wanted to send them not just to the donors—sometimes Norwegians, sometimes Europeans, sometimes others—but to my own people. How do you even send them? The media should've cared about our work with the people. But the media never gave a damn.

When we went to the villages, at first, the locals thought we were some political party. They figured we were there to collect votes for elections, that sort of thing. Once we finally got through to them, explaining who we were, what we wanted, and what we were doing, it became clear they didn't trust us, so they weren't interested in our proposals. At the start… Building trust took work and time.

All people heard from our media was this blanket term—"non-governmental organizations." And by that, the media meant the big international NGOs, the ones they'd sometimes invite, show on TV screens. The other organizations, the majority, didn't interest anyone. Never did.

But I've got to say: every movement, every bit of effort, every collaboration directly with rural communities—that's a political step in its own way. Why is it political? Because it serves the building of democracy, that grand goal the state keeps proclaiming.

When I talk about "building democracy," I mean that through our projects, people should become—and stay—more resilient, more capable, just better equipped overall. For example, they should learn technologies, how to manage their own work, and a ton of other things. But most importantly, they should become people who ask questions, think, act, and take responsibility.

What does that mean? We always told the villagers: when you say, "Oh, everything's polluted," or "The water doesn't reach here," or whatever else—what have you done about it? If you, as a community, as neighbors, work together for a week and end up with water in your house and yard—why aren't you doing it?

I'm talking about how the centralization of power has made people lazy. The authorities are too far removed from them—those making decisions are distant from the population. There's no distribution of power. Power needs to come down and settle where the people live, where the community is.

Sure, at first, there might be mistakes, but they'll be *their* mistakes—and then they'll talk it over, and the next year they'll do better. That's how a person grows. There's a saying: you learn by doing. I'm someone who learned everything I'm talking about through work. My colleagues too… Some of them don't have specialized university degrees because that kind of education doesn't exist here. In other countries, it does; here, it doesn't. They're former art historians, philologists, sociologists… and so on.

You're a "former" something too, right? So am I. And why did we take on this work? Because we looked around and saw—no one else was doing it. So we said: well, *someone* has to do it, right?—and we got to it.

There's this saying I heard in India, at a conference. I couldn't remember the author's name, and I can't find it online either—maybe you can. It goes: where power isn't shared, isn't distributed, humanitarian aid is the only way out. Pretty cool, huh? It ties right into the issue of security.

And what does that mean, how does it connect to our topic? To ethnically charged conflicts? Whoever lives in those places, on this side or that side of the border, where the other side has an ethnic group that doesn't exactly love the folks over here, and vice versa, they still have more shared concerns and thoughts than things that divide and spark disputes: responsibility for their families, the environment, health, safety, working conditions, care for opportunities to grow and thrive, and so on.

Yes, of course, some people feel responsibility—for their village, their municipality, their region, even their country. But they're few, a minority.

A person shouldn't just be a recipient. Because when they're only a recipient, a consumer, they end up with very little. And then, when it dawns on them that "from above" isn't coming as much or what they expected, they start to protest, get angry. But it doesn't cross their mind that they share some of the blame for the situation they're frustrated and mad about.

This is about civic consciousness, civic responsibility, and timely, sensible intervention. In other words, about a normal reaction from civil society, both in the country and beyond, to what's happening around us. People shouldn't wait until things get so bad there's no way out except to shout, "Step down, step down!" They need the wisdom to watch, step by step, and realize what their government is doing, to understand what tomorrow's consequences will be from today's decisions, and to speak up, to have their say on every issue, **even the smallest, as responsible citizens and as a whole society together.**

From this perspective, criticism from below, so to speak, should be interesting and useful for the authorities too.

But the truest path is to entrust people, groups of people, communities, with managing the resources that are vital to them. Then the river water will be clean, and kids will be able to swim in it. Those abandoned clubs, falling apart—or bought up by someone to turn into a restaurant—will become places where the village gathers, discusses, or just has fun and spends time well. Libraries in villages and towns won't close anymore.

Then life in those villages, for those people, will be just as exciting as in the best neighborhoods of a good capital city—maybe even more so. We know what's happening in Europe: people are moving to live in villages. But here, it's the opposite—everyone's rushing to the city. Why? For resources, for the means to survive.

The drive for higher education I've seen in Georgia's villages—I haven't seen anywhere else. And why? Not because they're thirsty for science. Families bend over backwards just to get their kids to study in the city, schoolteachers tirelessly tutor their own students, paid for by grandmothers' pensions. The family's goal is for the kids to move to the city. The main goal is for them to escape the rural life their parents tasted as bitter hardship.

It's believed that living in a village is nothing but suffering. And for what? The land no longer yields crops. Last year, in my village, right before my eyes, a husband and wife worked, dug, did everything—and harvested three sacks, nothing more. Food security is a whole separate story, one that I think high-level politics is finally taking seriously…

This problem has its reasons—huge mistakes, negligence, irresponsibility, and so on. What's going to happen, where will food come from? Nobody knows. Villages are emptying out—there are no working hands left, only old folks remain. When winter comes with heavy snow, who's going to clear it? Those elderly people can't shovel snow or do anything anymore. And that's a matter of security too, isn't it?

My original field was classical philology—Ancient Greece and Rome, literature, history. So, my knowledge of democracy is tied to my university education too. We read texts—in Greek and Latin.

The word "polis" in Greek means "city," and "politics" implies "citizenship." That's what I mean when I say that all development and social justice projects, including those of our foundation, push participants to take responsibility for their community. From this perspective, projects can spark civic

consciousness and encourage civic actions—meaning activities that benefit the state and aim for its well-being.

This is about preparing a person to express their opinion clearly and confidently. Before that, they need to form that opinion in their mind. Even earlier, they need to spot the problem. And before that, they must realize that a problem, even if it's not in their own backyard but just outside it, is still their problem too.

It's a whole chain where vision and asking questions—of yourself and others—are absolutely crucial. Knowing who's responsible for what, what duties each official has. What's a council? Who's that person—used to be a governor, now a mayor, right? And what actions must they take to solve a problem? What's the municipality's plan overall—for the whole region and specifically for this village? How can the community take part in making that plan happen?

For example, say there's a project worth 100,000 lari. The villagers could step up, dig the ground for free to lay water pipes in their own village, or do something else that's needed, essential. Then, instead of 100,000, it might cost just 25,000—you know what a sneaky budget line salaries can be, don't you?

On top of that, we need to revive the culture of volunteering. Back in the day, there was "nadi," for instance—people helped each other, harvested together, dug the land, sang work songs that went with what they were doing. That communal life was clearly about support, caring for one another, unity. Sure, there were disputes and feuds, but there was justice too. There was a shared aim, a common goal, and shared joy.

When we brought foreign students who volunteered with our organization to the villages, they kept asking: "It's winter, it's cold—why are these people standing outside? Why are they talking outside?" "Where's a place they can go to talk, to discuss things?" they'd ask. And why is it that polling stations are only set up in schools? Because there's simply nowhere else for people to gather.

This leads to problems—ones that fall on the shoulders of schoolteachers, principals, and so on. And none of this does anything to help democracy grow.

Now, I want to say a few words about local community organizations. I know this topic inside out because we've always worked hard in this direction—and it was us, as a national foundation, who took it on.

Who, if not a national foundation, should be accessible to the people living in villages? On top of that—they don't know English, and even if they did, the requirements for grant applications—writing the text, handling all the details—are tough even for us. How are these people supposed to manage?

So, here's what I'm saying: whether it's a national foundation, a women's foundation, a rural development foundation, an environmental protection foundation, a peacebuilding foundation, or one for local self-governance—it doesn't matter. A foundation like that is the link that's most easily accessible to rural communities.

We accept project proposals in Georgian. We also accept them in Armenian and Azerbaijani when we work in villages with ethnic minorities. And we try hard to make sure that the next year, those proposals—even if they're full of grammatical mistakes—are submitted in Georgian. That's something we're working on too.

On that note, I have to say that when ethnically charged conflicts broke out in Georgia, I wasn't just saddened—I was furious. And I was furious about how cheaply and easily Russia managed to provoke those conflicts—not just in Georgia, but across the Caucasus, in Central Asian countries, and beyond.

It was horrific—on one hand, because there was bloodshed, terrifying, heavy, awful events, and on the other, because it exposed the mentality of our people, including the opposing sides: whether Abkhaz and Georgians, Ossetians and Georgians, or others. It all revealed that none of us are fully Christian—not them, not us. In truth, none of us really believe that you shouldn't kill a person. None of us believe you shouldn't lie, and so on.

I'm talking about the civic sense that people often lack, especially when it's not backed by a sense of duty. Against this backdrop, the insularity of ethnic minority communities stands out even more starkly. These are closed, almost self-sufficient communities—land and the labor tied to it. They're excellent farmers. For example, the ethnic Azerbaijani population—they get good harvests in conditions where ethnic Georgians often fail in agriculture.

As for their insularity, things have improved a bit now, especially if the "four plus one" program is still running. That program really made an impact and gave some hope. Especially for the Azerbaijani population, because SOCAR supports Azerbaijanis, but not Armenians. That's obvious in itself… yeah, a bit funny, if it weren't so sad.

What's SOCAR's interest? That's clear. But we're talking about education. When it comes to education, an Armenian student and an Azerbaijani student, spending five years together at the same university, end up becoming friends. Real friends—I saw it with my own eyes. Because it's an opportunity given to these people to break free from their isolation.

I deeply believe and long for a time when—as it was in the early 20th century—a village child, if they're struck by a thirst for knowledge, has the chance to get an education. Think of the Kakabadze brothers, Galaktion and Titsian Tabidze, and other great Georgian writers and figures—born and raised in villages. Or the Armenian poet Hovhannes Tumanyan, known among Georgian writers as an honest, deeply kind, open, and warm person, loved by all. I know this for sure—I've read countless memoirs about him.

In other words, a first-generation intelligent should have the chance to become a genius. That's what it's all about. I shouldn't be doomed to dig the earth my whole life. If that work lets me live in a way that my family is provided for with dignity, if I can go to a nice resort in the summer, and my child has everything—not just food—then I'll live in the village. I, for example, love my garden, and I live in a village.

But if I'm interested in, say, microbiology and biochemistry, painting, or playing the piano—I should have that opportunity. And only an open society can provide that. Only an open society offers the vision where I'm not chained, not condemned, but…

I'm born a free citizen of a free country, and my possibilities, if I have the desire and interest, should be limitless. Now, let's get back to the fact that today we have closed societies—so closed that the practice of internal marriages takes on completely abnormal forms. Marriages between cousins—in some ethnic minority groups—are arranged just to keep property from passing into other hands.

It's obvious that marriages between close relatives have destroyed entire royal dynasties. I saw an Azerbaijani documentary about this—children born from such marriages often have developmental issues, illnesses, and so on. That's the second, deeply troubling side of this insularity. In one photograph, a woman and a young man sit side by side. She's both his aunt and his mother-in-law, and his brother-in-law is his cousin. Things like that happen. And they happen precisely in these closed spaces.

These closed spaces are a very old topic for me, but let me remind you—every ethnic group in its own closed space, including Georgian villages, has a mythologized history: about their land, their neighbors, with whom they don't interact for certain reasons. Meanwhile, their neighbor, belonging to another ethnic group, also has their own mythologized history, shared knowledge, so to speak… And between these two historical narratives, all it takes is one spark to ignite the flames of war. From the moment the first blood is spilled, no one remembers Allah or Christ anymore. The smell of blood is horrific. That's something we need to understand too.

And one more very important thing: identity is something a person sees as the core of their life. For example, someone says, "I'm Georgian, and beyond being Georgian—I'm nothing." They're not a mother, not a teacher, not a scientist, not a musician playing the guitar. Not a sower of seeds, they don't have a nursery, don't keep bees… they have nothing—no newspapers, no books. In the evening, they're so exhausted they don't visit the neighbors. Someone else has a tractor, plowing and replowing, and I can't afford to hire it. So, I envy the one who has more than me. And so it goes…

Openness, solidarity, caring for one another—and ultimately, caring for the village, the municipality, and the entire country—should become a shared cause. And I, whether Ossetian, Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, or Abkhaz, should see myself as a citizen of the country whose passport I carry in my pocket. That's what "nationality" means—citizenship.

Ethnically, I may not be Georgian, but nationally, I'm a citizen of Georgia. That's the kind of consciousness we need to build. And if that consciousness exists, responsibility will follow—not just for one's own community, but for the whole state and all of humanity.

Now is not the time to limit ourselves to the state alone. There are so few reasonable people left—people who truly see the future clearly and sense the dangers it holds—that every such reasonable, responsible person must be given space to act, room to breathe.

Take me, for example: I might invent something that purifies river water. Or, say, create something useful for humanity. Sure, I might even win a prize for it. But if it's good for my country, it should be good elsewhere too—on another continent, for some other village.

When people started talking about globalization, I was still a young woman. I thought a lot about it. I spoke with foreign friends, asked them to explain things, posed tons of questions.

I realized there were many dangers (including because people weren't ready), but I was still thrilled. Naively, I thought that since everything is so interconnected and interdependent, wars and bloodshed would simply have to vanish. The opposite happened.

My mind couldn't foresee it. Apparently, I didn't know enough about humanity's destructive tendencies—to ruin their surroundings and themselves. I want to say more about this. Every person holds every possibility: from committing atrocities (gloves made of human skin…) to absolute purity and self-sacrifice. That's the vast range of this pendulum—from depravity to greatness.

From my perspective, the relationships between people have one main purpose—to foster and nurture the best qualities in each other. That, in essence, is what civilization is. After all, humans are mammals. Civilization has brought wars and horrors, but at the same time, it has brought spiritual culture, beauty…

In the history of religions, there are long periods when humans seek knowledge about God, assigning names, creating concepts—think of the Sumerians, Egyptians, ancient Greeks, and others. But there are also religions of revelation, where God reveals Himself, speaks to humanity, and provides knowledge and rules. This happens in Christianity, Islam, Judaism—these religions carry the energy of revelation. These religions are monotheistic, recognizing a single God.

Now, if I have one God, and you have one God, and so does a third person, and a fourth—doesn't that mean that, ultimately, these Gods, called by different names, are still one and the same?

People should strive to see the similarities in each other, not the differences. My eyes are black, yours are blue, but these differences shouldn't stop us from seeing and understanding one another.

We've reached a time when there's an overwhelming amount of information, but knowledge is severely limited. If only because every minute you wonder, "Is this information true?"—and you no longer know who to trust.

If you take this path—trying to discern truth behind the flood of information, engaging your intellect—it could take your entire life. You'd become just a seeker, and perhaps your whole life wouldn't be enough to reach the truth.

Moreover, the mind of a decent person can never grasp the conclusions hidden in the plans of certain individuals. Because their brains work differently. Our minds simply won't allow certain things—they just can't. Because moral barriers exist.

In short, I believe that openness, sincerity, responsibility, and the distribution of power are what matter most. The distribution of power means that if I live in this village, this village is mine—mine to use and mine to care for.

So, when I go to the forest to chop firewood, I'll cut down dry trees—because I'll need them next year too. If there's a spring flowing, I'll make sure the area around it stays clean, because I drink that water.

Then, when the question comes up—say, next year we need to create a seed bank, because we saw how one year seeds were expensive, and things got tough—I'll call the farmers, my relatives, my friends. We're all kin here—cousins, extended family.

We live together, and I'll say: look, you got a great harvest, these are your seeds. Let someone sow a plot—where the yield looks promising—for seed production. I'll distribute that harvest among us. But you'd better save those seeds for planting. Later, those seeds will gain a reputation, and they'll be sold to other villages, to the neighboring village, and beyond. In other words, we'll plan smartly.

It's not an easy task. We told the authorities that local self-governance needs to be a truly democratic institution, but the government's response was always the same: "That'll just become a breeding ground for corruption."

I don't believe real local self-governance would be more corrupt than what we have now. On the contrary, I think when there's no appointed outsider—somebody's cousin, put in place through connections—but instead a person chosen by the community itself, people will actually keep an eye on them, hold them accountable, make sure they don't mess up or ruin things. If that happens, they'll

draw conclusions. If they notice something's gone wrong, they won't just scold—they'll replace them, elect someone else. Learning from mistakes, of course, takes time.
These educated people, whose parents send them to universities, rent apartments for them, and often struggle to pay for their studies—some don't even finish because of it—those who do graduate can't find work in their field. We know that lately, specialties like international economics, international business administration, and similar fields have become trendy. And after they graduate, the guys end up working as security guards in Tbilisi supermarkets, and the girls as cashiers.
These people may desperately want to return home to their villages, but there are no jobs there. That's when self-governance would truly make sense—when the law states that whatever you start—a shop, a tailoring workshop, a car repair garage, a bakery—whatever you launch in your village, a portion of your profits goes back to the village. Then the entire village will be invested in your business succeeding. And life itself will become more vibrant, for example, because the village will pay the librarian's salary from its own revenue, and the librarian will strive to be active, enlightening the community. This is the path village development should take.
As I've said, local organizations—non-profit, non-governmental organizations—would be a fantastic solution at every stage of rural development, especially at the outset, where they're particularly effective. Because skill-building and broadening mental horizons are possible precisely within the space of these organizations' activities.
But if the political factor—real, democratic self-governance with budgetary support—doesn't back this process, it will never happen. The non-governmental sector works like this: those served by the organization must provide the financial resources for its work. In other words, the local community must take responsibility for ensuring the sustainability of its own community organization's activities.
In our draft law ("Georgia's Law on Philanthropy, Charity, and Social Partnership"), we included the principle of the 1% rule. We also made a film about philanthropy—an educational film to spread the culture of philanthropy—in which a foreign expert explains that in their country, this rule worked especially well for community organizations.
Why? Because the results of community organizations' work are absolutely clear, visible, and tangible for the entire community. Because, first and foremost, it's the community organization that carries out projects for the community's well-being.
This could mean bringing in water, setting up laboratories, establishing libraries, providing computer services, offering educational programs, developing skills, supporting small business initiatives, and so on.
The principle is simple: those I serve must provide the resources for my non-governmental organization to exist.
I dreamed so much—and I still dream, as much as I still have the capacity to dream about anything—that our non-governmental sector wouldn't be entirely dependent on foreign funding.
- Like it is now?
- Exactly. It's good, I mean, the help is good, and we're immensely grateful, but it's not normal for an organization working for the good of society to lack the attention, involvement, and support of that very society. International organizations fund (if we win a grant competition) what we've come up with, based on our country's development needs, and outlined in our projects. And we do—we've done and continue to do—what's set out in our Constitution: human rights, peace, well-being, democracy—that's what we serve. But we serve it with foreign money.
I dream of a time when our people will themselves allocate funds for the work of their local community organizations and civil society organizations in general. And not just provide money, but back it with their demands and social priorities. I dream of a time when we'll report on our work to our people—as our donors. That would be truly awesome.
Yes, we'll still accept help from abroad—we'll say a huge thank you—but it shouldn't be the only or primary source. And then, the greatest enemy of our work—fragmentation—will be overcome. We won't be at the mercy of who announces what grant competition, where, or when. As experts, we'll have our own plan, rooted in the conditions and current needs of our people. And we'll have the support of those people to carry out that plan thoughtfully, consistently, and effectively.
The greatest Consequences of the non-governmental sector's work is the person. A person I'd never call a "beneficiary." They're not a recipient, not a passive consumer, but a participant, a partner. They're our partner, a co-creator in our projects, not just someone we "hand something to." In truth,

they give us more than we give them. First, they give us expert knowledge about their village, their community—they know better than anyone who needs what. And second, they give us the joy of seeing responsible, thoughtful, and capable people—and their organized teams—emerge, grow, and stay right here.

Organizations are often asked to fill out various questionnaires. Once, when our national fund needed to list partners in one such application, we had about 38 community organizations and initiative groups in villages as partners. I thought, I can't list all 38, but I'll include at least three. As I was filling out the fields, I noticed that the address section listed: country, state, postal code, street, and house number—but the word "village" was nowhere to be found. There was no such field. And this wasn't the first time…

That's when I realized this isn't just our problem—development programs don't reach villages. It's a global issue, and it's especially clear today. Who do voters choose in elections? The same problem exists in Georgia, the United States, and many other countries—essentially, everywhere.

No one cares about village development. In some countries, villages as we understand them no longer exist. They call a "village" a place where people live urban-style, but agricultural lands and pastures stretch across hectares, owned by a single family—it's called a farm or a ranch.

The villages we have—those are the ones dying in our hands. Villages like ours no longer exist in the West.

In the West—sorry—machines do everything. On a vast territory, there's one house, a couple of storage buildings, two or three tractors, three or four cars—and a single family manages it all. They hire seasonal workers. That's how it is there.

But Georgia has always been an agrarian country.

The peasant, when he existed, was a strong worker, a soldier, and a keeper of traditions. Everything rested on the peasant.

Now the question is—what do we want? We need to decide what we're doing. Urban life, especially the kind we see on TV, has its allure. People no longer want to toil with a hoe—and we can't blame them. But someone has to produce, produce in their own country, and that's a matter of security.

When we talk about security, the first thing to understand is that it's about food security. If you don't have your own grain, your own harvest, and you're almost entirely dependent on imports from abroad… It's one thing if you're short on something like bananas or other exotic products, but don't we see what's happening?

I heard that even in Tbilisi there used to be a seed bank—underground storage and something like that. It seems it's gone now. Everything was taken all at once… In short, there's no preparedness, no thought or care for the future.

I believe that people who think about the future need individual support (and institutions, accordingly, need institutional support) so they aren't forced to work as cashiers or bank clerks but can sit down, think, plan, and then present their ideas and work to the state—as a program for the future.

Such people do exist. And if they're given the means to live and create, drawing on their responsibility, intellect, and knowledge, our future will truly be bright. There's plenty to do in the village, too, and it's not at all necessary for people in yellow hard hats to come from the capital and build houses here.

People build for themselves—as best they can. And if they don't know something, they can hire one engineer to teach them. That's not such a big problem.

Democracy as a Way of Life: Problems and Solutions

The interview with Marina Tabukashvili is not only a reflection of her personal and professional experience but also a profound analysis of the key challenges facing Georgian society in the context of sustainable development and security. She articulates a civic philosophy encompassing categories such as democracy, participation, power decentralization, local self-governance, identity, cultural awareness, and social responsibility, with particular attention to border regions and ethnic minorities.

The central theme of the interview is the understanding of democracy as a form of thinking: the ability to ask questions, critically assess reality, and take responsibility. Here, democracy transcends procedural frameworks, becoming a process of nurturing a conscious citizen capable of identifying problems, acting, and contributing to societal transformation. This vision, rooted in awareness and engagement, runs through the entire interview. It forms the foundation of sustainable development, as it demands a just distribution of power.

The expert emphasizes that sustainable development is impossible without genuine decentralization—both at the level of local self-governance institutions and in the daily practices of communities. When individuals feel responsible for their village, region, or border territory, they begin to make decisions, shape their environment, and strengthen stability. Strong local self-governance, such as community councils, and support for community-based organizations (CBOs), which initiate development from the grassroots, are crucial, especially in multi-ethnic regions where they foster inclusion.

Equally important is the idea of establishing a legal framework for the civic sector, including a law on philanthropy that, for instance, through tax incentives, would bolster local community initiatives. This is not merely a technical tool but an institutional recognition of the culture of participation. The expert stresses the need for reliable and ethical mechanisms, particularly in border villages, where non-governmental and community organizations serve as bridges between the population and the state.

The interview offers reflections on cultural transformation—on solidarity, openness, and embracing differences. Identity is viewed not as a means of ethnic division but as part of a shared civic space where everyone, regardless of origin, is an equal participant. This is especially significant for multi-ethnic Georgia, where ethnic diversity, with an inclusive approach, becomes a resource for integration and security, contributing to social stability.

Marina Tabukashvili's interview provides a theoretical framework for understanding civil society in Georgia. It blends practical experience with a humanistic vision, where democracy is a way of life grounded in engagement and responsibility. This vision offers pathways to overcome isolation in border regions, strengthen inclusion, and ensure stability, positioning Georgia as a model of integration and sustainability in the modern world.

Democracy as a Way of Life: 10 Key Aspects

1. Underdevelopment of Border Villages — A Missed Opportunity for the State

Problem: The state lacks a long-term vision for developing border communities and demonstrating dignified living in these regions, which could serve as a powerful strategic tool for strengthening internal stability, promoting national unity, and integrating ethnic minorities.
Description of the Problem: Border villages should be spaces that exemplify a democratic and developed state. Yet today, they are forgotten territories suffering from systemic neglect, a shortage of social services, and demotivated populations. The issue goes beyond infrastructure or social support—it is a serious strategic misstep by the state.
The well-being of these villages' residents, particularly ethnic minorities, could lay the foundation for prosperity and integration. Providing dignified living conditions in these areas signals that the state cares for every citizen and creates an image of a "frontline zone" that is attractive both within the country and beyond its borders.
Consequences:

- Residents of border villages, including ethnic minorities, do not feel the state's care, which erodes trust and fuels migration.
- The state fails to strategically utilize these territories as platforms for securing border zones and integrating ethnic minorities.
- An opportunity is missed to demonstrate that the country's way of life is rooted in dignity, justice, and development, while economic potential is lost due to unresolved ecological and social challenges.

Quotes (Expert Marina Tabukashvili):
"...border villages need to thrive. If a country wants to peacefully reclaim those territories, you've got to show the people on the other side that your pensions are better, your schools and kindergartens are flourishing, everything's moving forward. That, despite the differences, there are similarities too—shared interests, shared problems that can be tackled together through cooperation."
"That's where you need to build a life that shows everyone: in this country, an ordinary person who works hard lives well."
How to Address the Problem:

- The state must prioritize border villages as a strategic focus, not only for security but also in the context of social, economic, and ecological development, with special attention to the needs of ethnic minorities.
- Investments in education, infrastructure, local economies, ecology, and natural resource protection are essential—these will enhance citizens' trust and reduce population outflow.
- Border villages should become a "showcase" of the democratic state's dignity, eliminating alienation and fostering civic engagement.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Developing border communities is not only a socio-economic and ecological task but also a strategic component of national security and the integration of ethnic minorities.
- The state should not view these territories as periphery but as an opportunity to demonstrate the advantages of democratic governance and sustainable development.
- Dignified and stable living in border villages, reinforced by cross-border cooperation (e.g., in ecology), should be the state's response to radical or violent narratives.

2. SD of Border Villages, Equitable Resource Distribution, and the Need for Philanthropy Legislation

Problem: The state's lack of attention to the development of border and regional villages, particularly those inhabited by ethnic minorities, hinders the strengthening of security, democratic processes, and ecological stability. The weakness of democratic institutions (local self-governance, community-based organizations — CBOs) and media indifference turn these territories into socially, ecologically, and strategically vulnerable zones.

Description of the Problem: When the state fails to provide dignified living conditions in border villages, local populations, including ethnic minorities, do not feel like full-fledged citizens of the country. Unequal resource distribution and weak self-governance undermine the social contract. Against this backdrop, local organizations (CBOs) that actively work with communities remain invisible due to media indifference, which focuses on the capital and international structures, neglecting genuine civic activity in the regions. The absence of philanthropy legislation and barriers to accessing donor programs (e.g., due to language barriers) further impede citizens' participation in creating the common good.

Consequences:

- Residents of border and rural areas, including ethnic minorities, lack equal opportunities for development.
- The contribution of local organizations to building democracy and enhancing security is undervalued.
- The lack of media attention exacerbates alienation and apathy among the population.
- The "gap" between the state and the civic sector limits cooperation.
- Donor projects remain inaccessible to rural populations due to bureaucracy and linguistic barriers.

"When I said you can't separate the problems of border villages from the broader issues of rural Georgia, that's exactly when the question of local self-governance comes up—as a democratic institution."

"The media never cared about the villages—just like no government ever cared about the non-governmental sector, the civil society organizations."

"When I started thinking about legislation for philanthropy—and I thought about it for a long time—I had my reasons. Those reasons were obvious to everyone but rarely recognized as a problem: the glaring gap between the population and non-governmental organizations."

How to Address the Problem?

- At the state level, it is essential to adopt philanthropy legislation that legitimizes and encourages citizens' participation in creating the common good.
- Local self-governance must be strengthened through training, delegation of authority, and equitable, proactive resource distribution.
- Media engagement in covering rural processes should be encouraged through grants and partnerships, increasing awareness and trust in civic activity.
- Donors should adapt their programs to rural populations, simplify procedures, and account for the linguistic needs of minorities.
- The state and local organizations should jointly develop regional development approaches, encompassing social, economic, and ecological measures.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The state needs a systemic approach to the development of border villages as a guarantee of security and democracy.
- Philanthropy legislation is key to encouraging civic participation and bridging the "gap" between the population and non-governmental organizations.
- Active media involvement in regional life fosters the formation of an informed and engaged society.
- Support and legitimization of local organizations should become a priority of state policy, as they drive real change on the ground.

- These steps will create a foundation for citizens, including minority representatives, to become not passive observers but co-authors of sustainable development.

3. Decentralization, Civic Responsibility, and Rural Security

Problem: The centralized structure of governance and the perception of citizens, particularly those in border villages, solely as "recipients" hinder their participation in democratic processes. The population, including ethnic minorities, is not viewed as a full-fledged participant in resource management but as a passive beneficiary, leading to alienation, demotivation, and social crisis, which increases the vulnerability of these territories.

Description of the Problem: When citizens, especially in border villages, are not trusted or equipped with tools to improve their communities, they lose a sense of responsibility. The distance of governance and the concentration of authority at the central level create an environment where rural residents, including ethnic minorities, feel powerless. The social contract is violated, villages empty out, local initiatives weaken, and the level of security—social, physical, and food-related—declines, threatening the region's sustainability.

Consequences:

- The population, including minorities, loses motivation to participate and trust in the state.
- Rural residents migrate to cities, increasing urban pressure and triggering a demographic crisis.
- Public infrastructure (cultural centers, libraries) deteriorates.
- The rural workforce shrinks, jeopardizing the agricultural sector, food security, and the stability of border zones.
- Residents do not feel like "owners" of their communities, which erodes local civic identity.

Quotes (Expert Marina Tabukashvili):

"I believe that openness, sincerity, responsibility, and the distribution of power are what matter most. The distribution of power means that if I live in this village, this village is mine—mine to use and mine to care for."

"the truest path is to entrust people, groups of people, communities, with managing the resources that are vital to them."

"Villages are emptying out—there are no working hands left, only old folks remain. When winter comes with heavy snow, who's going to clear it? Those elderly people can't shovel snow or do anything anymore. And that's a matter of security too, isn't it?"

"When we talk about security, the first thing to understand is that it's about food security."

How to Address the Problem:

- Power must be redistributed to the local level: self-governance bodies should become genuine decision-makers through training and delegation of authority.
- The state must prioritize ensure community participation, including minorities, in resource management—from budgets to infrastructure projects.
- Long-term social investments in rural areas are needed: restoration of clubs, libraries, and cultural centers.
- Education for rural children and youth must be supported, both in infrastructure (schools, kindergartens) and content (curricula, including Georgian language instruction).
- The presence of villages in the media should be amplified through campaigns and partnerships to reframe rural realities and enhance civic engagement.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The government should trust in citizens, particularly in border villages, and empower communities is the starting point for genuine responsibility transfer.
- Decentralization and community strengthening ensure empowerment are guarantees of security, democracy, and sustainable development.
- The emptying of villages and social alienation pose structural risks, including to food security and social stability in border regions.
- Transforming citizens into active participants, not mere recipients, is a long-term state interest for stability and integration.

4. Civic Awareness, Education, and Accessibility of Local Organizations (CBOs)

Problem: Low levels of civic engagement and a lack of democratic skills, particularly among residents of border villages and ethnic minorities, significantly hinder local development processes. Rural populations lack sufficient knowledge and resources to participate in decision-making, while state funds and programs remain incomprehensible and inaccessible due to linguistic and bureaucratic barriers.

Description of the Problem: Empowering rural populations, especially in border regions, is impossible without a democratic culture rooted in knowledge, the ability to ask questions, and an awareness of responsibility to the community. Education is the foundation of civic awareness, essential for sustainable development and security. Resources and funds offered by the state often do not align with the real needs and capacities of regions, particularly for non-Georgian-speaking communities (e.g., ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis), due to complex procedures and linguistic barriers. The erosion of volunteerism further weakens collaboration and solidarity, reducing the potential of local initiatives.

Consequences:

- The population, including ethnic minorities, lacks sufficient knowledge to understand their rights and responsibilities.
- At the local level, democratic processes lose significance, leaving communities, especially in border areas, as passive beneficiaries.
- Local needs are poorly reflected in the priorities of foreign funding competitions, and community organizations' participation is hindered by complex bureaucratic procedures, insurmountable for rural residents.
- The traditional culture of volunteerism is gradually lost, weakening community solidarity and resilience.
- Communities lack spaces for meetings, discussions, and participation (beyond schools, which are unfortunately used only for electoral purposes), reducing their role in ensuring social and physical security.

Quotes (Expert Marina Tabukashvili):

"Who, if not a national foundation, should be accessible to the people living in villages? On top of that—they don't know English, and even if they did, the requirements for grant applications—writing the text, handling all the details—are tough even for us. How are these people supposed to manage?"

"Projects can spark civic consciousness and encourage civic actions—meaning activities that benefit the state and aim for its well-being." "It's a whole chain where vision and asking questions—of yourself and others—are absolutely crucial." "That communal life was clearly about support, caring for one another, unity. Sure, there were disputes and feuds, but there was justice too. There was a shared aim, a common goal, and shared joy."

"We accept project proposals in Georgian. We also accept them in Armenian and Azerbaijani when we work in villages with ethnic minorities. And we try hard to make sure that the next year, those proposals—even if they're full of grammatical mistakes—are submitted in Georgian. That's something we're working on too."

How to Address the Problem?

- The education system must integrate components of democracy, responsibility, and civic engagement, tailored for border villages and minorities.
- Funding mechanisms for local organizations should accommodate local linguistic (multilingual applications), professional, and cultural specifics.
- The culture of volunteerism must be revived in modern forms (e.g., joint projects) to strengthen community solidarity and resilience.
- Public spaces (clubs, centers) for meetings, discussions, and participation should be established in rural regions to reduce pressure on schools.
- Funds and state institutions should enhance awareness and accessibility through simple tools (simplified forms, information campaigns), promoting security and development.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Strengthening democracy and security begins with deepening citizens' knowledge and initiatives that expand their rights and opportunities in border villages.
- Local organizations must become an integral part of state policy at the regional level, fostering sustainable development.
- A multilingual and culturally sensitive approach is essential for engaging local communities, particularly ethnic minorities.
- Volunteerism should be restored as a form of civic solidarity and a tool for rural development and stability.
- Access to financial resources and institutional support determines the level of genuine democratic participation in communities, enhancing their role in ensuring security.

5. Legacy of Ethnic Conflicts, Deficit of Civic Identity, and the Role of Education in Integration

Problem: The negative legacy of ethnically charged conflicts in Georgia has exposed a significant lack of civic culture, against which ethnic minority communities remain isolated. Instead of integration, there is a prevalence of insularity and a focus solely on labor, which reinforces segregation and hinders societal consolidation.

Description of the Problem: The respondent (Expert Marina Tabukashvili) shares personal emotions and a deep understanding of the cultural and mental context that perpetuates conflicts and ethnic distancing, threatening the stability of border zones. These conflicts are tied not only to violence and tragedies but also to value gaps—specifically, a deficit in civic responsibility. Ethnic communities, such as the Azerbaijani population, are hardworking but insular groups whose economic success (e.g., in agriculture) does not translate into social integration. Education, including the "Four Plus One" program, offers rare integration opportunities, but participation in this free state program remains costly for families (due to expenses for students living in Tbilisi—rent, transportation, food), complicating decisions to join.

Consequences:

- Isolation of ethnic communities and a focus solely on economic self-sufficiency lead to long-term distancing and social vulnerability.
- Civic self-awareness remains low among both the majority and minorities, undermining consolidation.
- Effective integration mechanisms, such as educational programs, lack sufficient support and remain unevenly accessible.
- Signs of segregation emerge: opportunities divided by ethnicity and a deficit in interethnic dialogue, threatening the security of border zones.

Quotes (Expert Marina Tabukashvili):

"It was horrific—on one hand, because there was bloodshed, terrifying, heavy, awful events, and on the other, because it exposed the mentality of our people, including the opposing sides: whether Abkhaz and Georgians, Ossetians and Georgians, or others. It all revealed that none of us are fully Christian—not them, not us."

"I'm talking about the civic sense that people often lack, especially when it's not backed by a sense of duty. Against this backdrop, the insularity of ethnic minority communities stands out even more starkly."

"For example, the ethnic Azerbaijani population—they get good harvests in conditions where ethnic Georgians often fail in agriculture."

"When it comes to education, an Armenian student and an Azerbaijani student, spending five years together at the same university, end up becoming friends. Real friends—I saw it with my own eyes. Because it's an opportunity given to these people to break free from their isolation."

How to Address the Problem?

- Integration-focused educational approaches must become a priority in state policy, strengthening the security of border regions.

- The “Four Plus One” program and similar mechanisms for shared educational spaces should be continued, expanded, and provided with equitable support.
- Value-based education that fosters responsible citizens—regardless of ethnic origin, with an emphasis on civic identity—must be developed.
- Principles of multicultural communication and cooperation should be integrated into schools, universities, and local communities through the establishment of dialogue platforms.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The legacy of ethnic conflicts and weak civic culture hinder national consolidation and the stability of border regions.
- Raising civic responsibility is essential among both the majority and minorities to strengthen unity.
- Education is the most effective way to integrate insular communities and reduce interethnic tensions.
- Education policy must be inclusive, equitable, and grounded in multiculturalism, considering the context of border regions.
- Successful social integration and security require dialogue mechanisms and equal support for all ethnic groups.

6. Education as the Foundation of Social Freedom and an Open Society

Problem: Youth in the communities of Georgia’s border villages face unequal access to education, which limits their opportunities for self-realization, reinforces social predetermination, and hinders the formation of active citizens.

Description of the Problem: The absence of an inclusive and equitable education system deprives youth in border regions, including ethnic minorities (43.5%–46.4% in Gardabani and Sagaredjo), of the opportunity to develop their talents according to their interests. Interviews emphasize that a village should not be a closed space where individuals are confined to the role of “laborer.” Rural work can be a conscious choice if it ensures a dignified life, but for those aspiring to intellectual or creative development—in science, art, or music—resources must be accessible. An open society creates freedom of choice, breaking down barriers of predetermination, which is especially crucial for sustainable development and social cohesion in border zones.

Consequences:

- Reinforcement of stereotypes about the “destiny” of rural residents, limiting their ambitions.
- Unequal access to education (including insufficient professional qualifications of local schoolteachers) exacerbates social segregation and the isolation of ethnic minorities.
- Loss of potential leaders, scientists, and artists due to the lack of development opportunities.
- Decline in youth civic engagement, undermining democracy and regional stability.

Quotes (Expert Marina Tabukashvili):

“In other words, a first-generation intellectual (intelligent) should have the chance to become a genius. That’s what it’s all about. I shouldn’t be doomed to dig the earth my whole life.”

“But if I’m interested in, say, microbiology and biochemistry, painting, or playing the piano—I should have that opportunity. And only an open society can provide that.”

“I’m born a free citizen of a free country, and my possibilities, if I have the desire and interest, should be limitless.”

How to Address the Problem?

- Ensure equal educational opportunities across all regions through investments in rural schools and access to modern resources.
- Establish programs to identify and support the talents of rural children, including ethnic minorities, with a focus on scholarships and courses.
- Promote cultural and professional diversity through non-standard educational formats (science, art, technology).
- Integrate civic education into curricula, fostering social skills that shape responsible and active citizens capable of strengthening democracy.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Education is an inalienable civic right, not a privilege defined by place of birth or social status.
- An open society is possible only with equal educational opportunities for every child, whether in a village, city, or border zone.
- Inclusive education dismantles myths of predetermination, creating space for freedom and self-realization.
- State policy must support social mobility through investments in rural education, multilingual programs, and platforms for youth, enhancing the resilience and security of border regions.

7. Rethinking National Identity and Strengthening Shared Civic Consciousness

Problem: The dominance of ethnic identity as the primary criterion for self-determination hinders the formation of shared civic consciousness, exacerbates societal divisions, and limits the development of inclusive democracy.

Description of the Problem: In Georgia's border regions, where ethnic minorities, such as Azerbaijanis, constitute a significant portion of the population, a narrow understanding of identity through ethnic affiliation reduces opportunities for social cohesion. A person who defines themselves solely as "Georgian" or a member of a minority group loses the diversity of roles—parent, professional, citizen. This leads to alienation, social fatigue, and distrust, particularly amid economic challenges. Civic consciousness, in contrast, is rooted in responsibility toward society and the state, regardless of ethnic affiliation, and fosters the solidarity essential for sustainable development and security.

Consequences:

- Ethnic divisions intensify social isolation and weaken trust between communities.
- The absence of a shared civic identity diminishes solidarity and impedes peacebuilding.
- Weak civic consciousness restricts participation in democratic processes and undermines societal resilience.

Quotes (Expert Marina Tabukashvili):

"Openness, solidarity, caring for one another—and ultimately, caring for the village, the municipality, and the entire country—should become a shared cause."

"And I, whether Ossetian, Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, or Abkhaz, should see myself as a citizen of the country whose passport I carry in my pocket. That's what "nationality" means—citizenship."

"People should strive to see the similarities in each other, not the differences."

"But if it's good for my country, it should be good elsewhere too—on another continent, for some other village."

"Every person holds every possibility: from committing atrocities (gloves made of human skin…) to absolute purity and self-sacrifice. That's the vast range of this pendulum—from depravity to greatness."

How to Address the Problem?

- Integrate and emphasize civic education in schools and public spaces at the local level, focusing on shared values of responsibility and cooperation rather than ethnic differences.
- Promote the integration of ethnic minorities through equal partnership, avoiding assimilation, by supporting multilingual programs and dialogue platforms.
- Foster global thinking to help youth recognize their roles both in local communities and in a global context.
- Encourage a culture of humanism and solidarity through public initiatives that strengthen unity at the local level.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Civic consciousness should complement, not replace, ethnic identity, forming the foundation for an inclusive society.
- Ethnic diversity is a resource for democracy and resilience if grounded in shared values and responsibility.

- The state and communities must jointly create spaces where every individual, regardless of origin, feels like a valued citizen.
- Policies in education and public initiatives should promote humanism, universalism, and solidarity as the core of social cohesion and security in border regions.

8. Strengthening Local Self-Government and Legal Foundations for Community-Based Development

Problem: Due to the concentration of power at the central level, local self-government in Georgia does not function as a fully-fledged democratic institution. This deprives local communities of tools to manage resources and develop their own initiatives.

Description of the Problem: Centralization of power leaves rural and border communities, including regions populated by ethnic minorities, without control over local budgets and decisions. This fosters apathy, helplessness, and the perception of the population as passive recipients rather than active participants. Effective local self-government requires a genuine redistribution of powers, enabling communities to take responsibility for their spaces. Without this, the sustainability and security of border zones remain at risk, as development depends on external rather than local resources.

Consequences:

- Loss of the population's sense of responsibility for their environment.
- Local self-government is perceived as a formal, often corrupt body, detached from community needs.
- Lack of support for jobs and initiatives hinders young people's return to villages.
- Economic and social development of communities is stalled due to dependence on centralized decisions.

Quotes (Expert Marina Tabukashvili):

"I don't believe real local self-governance would be more corrupt than what we have now. On the contrary, I think when there's no appointed outsider—somebody's cousin, put in place through connections—but instead a person chosen by the community itself, people will actually keep an eye on them, hold them accountable, make sure they don't mess up or ruin things. If that happens, they'll draw conclusions. If they notice something's gone wrong, they won't just scold—they'll replace them, elect someone else. Learning from mistakes, of course, takes time.

"And life itself will become more vibrant, for example, because the village will pay the librarian's salary from its own revenue, and the librarian will strive to be active, enlightening the community. This is the path village development should take."

"Local organizations—non-profit, non-governmental organizations—would be a fantastic solution at every stage of rural development, especially at the outset, where they're particularly effective. Because skill-building and broadening mental horizons are possible precisely within the space of these organizations' activities."

"In our draft law ("Georgia's Law on Philanthropy, Charity, and Social Partnership"), we included the principle of the 1% rule. Because the results of community organizations' work are absolutely clear, visible, and tangible for the entire community."

How to Address the Problem?

- Strengthen local self-government through budget autonomy and mechanisms for public participation in decision-making, including elections and accountability.
- Grant communities the right to allocate a portion of local resources, such as revenue from small businesses or agriculture, to fund local initiatives.
- Support community-based organizations through voluntary public participation and legal incentives, promoting local philanthropy.
- Develop a legislative framework that ensures transparency and opportunities for financial support of local initiatives, reducing reliance on external grants.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Centralization of power undermines the sustainability of local communities, fuels distrust in institutions, and hampers local democracy.

- Budget autonomy and public participation in governance must form the foundation of local self-government, especially in border regions.
- Local communities need legal tools for independent development, including access to local revenues and support for public initiatives.
- Fostering a culture of philanthropy and voluntary support for community-based organizations, backed by appropriate legislation, can enhance their role in social development at the local level.
- Effective and inclusive local self-government is critical for economic autonomy, social cohesion, and the security of border territories.

9. The Need for a Legal Framework for Philanthropy and the Sustainability of Local Organizations

Problem: Despite public demand for the activities of community-based organizations, the absence of a legal framework limits the development of local philanthropy. Non-governmental organizations in Georgia are entirely dependent on foreign grants, leading to financial instability, fragmented connections, and low levels of civic participation.

Description of the Problem: As noted in interviews (Expert Marina Tabukashvili), local self-government and the population do not participate in funding non-governmental organizations, meaning they lack both the right to express demands and mechanisms for oversight. This is a critique of the current model, where activities focused on local community needs are primarily funded by foreign donors. At the same time, the respondent proposes activating local philanthropy and community-funded mechanisms as a solution.

Consequences:

- The population cannot influence the priorities of non-governmental organizations operating in their communities.
- Local organizations remain politically vulnerable and financially unstable.
- The activities of local organizations lack strategic, long-term development due to fragmented funding.
- Volunteerism and public participation are not perceived as an organic part of democracy.

Quotes (Expert Marina Tabukashvili):

"The principle is simple: those I serve must provide the resources for my non-governmental organization to exist."

"Because the results of community organizations' work are absolutely clear, visible, and tangible for the entire community. Because, first and foremost, it's the community organization that carries out projects for the community's well-being."

"I dream of a time when our people will themselves allocate funds for the work of their local community organizations and civil society organizations in general. And not just provide money, but back it with their demands and social priorities. I dream of a time when we'll report on our work to our people—as our donors."

How to Address the Problem?

- Create legislation on philanthropy to support the financial independence of local organizations and their ties to local communities through voluntary donations from citizens and businesses.
- Establish legal mechanisms to simplify donations, including tax incentives and opportunities for support from local self-governments.
- Promote the development of social entrepreneurship as a source of sustainability for local organizations and employment in border regions.
- Implement a transparency system, such as a registry of public organizations, to increase public trust.
- Conduct information campaigns inspired by ideas of local philanthropy to strengthen civic participation and motivation.
- Integrate support for philanthropy into state policy as a tool for social justice and unity, especially in border zones.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Philanthropy legislation is a systemic solution that ensures the financial independence and strengthening of local organizations.
- Voluntary citizen participation and support from self-governments guarantee organizational accountability.
- Social justice, peacebuilding, and community development are impossible if resource mobilization relies solely on foreign donors.
- Local philanthropy and partnerships with local communities are the foundation of democracy, and their legal recognition is essential.
- A culture of volunteerism, responsibility, and accountability must become a societal norm, facilitated by a new legal framework.

10. The Village as a Strategic Partner: Security, Dignity, and Restoration of Local Resources

Problem: Rural territories, especially in border zones, remain vulnerable and neglected despite their potential as a foundation for national security and sustainable development. State policy views villages as passive recipients of aid rather than active partners, undermining their strategic role.

Description of the Problem: Rural populations, including ethnic minorities, are systematically marginalized due to the disregard of their knowledge, initiatives, and needs in state policy. The expert criticizes the term "beneficiary," emphasizing that rural residents are partners whose contribution is indispensable for sustainability. The lack of investment in infrastructure, food security, and human capital contradicts the historical role of villages as the backbone of agrarian Georgia. Instead of leveraging local resources, policy focuses on imports and centralized decisions, which is particularly acute in border regions where stability and self-sufficiency are critical for security.

Quotes (Expert Marina Tabukashvili):

"The greatest Consequences of the non-governmental sector's work is the person. A person I'd never call a "beneficiary." They're not a recipient, not a passive consumer, but a participant, a partner."

"The villages we have—those are the ones dying in our hands. Villages like ours no longer exist in the West."

"The peasant, when he existed, was a strong worker, a soldier, and a keeper of traditions. Everything rested on the peasant."

"I believe that people who think about the future need individual support (and institutions, accordingly, need institutional support) so they aren't forced to work as cashiers or bank clerks but can sit down, think, plan, and then present their ideas and work to the state—as a program for the future."

Consequences:

- Villages lose their function as a strategic resource for the economy, social stability, and national identity.
- Population passivity and dependence on the center exacerbate youth outmigration and demographic crisis.
- Threats related to food security and social cohesion intensify, especially in border zones populated by ethnic minorities.
- The knowledge and initiatives of local residents remain unsupported and unrecognized, hindering local development.
- The absence of dignified living conditions in villages undermines the integration of local populations into public life, ultimately affecting the country's development and security resilience.

How to Address the Problem?

- Reassess the role of villages in state policy, recognizing them as strategic partners in ensuring security and development.
- Develop a long-term strategy based on local context knowledge and local human and other resources, with the participation of rural residents, including ethnic minorities.

- Focus on food security by supporting local production rather than import dependency.
- Create a system to support initiative-driven and responsible residents (grants, professional and skills development, resource access) to retain and activate local human capital.
- Restore rural infrastructure: educational centers, libraries, cultural spaces as the foundation for dignified living and community cohesion.

Conclusions:
Rural territories, especially border zones, are not merely agricultural spaces but strategic areas that determine Georgia's sustainability and security. Their current neglected state and perception as passive aid recipients contradict the development and realization of their human and community potential. The participation of local residents as partners, not beneficiaries, is essential for restoring food security, demographic stability, and social integration, particularly in regions populated by ethnic minorities.

Recommendations:
- Recognize villages as equal partners in implementing national strategies, integrating their resources and knowledge into decision-making processes.
- Develop a food security policy based on local production, with a focus on border territories.
- Support rural residents' initiatives through targeted programs (financial aid, education) to prevent youth outmigration.
- Restore rural infrastructure (schools, libraries, cultural centers) to improve quality of life and strengthen community unity.
- Ensure the involvement of ethnic minorities in developing and implementing strategies, reinforcing their role in sustainable development.

Democracy as a Way of Life: General Conclusion

The ten blocks of the analysis reveal systemic obstacles to the sustainable development and security of Georgia's border territories, underscoring the necessity of civic engagement, decentralization, education, and legal support. The underdevelopment of border villages (Block 1) and their perception as passive recipients of aid (Block 10) highlight those opportunities for strengthening stability and integration remain untapped, particularly in regions where ethnic minorities (43.5%–46.4% in Gardabani and Sagaredjo) constitute a significant portion of the population. The neglect of equitable resource distribution and the weakness of local self-government (Block 2) increase social vulnerability and strategic risks. Centralization of power (Block 3) fosters apathy, demographic decline, and threats to food security, while low levels of engagement culture and limited access to community-based organizations (Block 4) hinder initiatives.

The legacy of ethnic conflicts and the deficit of a shared civic identity (Block 5) deepen the segregation of minorities, such as Azerbaijanis and Armenians, undermining consolidation. Unequal access to education (Block 6) reinforces social predetermination, exacerbates ethnic isolation (Block 5), and limits opportunities for youth in border zones. Notably, the lack of bilingual textbooks and adapted curricula in schools prevents students from expressing their thoughts, reflecting a global challenge where Georgia still strives to improve students' reading comprehension skills. The narrow perception of identity as exclusively ethnic (Block 7) impedes solidarity and the development of national or global thinking. The weakness of local self-government and the absence of legal frameworks for community development (Block 8) restrict opportunities for economic autonomy and democracy. The lack of community-oriented projects (Regional Block 1) and the severe underfunding of community organizations (Regional Block 2) widen the gap between external aid and actual needs. The need for a legal framework for philanthropy (Block 9, Regional Block 4) and the contraction of civic space following the 2024 law (Regional Block 3) undermine the potential of community organizations as a force for resilience.

These problems are interconnected: centralization weakens communities, limited access to education intensifies isolation, and the lack of legal and financial support hampers the contribution of community organizations. The consequences—population outmigration, loss of trust, and threats to social and food security—are particularly acute in border zones, where stability is of strategic

importance. The expert Marina Tabukashvili emphasizes that solutions require resource redistribution, strengthened education, and the cultivation of civic responsibility, enabling ethnic diversity to become a vital resource for societal unity.

Key Conclusions:

1. **Strategic Role of Border Villages**: Their development, including national security objectives, requires recognizing villages as active partners, not merely beneficiaries.
2. **Decentralization as a Cornerstone**: The transfer of powers and resources strengthens democracy and sustainability, especially in regions with ethnic minorities.
3. **Education as a Tool**: Inclusive education breaks down barriers, integrates youth, and fosters an open society ready to engage in development.
4. **Civic Identity**: Shifting from ethnic insularity to shared societal consciousness enhances solidarity and security.
5. **Legal and Financial Support**: The development of community-based organizations requires legislative mechanisms to promote a culture of philanthropy and autonomy.

Recommendations:

- **State Policy**: Develop border villages through investments in infrastructure improvement, education (e.g., bilingual textbooks, materials in local languages, scholarships), and food security.
- **Decentralization**: Transfer powers to ensure financial independence (e.g., increasing local taxes) and enhance public accountability (elections, transparency).
- **Education and Engagement**: Provide high-quality civic education in schools, develop social skills through an improved education system, and create development spaces (e.g., youth centers, libraries) for motivated students, particularly in regions with compact ethnic minority populations. In areas where professional education opportunities are virtually nonexistent, implement programs to ensure youth success in the labor market.
- **Integration of Minorities**: Establish dialogue platforms (e.g., regional forums) and ensure equal access to resources (e.g., expanding the “Four Plus One” program, which supports Georgian language learning within communities) to overcome isolation.
- **Support for the Civic Sector**: Introduce philanthropy legislation to encourage public and business involvement in funding community-based organizations, ensuring transparency and sustainability.

These measures will activate the population and transform border territories into spaces of sustainable development and inclusion, strengthening Georgia as a unified democratic state where ethnic diversity becomes a driving force for progress, setting an example for the entire region.

Democracy as a Way of Life: A Form of Thinking and Responsibility

In Marina Tabukashvili's interview, democracy emerges not as a set of formal procedures but as a way of life, a mindset, and a culture of everyday actions, particularly relevant for Georgia, including its border regions. This approach allows us to understand democracy not solely through participation in elections or affiliation with civil society but as a person's capacity to be engaged, ask questions, take responsibility, and act for the common good.

The expert emphasizes that a key task is to nurture citizens capable of seeing problems not only in their own backyard but beyond it—in their municipality, region, country, or the world. Such civic maturity is impossible without education, the right to critique, and a culture of

This mindset forges a connection between the citizen and the state. The interview clearly conveys the idea that true democracy begins where power is distributed, and individuals see themselves not only as recipients of aid but as co-participants in decision-making. This is a particularly pressing issue for Georgia, where centralization trends limit local initiatives.

This vision is deeply humanistic: it demands engagement, not passivity; creativity, not waiting. This is the essence of civic thinking in its truest sense. The interview places special emphasis on local democracy and community-based organizations as tools for empowering communities. These spaces enable individuals to learn citizenship through practical actions and small projects, gradually fostering trust, collaboration, and sustainable development.

Marina Tabukashvili's interview serves as a manifesto of democratic thinking, where personal value, participation, respect for others, and social responsibility form the foundation of societal development. This vision is particularly vital for Georgia, where the engagement of local communities, including ethnic minorities, shapes social unity and stability. Implementing this mindset requires promoting education, decentralizing power, and supporting local community initiatives to ensure every citizen becomes a co-author of change.

[Tbilisi] is our homeland too. We have lived here for so many centuries, had so many ancestors here, so many graves here; we have no other homeland. My uncle, who lived over a hundred years, was a member of the Tbilisi City Assembly [1918–1921}.

Respondent G-3

Ethnic Diversity, Integration, and External Influences

This chapter explores the integration processes unfolding in Georgia's ethnically diverse regions, touching on areas such as education, proficiency in the state language, civic engagement, and perceptions of statehood. At the heart of the discussion is the formation of a new generation—one that aspires to acquire knowledge, engage socially, and participate equally in public life. These transformations owe much to the efforts of previous generations who, despite economic hardships, ensured their children had access to education and instilled fundamental values such as diligence and responsibility.

In parallel, the chapter examines the barriers and challenges to the full integration of ethnic minorities. The focus is not only on dismantling social barriers but also on the need for state policies that ensure the comprehensive inclusion of ethnic minorities in civic and political processes. Particular attention is given to the importance of learning the Georgian language—both as a resource for accessing opportunities and as a symbol of civic belonging.

Additionally, the analysis addresses challenges arising within Georgian society itself, which is not always prepared to embrace integration as a mutual process. This dynamic demands the need to deepen dialogue between ethnic groups, build trust, and expand joint initiatives.

The study is grounded in the lived experiences of individuals—their voices, daily realities, and reflections on their future and shared prospects. This approach distinguishes it from dry statistics, transforming it into a social analysis with significant research value.

Issues of Ethnic Minority Integration and Strategic Security Challenges

1. Introduction

Amid growing external political risks and internal social fragmentation, the integration of ethnic minorities in Georgia assumes not only humanitarian but also strategic significance. Research conducted in the eastern border regions—Lagodekhi, Sagaredjo, and Gardabani—has revealed a spectrum of threats where issues of identity, access to state resources, the influence of religious organizations, and cross-border infrastructural processes intersect, creating a complex and unstable environment.

This chapter examines the key areas where security risks most closely intertwine with the dynamics of ethnic minority integration and the regional activities of external actors. The analysis is grounded not only in empirical data and interviews with local residents but also in an understanding of the structural factors that determine regional resilience and the level of engagement of ethnic groups within a shared state framework.

2. Infrastructure of Influence and Competition Among External Actors

2.1 Religious and Humanitarian Networks as Tools of External Influence

In the border districts of eastern Georgia, numerous humanitarians, religious, and educational initiatives operate with the support of external actors. While these projects are formally social or cultural in nature, they often carry strong elements of symbolic influence and aim to foster ideologically loyal environments.

Religious and humanitarian organizations active in these regions offer local populations a range of educational, charitable, and cultural programs. Their activities typically extend beyond short-term aid, seeking to establish long-term mechanisms of influence, including through educational centers and symbolically charged infrastructure.

In some cases, program coordination is carried out through regional religious centers and educational institutions operating across municipalities in Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti. In particularly vulnerable villages, local communities receive targeted support in the form of material resources, access to education, and other social services.

According to public reactions, despite the availability of information, official state structures rarely provide systematic responses or conduct preventive audits of these programs.

2.2. Infrastructural and Educational Initiatives: Projects as Carriers of Symbolic Influence

Certain infrastructural and educational initiatives implemented within the framework of humanitarian programs also carry elements of symbolic influence. Such projects often incorporate markers of identity—architectural designs, the use of national symbolism, and visual or linguistic codes—that transcend their initial purpose and imbue them with cultural and political significance. As a result, these initiatives simultaneously serve social-economic functions and contribute to identity consolidation within specific local contexts.

At the same time, notable activity is observed from certain economic actors who implement large-scale programs in education, energy, and social support. These initiatives are accompanied by public symbolism and branding, and in some districts, they are perceived as parallel infrastructure operating at the community level. Moreover, these initiatives may be seen as part of a long-term influence strategy aimed at establishing structures of cultural and economic dependence.

2.3. Territorial Issues and Transit Infrastructure

One of the most persistent and sensitive security factors remains the operation of shadow logistical infrastructure. This refers not only to cases of illegal movement of narcotics, weapons, and people but also to the establishment of a stable transportation network partially integrated into international routes. In this context, the municipalities of Gardabani and Lagodekhi are increasingly viewed as transit hubs linked to routes extending beyond the country's borders.

Examples related to Kumisi Lake and instances of illegal weapons trafficking highlight the critical need for systemic monitoring and preventive measures at the state policy level. These are not isolated incidents but part of a dynamic process—a sustained "gray" infrastructure encompassing both material and human resources. Dismantling such systems after the fact is extremely challenging if they are not identified in a timely manner.

An additional threat arises from border geodynamics, such as changes in the Alazani River's course. Unilateral reinforcement of certain sections by a neighboring country, without bilateral agreements or formal negotiations, creates the risk of de facto legitimization of a new border. This fosters a sense of uncontrollability among local populations and inflicts reputational damage on the state due to its failure to respond promptly to such developments.

These cases underscore the necessity of diplomatic and institutional responses, including ensuring strategic monitoring and developing preventive policies in border management.

3. Radicalization, Identity, and Religious Conflicts

3.1 Youth and the Risks of Religious Radicalization

In the ethnically and religiously diverse districts of eastern Georgia, the vulnerability of youth to ideologically motivated violence remains a significant challenge. According to expert assessments, since the 2000s, there have been documented cases of young members of Georgia's Azerbaijani community engaging in transnational extremist movements. While such involvement has not been widespread, it raises a fundamentally important question: how can the resilience of youth groups be ensured in conditions where they face social and informational vulnerabilities?

The risk is particularly high in settlements with limited access to inclusive education, a lack of youth spaces and alternative recreational opportunities, and religious infrastructure exposed to external radical influences. Such structures, whether Shiite or Sunni, often rely on networks of informal educational centers and distribute materials that foster closed identity formation, detached from principles of civic integration.

Radical groups operating in the region emphasize ritualistic elements, visual symbolism, and mechanisms of emotional engagement. They offer youth not only religious content but a comprehensive project of identity and worldview, particularly appealing in conditions of social instability. As a result, the connection between young citizens and state institutions weakens.

3.2 Conflicts Among Religious Movements and the Struggle for Influence

In Georgia's border districts, where Muslim communities live compactly, covert tensions are particularly evident in settlements with differing interpretations of Islam. External organizations actively operate here, offering religious, educational, and social programs to these communities.

This tension can manifest as competition for access to educational resources, the dissemination of religious literature, or influence over the community. Religious differences are often amplified by external funding and the absence of institutional coordination mechanisms within the country. Competing groups seek to limit each other's influence through ideological channels and by creating infrastructural barriers.

Particular concern arises from the fact that the state has yet to develop a comprehensive and sustainable policy for managing religious and ethno-confessional interactions. The lack of transparent standards and programs in education, civic integration, and cultural dialogue creates a favorable environment for external influences. In this context, planning and implementing initiatives focused on supporting local communities—through existing state programs and grant mechanisms—appears especially critical.

In the absence of coordination and preventive mechanisms, local polarization increases. In the long term, this creates the risk of new radicalization hotspots, particularly among youth who face a deficit of alternative channels for self-identification and development.

4. State Policy and Response Limitations

The growing challenges in eastern Georgia's border regions—spanning security, religious influences, humanitarian infrastructure, and long-term foreign representation—continue to evade adequate and systemic responses from state institutions. Despite certain initiatives, the fragmentation of processes, low levels of coordination, and the absence of a long-term strategic vision are evident. These factors increase the vulnerability of local communities and facilitate the strengthening of informal influence channels, which often supplant state support mechanisms.

4.1 Reactive Rather Than Preventive Approach

State structures frequently respond only after incidents occur, rather than acting preventively. In most cases, threats are acknowledged only when an event gains public attention or escalates into a crisis. This approach limits opportunities for early intervention and erodes public trust in institutional protection mechanisms. Meanwhile, sustained forms of external influence—manifested in humanitarian, religious, and educational spheres—remain outside the scope of strategic foresight.

4.2 Deficit of Assessment and Control Mechanisms

Despite the existence of general national strategies for security and integration, practical tools for comprehensive assessment and monitoring of local processes are lacking. There is no systematic analysis of humanitarian, infrastructural, or educational initiatives operating in the regions, including targeted and consistent tracking of funding sources, ideological orientations, or social consequences. This creates "blind spots" where external actors' influence can grow unchecked, while institutional responses are delayed or merely symbolic.

4.3 Coordination Challenges Across Levels of Governance

The absence of a coherent vertical interaction between central and local authorities results in neither level having a complete understanding of regional processes. Municipalities are not involved in developing or implementing integration and security strategies, while central agencies often overlook the specifics of regional contexts. Consequently, local authorities are caught between external initiatives and formally existing, yet weakly implemented, state policies.

4.4 Vulnerability of Religious, Humanitarian, and Educational Environments

In the most ideologically sensitive areas—education, humanitarian aid, and religious interactions—state involvement remains limited. The lack of sustainable educational programs and state-led religious dialogue creates an asymmetrical situation where local populations, facing resource deficits, prioritize cooperation with alternative external actors. This increases dependence on them and weakens civic identity, particularly among youth and vulnerable groups.

4.5 The Need for a Shift to Strategic Governance

Transitioning from reactive to strategic governance requires:

- Strengthening state institutional engagement in the regions (social infrastructure, education, cultural centers);
- Establishing an early warning system based on continuous monitoring of preventive processes;
- Partnering with local organizations that understand regional specifics and enjoy community trust;
- Ensuring transparency and accountability in the distribution of both state and international aid.

Eliminating the existing institutional and informational vacuum is a critical prerequisite for enhancing the resilience of border regions, fostering civic integration, and neutralizing external risks.

5. Diplomatic Interpretation and the Need for a Strategic Approach

The contemporary challenges in Georgia's border regions concerning integration and security cannot be fully understood by focusing solely on isolated incidents or local issues. A comprehensive understanding requires delving into the enduring structures—logistical, ideological, cultural, religious, and social—that operate beneath surface phenomena. These structures, functioning in a context of weak institutional frameworks, gradually transform into alternative infrastructures of influence. Their development threatens not only local stability but also the country's sovereignty and national cohesion as a whole.

5.1 The Problem Lies Not in Isolated Incidents but in Growing Processes

Concentrating attention solely on high-profile episodes distracts from a more significant phenomenon—the existence and incremental expansion of a sustained infrastructure of influence. These processes encompass logistical, humanitarian, and educational channels, supported by both formal and informal institutions. Their impact is not immediate but develops against a backdrop of prolonged inaction and limited institutional responses.

At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge objective constraints: limited resources, Georgia's cadre potential under geopolitical pressures, and constrained institutional capacities. This situation calls not for assigning blame but for providing necessary support and strengthening available mechanisms.

5.2 Evolution Instead of Isolated Cases

The discussion is not about temporary deviations but about the long-term transformation of the social and political environment. Any humanitarian project, cultural center, or educational initiative is a potential element of a broader system of influence—one that can shift its orientation depending on circumstances. Even initiatives perceived positively by society require evaluation not only based on their formal content but also in the context in which they develop. Strategic vulnerabilities emerge precisely when long-term scenarios and potential substantive shifts in such programs are not analyzed.

5.3 The absence of state policy as the Primary Factor of Vulnerability

The primary threat is not the activities of external actors per se but the absence of an effective, transparent, and predictable state policy. The institutional vacuum in areas such as humanitarian aid, religious dialogue, and support for educational activities is filled by external initiatives. Depending on their intentions and resources, these initiatives may either strengthen or weaken the condition of local communities in the long term. Where the state fails to establish reliable and trusted anchor points, alternative centers of legitimacy emerge, often operating outside democratic and legal principles.

5.4 The necessity of strategic planning

Addressing ongoing processes requires a strategic approach, not merely operational responses. This entails:

- Continuous monitoring, analysis, and mapping of influence networks;
- Establishing inter-agency analytical platforms in the regions;
- Engaging local experts, thematic organizations, and opinion leaders;
- Developing mechanisms for two-way dialogue with communities, including religious groups;
- Diplomatic evaluation: not every external intervention is an immediate threat, but each serves as a significant signal requiring careful consideration.

Moreover, it must be recognized that no strategy can be implemented without training relevant personnel, forming sustainable analytical teams with professional expertise. This process demands time and resources, but without them, transitioning from reaction to prevention is impossible.

5.5 Internal Diplomacy as a Factor of Resilience

In the context of hybrid challenges, diplomacy involves not only external communication but also the state's ability to ensure internal resilience. This includes fostering partnerships with municipalities, schools, religious and civic organizations, as well as supporting local media and expert resources. The strategy must be rooted in respect for local contexts, the presence of state support, the ability to anticipate potential risks, and not merely respond to them.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of the situation in the border municipalities of eastern Georgia—Lagodekhi, Gardabani, and Sagaredjo—reveals that issues of ethnic minority integration are intricately linked to the country's internal resilience, security, and external influences. Despite certain integration efforts, the region retains systemic vulnerabilities driven by both institutional weaknesses and the heightened involvement of external actors. These are not fragmented problems but deep, systemic processes that demand strategic reassessment.

Key Findings:

- In areas with compact ethnic minority populations (primarily Azerbaijani communities), there is significant activity in humanitarian, religious, and infrastructural initiatives, often originating

from external sources. These initiatives frequently extend beyond mere aid, creating sustained mechanisms of influence.

- The limited participation of state institutions—particularly in education, social support, and religious dialogue—creates a vacuum filled by structures that do not always pursue neutral or democratic agendas.
- A sustained infrastructure is emerging—from humanitarian projects to informal logistics and symbolic identity—that operates in parallel with state mechanisms, requiring not ad hoc responses but a systemic policy approach.
- State agencies, including security structures, local governments, and relevant ministries, lack sufficient resources, analytical capabilities, and coordination mechanisms to conduct comprehensive work in border regions.
- Successful integration, resilience, and trust-building cannot rely solely on normative or administrative measures. Systemic collaboration with local organizations, recognition of community expertise, and sustained partnerships are essential.

Recommendations:

Institutional Response and Monitoring

- Establish an inter-agency analytical center to study sustained influence channels in border regions.
- Conduct regular monitoring of humanitarian, educational, and religious programs with the involvement of local experts.
- Develop an interactive map to identify existing and potential infrastructures of influence.

Integration and Partnership

- Support local community organizations and municipalities as equal state partners.
- Promote transparent governance and mechanisms for citizen participation at the local level.
- Recognize ethnic minorities as a valuable resource for democratic development and a shared civic space.

Sustainable Development and Humanitarian Competitiveness

- Formulate a state strategy to reduce dependence on external humanitarian initiatives.
- Invest preventively in education, cultural infrastructure, religious dialogue, and local economies.
- Address legal and organizational issues related to property and land in high-risk zones.

A New Model of National Security

- Broaden the concept and vision of security: from border protection to safeguarding identity, trust, and long-term resilience.
- Integrate preventive diplomacy, local analysis, and strategic thinking into national security frameworks.
- Support youth through accessible education, employment, and participation as a foundation for combating marginalization and radicalization.

Concluding Remark

Georgia faces a strategic challenge: the primary task is to strengthen the state through prudent, transparent, and equitable governance, rather than responding to external challenges with force. Where the state offers respect, opportunities, and equal partnership, the space for external influences significantly diminishes. Integration should not be viewed merely as a component of social policy—it is the foundation of resilience, security, and societal trust. As such, integration must be regarded as a strategic objective, the success of which depends on long-term institutional support and the consolidation of political will.

Ethnic Diversity, Integration, and External Influences

1. Ethnic Minorities and Integration Challenges in a Changing Environment

1.1 Internal Transformations: Education, Language, and Generational Change

Problem: Despite positive shifts, ethnic minorities in Georgia's border regions continue to face systemic challenges in accessing education, mastering the state language, and achieving social integration. While transformation is underway, it requires targeted and consistent state-level support. Without this, ethnic minorities risk falling under the influence of various external geopolitical actors.

Problem Description: A noticeable shift in values is emerging: young people from ethnic minority communities increasingly aspire to education, proficiency in the state language, and equal participation in the country's public life. Their worldview is becoming more open, future-oriented, and integration-focused. This positive change has been driven by the efforts of older generations to secure education for their children, coupled with expanded access to information and the emergence of new value orientations. However, integration faces persistent barriers: a shortage of qualified teachers, limited access to state language learning programs, and economic disparities.

Consequences:

- Ethnic communities are evolving from insular, localized structures into groups oriented toward education and development.
- The younger generation encounters obstacles that limit their potential, particularly in education and public participation.
- Linguistic and educational integration remains a critical prerequisite for further positive change.

Quotes:

"Time has brought change. If parents and grandparents lived insularly, the new era has introduced different challenges." (L-4)

"If you ask children, they all want to travel to cities around the world." (L-4)

How to Address the Problem:

- Develop state-supported programs for teaching the Georgian language at all educational levels.
- Establish inclusive models in preschool and general education institutions to support multilingual environments.
- Strengthen the role of local initiatives that promote youth education, mentorship, and community engagement.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Generational change in ethnic communities is already a reality and requires institutional support.
- Education, language, and participation are key drivers of integration, especially for the new generation.
- Without a systemic approach and sustainable educational programs, this positive transformation risks remaining fragmented.

1.2. The Political and Practical Value of Proficiency in the Georgian Language

Problem: Representatives of ethnic minorities who lack proficiency in the state language are often deprived of opportunities for full participation in public and political life.

Description of the Problem: The language barrier restricts ethnic minorities' access to state institutions, hindering their ability to effectively advocate for their interests. Proficiency in the Georgian language is viewed not only as a tool for integration but also as a resource for political empowerment, enabling access to the political sphere and amplifying the community's voice.

Consequences: The younger generation increasingly seeks education in the Georgian language. Within the community, a new generation of leaders is emerging, ready to engage fully in the country's political space, reflecting their growing ambition and civic responsibility.

"Their (ethnic minorities') interests must be protected by someone who knows the country's legislation well and can communicate effectively in Georgian. They believe that I, as a Georgian, cannot represent their interests as effectively as one of their own, so it's better for them to be

educated themselves. Politically, with such a large electorate, they need a fully legitimate representative who can maximally protect their interests. They have realized this and are nurturing their community's representatives for the future." (L-4)

How to Address the Problem?

- Continue supporting state programs for teaching the Georgian language, focusing on practical and accessible education.
- Promote the political and civic education of community members.
- The state should ensure support for skill development and facilitate legitimate political participation.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Proficiency in the Georgian language is not merely a tool for integration but a key to political and social mobility. The ongoing transformation within the community requires a state policy that ensures equal opportunities, promotes full integration, and strengthens the community's trust in the state.

1.3. Formation of a New Ethnic Elite and Challenges of Civic Integration

Problem: In border municipalities, the Azerbaijani community is undergoing significant transformation, with a new generation emerging that is proficient in the state language, strives for education, and is ready to actively participate in the country's public life. However, the lack of robust state integration policies limits the realization of this potential, leaving community representatives outside the national civic space.

Description of the Problem: The new generation, distinguished from their parents by education, ambition, and readiness for integration, is making significant progress. They transcend the traditional frameworks of local leadership, aiming to contribute to the country's development. However, the absence of state mechanisms hinders their inclusion in political and institutional processes, increasing the risk of forming parallel elites that develop independently of state institutions.

Consequences:

- An educated, ambitious generation is emerging but struggles to fully engage in civic and political spaces despite its potential.
- Despite language proficiency and professional skills, a "distance" persists between ethnic communities and the state.
- The state fails to provide structured mechanisms for integrating new ethnic community leaders.

"Now they are completely different people compared to their parents." (L-4)

"They believe that I, as a Georgian, cannot represent their interests as effectively as one of their own, so it's better for them to be educated themselves. Politically, with such a large electorate, they need a fully legitimate representative who can maximally protect their interests. They have realized this and are nurturing their community's representatives for the future." (L-4)

"In our district, during majoritarian elections, the votes from these villages were often decisive, and I wouldn't be surprised if, in the future, they put forward their own candidate, win the elections, and become district deputies." (L-4)

Analytical Conclusion:

Ethnic communities prefer representatives from their own ranks who can advocate for their interests in a modern format, rather than figures loyal to central authorities. The Azerbaijani community is forming new political cadres capable of significantly influencing local election consequences, indicating their growing political potential.

How to Address the Problem?

- Develop a civic integration policy that facilitates the inclusion of the new ethnic elite in governance processes.
- Establish transparent mechanisms to ensure the participation of ethnic minority representatives in state institutions, including executive bodies, education, and the civic sector.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The state must recognize the formation of a new ethnic elite and establish equal, partnership-based relations grounded in mutual respect.
- The integration process should respect identity, reject assimilationist approaches, and promote cultural diversity.

- Specialized programs should be developed to enhance civic and political engagement of communities, ensuring equal participation in governance and fostering the formation of a shared civic space.
- Such a policy will reduce polarization, strengthen trust, and promote an inclusive society where all communities feel valued.

1.4. Political Participation: From Expectations to Real Engagement

Problem: Despite increased levels of education and state language proficiency, the political participation of ethnic minorities remains fragmented. The community lacks clear and legitimate political representation, reinforcing feelings of alienation from the decision-making process.

Description of the Problem: A new generation capable of representing community interests is emerging but rarely becomes a full participant in political processes. The lack of institutional support limits their engagement, while local political fields often rely on informal governance practices prioritizing loyalty, financial resources, and patronage. This creates a closed system that hinders the integration of new leaders.

Consequences:

- A mismatch between education and opportunities limits community representatives' participation in decision-making.
- Educated youth, despite their potential, are often excluded from political processes, preventing the utilization of their resources.
- The risk of disillusionment and loss of trust grows, fostering the formation of parallel influence systems within the community.

"They send their children to study, and they come back so educated, such refined intellectuals—you'd be delighted to see these young men." (L-4)

"Everyone has a patron, but who do we have? No one…" (S-2)

How to Address the Problem?

- Municipalities and state structures should develop participatory mechanisms based on transparency and competence.
- Encourage the emergence of local leaders who are given institutional opportunities to represent community interests.
- Promote initiatives such as talent pools, mentorship programs, and inclusion in working groups to integrate new voices into governance processes.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Language proficiency and education provide a foundation for participation, but without institutional support, they do not ensure equal engagement.
- The state should develop an inclusive policy to support the new generation of leaders.
- Only through equal access and genuine engagement can the community become a full participant in the country's public and political life.

1.5. Challenges for Georgian Society: Integration as a Two-Way Process

Problem: The integration of ethnic minorities into public and political life is hindered not only by barriers within the communities but also by insufficient readiness within parts of Georgian society to embrace cultural diversity.

Description of the Problem: Integration is a two-way process requiring openness, willingness to cooperate, and respect for diverse identities from the majority population. However, stereotypes, feelings of alienation, and fears toward ethnic minorities persist in Georgian society, obstructing both institutional and everyday interactions.

Consequences:

- Despite positive changes within the community, barriers from the "other side" continue to impede integration.
- Community successes are sometimes perceived as a threat rather than a resource.
- An "asymmetry of expectations" and mistrust hinder the formation of a shared civic space.

"If our people do nothing and give in to laziness…" (L-4)

"Integration must be two-way, but I don't feel it from the Georgian society…" (S-2)

"Of course, it's good—the more educated and integrated communities we have, the better." (L-4)

How to Address the Problem?

- Implement public campaigns to raise awareness about cultural diversity and overcome stereotypes.
- Incorporate themes of multicultural dialogue and respect for diverse identities into educational programs.
- Develop initiatives that unite representatives of different ethnic groups in joint projects, particularly at the local level.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- A democratic society cannot be sustainable without recognizing diversity and respecting different identities.
- The state and civil society must work together to ensure integration is perceived as a foundation for trust, cooperation, and shared development.
- Overcoming barriers is possible only through mutual engagement, with both ethnic minorities and the majority actively participating.

2. Transformation of Ethnic Minorities and Strategies of External Actors

2.1. Risks of Radicalization and Threats of Affiliation with Terrorist Groups

Problem: In some cases, ethnic communities face risks of religious radicalization, potentially linked to the vulnerability of youth, insufficient integration, and the influence of transnational radical structures.

Description of the Problem: Interviews indicate isolated cases within the Azerbaijani community where young individuals have traveled abroad to join international radical groups, including the terrorist organization "Islamic State" (ISIS). While not widespread, these individual cases are sufficient to necessitate strengthened state prevention and early response mechanisms. In some instances, school-aged youth become victims of radicalization, influenced by religious groups promoting extremist rhetoric.

Consequences:

- A small portion of youth has fallen under the influence of radical ideologies.
- Cases have been recorded of individuals traveling to participate in combat activities.
- Weak state prevention policies and inter-agency coordination increase risks to both community and national security.

"– Do you know how many have gone to fight?

– I don't know, I don't deal with them, but when they post their photos on social media, they're not shy about it… What can you do? They're young, nothing worries them." (G-4)

"Two girls from the Lagodekhi district also went to join ISIS, but their fate remains unknown." (Exp. M.Ar.)

"A tenth-grade girl started wearing a headscarf and talking about Allah at school… She stubbornly said that when she grows up, she will definitely go fight with jihadists." (L-4)

"According to unofficial information, there are several religious groups here. One of them is the Wahhabis." (L-4)

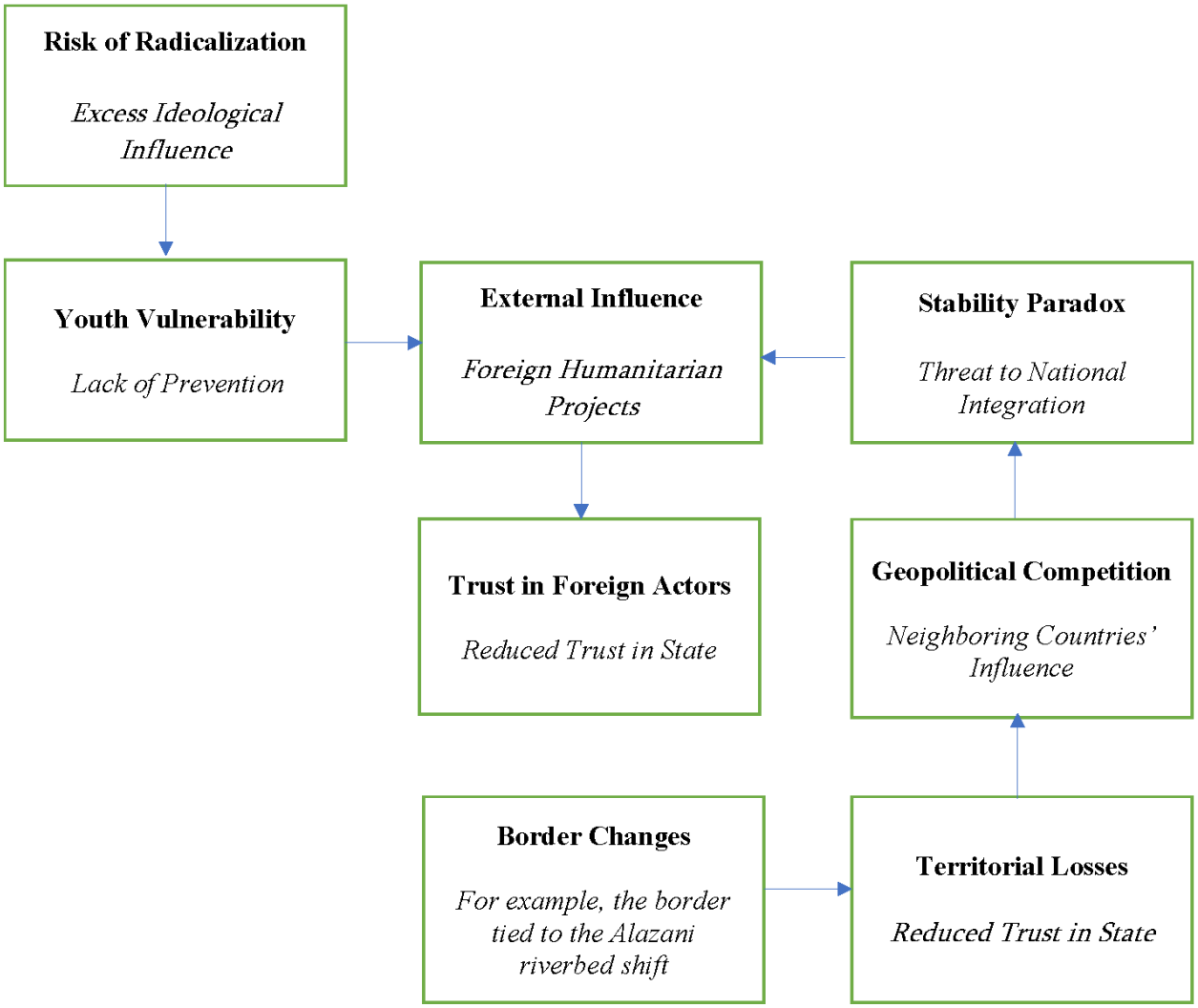
"Five days after the marriage, a man filed for divorce at my office… His wife was a member of some religious sect that allowed sexual relations with all men, including her father-in-law and brother-in-law." (L-4)

How to Address the Problem?

- The state must strengthen preventive and educational measures to protect youth from religious extremism.
- Schools and vulnerable communities should establish psychological and social support mechanisms for adolescents.
- Foster trust-based cooperation between state structures and communities.
- Develop and implement early prevention programs involving the Ministries of Education and Labor, the State Security Service, and local NGOs.

Transformation of Ethnic Minorities and External Influence

Causal Relationship Scheme



Conclusions and Recommendations: Even rare cases of radicalization can have severe consequences. Priority should be given to developing and strengthening preventive mechanisms. Inclusive education, parental involvement, cultural dialogue, and the establishment of psychosocial support systems within communities can significantly reduce radicalization risks. State policy should support community-driven initiatives and encourage active participation, as this is the most effective response to counter external radical influences.

2.2. Infrastructure, Social Assistance, and Expansion of Influence

Problem: Foreign organizations, particularly those of Turkish and Iranian origin, operating in the region enhance their influence and expand their reach through infrastructure and social projects, which can be viewed as a long-term "soft power" strategy.

Description of the Problem: In Georgia's border regions populated by ethnic minorities, humanitarian and charitable organizations from neighboring countries are increasingly addressing social and infrastructural challenges. These organizations facilitate the modernization of water

systems, schools, public spaces, and other facilities, as well as provide socially vulnerable groups with construction materials and daily necessities. Such initiatives often carry cultural, linguistic, or symbolic components, lending them not only humanitarian but also ideological weight. In the context of weak state and
municipal engagement, local populations often perceive this foreign aid as a reliable and accessible resource. This blurs the line between humanitarian missions and political positioning.

Consequences: The population increasingly perceives foreign humanitarian organizations as more efficient and responsive to local needs than state institutions. This fosters trust, sympathy, and openness toward the donor countries' cultures and values. If the state fails to offer a systematic, consistent, and sustainable alternative, long-term symbolic and emotional ties with external actors may deepen, complicating the implementation of state integration policies.

Quotes:

"For example, they help the local population set up water supply systems. However, after the project is completed, a photo of the donor country's leader or another symbolic marker must be displayed at the site…" (Exp. M.Ar.)

"Initially, they didn't charge for gas, I know that. The first pipeline was installed in one of the Azerbaijani villages, bypassing Georgian villages. Metering and gas supply in Georgian villages only happened 5–6 years later." (L-4)

"Periodically, once a month or every two months, they bring in construction and repair materials, which are distributed for free or sold at a discount. The proceeds are used to help the needy."

"Under the guise of humanitarian organizations, they are quite active in the regions." (Exp. M.Ar.)

How to Address the Problem?

- State agencies and municipalities must actively participate in planning and implementing critical infrastructure projects to provide a competitive alternative to external support.
- Municipalities and local governments, in collaboration with communities, should develop partnership projects that address immediate population needs and strengthen trust in local governance.
- Enhance communication with the population, providing clear and accessible information about the origin, funding sources, and strategic goals of ongoing projects to reduce speculation and assumptions through transparency.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Infrastructure initiatives and social assistance tailored to community needs are critical components of daily life. When such support comes from foreign organizations accompanied by political symbolism, it transcends humanitarian frameworks and serves as an instrument of influence. The state's responsibility is to create systematic and sustainable support mechanisms that effectively address local needs, enhance trust in state institutions, and reduce vulnerability to external influence. Only through this approach can a consistent and successful national integration policy be achieved.

2.3. Geopolitical Competition of Neighboring Countries' Influence

Problem: Neighboring countries actively seek to strengthen their influence in Georgia's regions populated by ethnic minorities, each employing distinct strategies. This creates multilayered competition within the same social environment.

Description of the Problem: Various actors operating in the region employ specific approaches to achieve their foreign policy objectives. Some emphasize historical-cultural ties and strengthening loyalty among local communities, others focus on disseminating certain ideological principles and expanding social networks, while some utilize infrastructure projects, cultural, and educational initiatives to enhance soft power. In the past, certain groups were also actively present, though their influence has diminished in recent years due to measures taken by relevant agencies. These strategic differences lead to overlapping interests and competition for influence within the same ethnocultural space.

Consequences: The influence of external actors' humanitarian, ideological, or cultural initiatives results in parts of ethnic communities coming under the sway of various political and cultural factors. This situation complicates the state's ability to effectively and consistently manage internal social and integration processes in the long term. A so-called "stability paradox" emerges: on one hand, external assistance objectively improves social conditions in communities; on the other, it strengthens the

symbolic and political influence of those seeking to shape processes within the country's domestic space.

Quotes:

"Every foreigner in Georgia has their own interests…" (G-4)

"Every country is interested in influencing its neighbor, especially when its ethnic population lives on their territory." (G-4)

"The activity of 'humanitarian' organizations has noticeably decreased in recent years because special services have been quite effective against them. Some countries are facing serious financial crises, which is why such organizations can no longer provide aid on the same scale as before." (Exp. M.Ar.)

"At least half of the Sakrebulo members are Azerbaijanis. Most of them don't speak Georgian. They sit in Sakrebulo and have no idea what's going on. Some local authority says, 'Vote, raise your hand,' and they raise their hands — that's how things get done." (G-2)

"The country should pursue an integration policy. Here in Gardabani, there's an 'integration center' funded from abroad that teaches children Georgian for free." (G-1)

How to Address the Problem?

- The state must strengthen mechanisms for strategic analysis and monitoring of external influences to enable in-depth assessment and timely response to regional processes.
- Develop coordinated policies with international partners to protect national interests and maintain regional stability.
- Plan and implement local initiatives with active community participation, focusing on internal resilience, education, and socio-economic development, rather than merely replicating external support.

Conclusions and Recommendations: The strategies of neighboring countries vary but collectively create a multilayered geopolitical reality in Georgia's ethnic space. The state must respond with a multifaceted policy encompassing not only security measures but also social, cultural, and economic resilience. Stability depends on the systematic, robust, and visibly effective support of the state, positioning it as a credible and viable alternative to external actors' influence.

2.4. Border Changes and the Alazani Riverbed Problem

Problem: Amid natural changes in the Alazani River's course, Azerbaijan systematically reinforces newly formed land plots with state border markers, while Georgia lacks effective response mechanisms. This creates risks of territorial loss and undermines public trust in the state.

Description of the Problem: Each time the Alazani River shifts its course, Azerbaijan promptly secures new territories with concrete structures. Georgia lacks the rapid-response resources and mechanisms to address these changes. As a result, certain land plots, including islands formed by riverbed shifts, effectively fall under the neighboring country's jurisdiction. This issue is not solely geophysical but also tied to the legally ambiguous determination of the state border. The lack of coordination between central and local authorities exacerbates the problem.

Context: The dispute around the David-Gareji monastery complex. The issue is particularly sensitive due to the territorial dispute surrounding the David-Gareji monastery complex. Parts of this historically and culturally significant site lie on an undelimited border, leading to restricted access, inconsistent interpretations of the site's status, and prolonged demarcation processes. This generates public discontent and concern in religious and academic circles. Existing precedents demand a clear and strategic state policy to protect territorial integrity and cultural heritage.

Consequences:

- An undefined and unprotected border undermines state sovereignty.
- The absence of timely response mechanisms allows the neighboring state to establish a de facto status quo and assert claims over new territories.
- Public trust in state institutions declines, complicating social stability in border zones.

Quotes:

"The Alazani River's course changes remain a serious problem for the region. After each shift, Azerbaijan quickly reinforces the new border section with concrete structures… The Georgian side lacks appropriate responses to these changes, and due to this inaction, certain land plots, including

islands formed by the riverbed's shifts, effectively and permanently transfer to Azerbaijan." (Exp. M.Ar.)

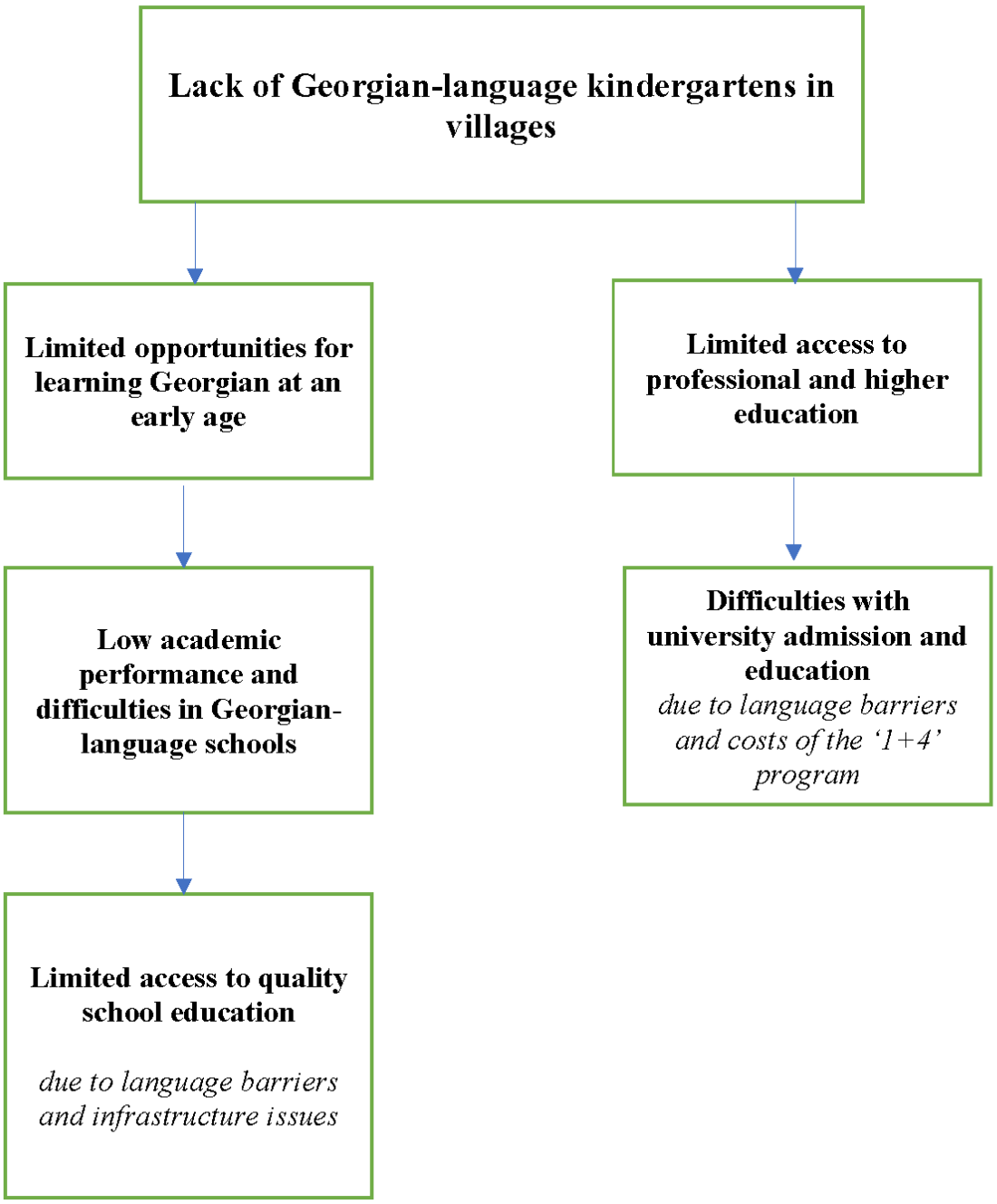
How to Address the Problem?

- Develop rapid-response mechanisms: The state must establish structures equipped with technical, human, and financial resources to effectively address Alazani Riverbed changes.
- Accelerate delimitation and demarcation: Pursue delimitation based on international law principles through bilateral dialogue to ensure a legally defined border.
- Enhance coordination between central and local levels: Local governments must be systematically involved in managing border issues and serve as part of an early warning system.
- Prioritize cultural heritage protection: Policies for sites like David-Gareji should leverage cultural diplomacy and mobilize international support to safeguard their status.

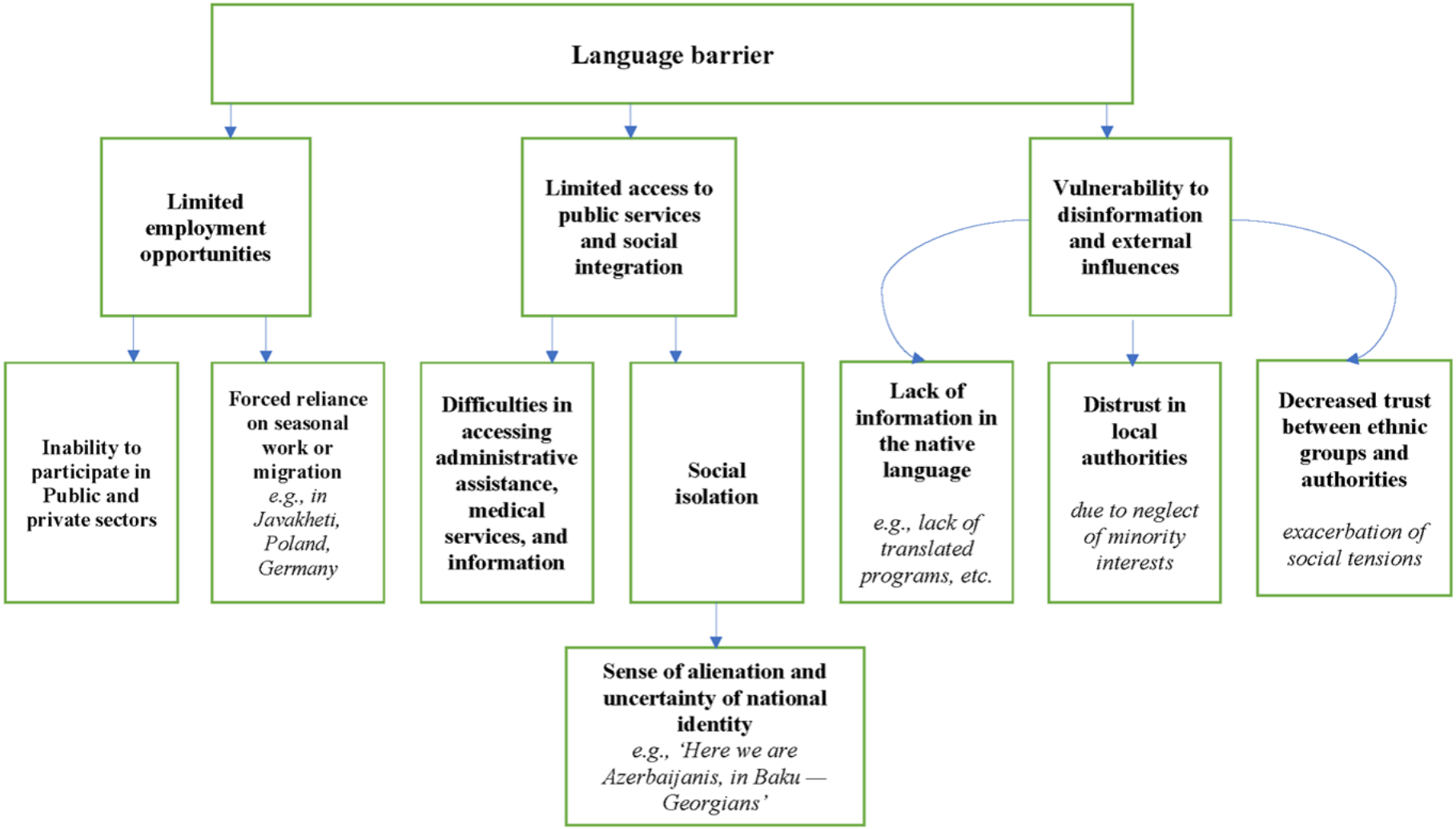
Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Natural landscape changes should not serve as a legal basis for altering state borders.
- Georgia must adopt a proactive policy to protect territorial integrity, especially in sensitive zones.
- The David-Gareji issue highlights the need to protect not only physical but also cultural and historical-spiritual spaces.
- Border management should rely on continuous monitoring and active community collaboration to ensure timely responses to all types of changes.

Causal Relationship Scheme: Language barrier for ethnic minorities in Georgia's border municipalities - 1



Causal Relationship Scheme: Language barrier for ethnic minorities in Georgia's border municipalities - 2



16.1 – Reduction of all forms of violence;
16.2 – Elimination of exploitation, trafficking, and violence against children.
Sustainable Development Goals

Systemic Social Crisis of Violence and Inequality

Domestic Violence, Early Marriage, and Child Labor

Domestic violence, early marriage, and child labor are not merely individual tragedies but manifestations of a systemic crisis that undermines the foundations of society from within. These phenomena reflect institutional weaknesses, deeply rooted cultural norms, and social inequalities that are passed down through generations, perpetuating cycles of violence and hindering social progress.
Ensuring social stability and security cannot be achieved while these fundamental challenges remain an integral part of daily life. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 16 emphasizes the critical importance of fostering peaceful, just, and inclusive societies built on strong, transparent, and accountable institutions. Yet, how can stability be secured when thousands of women and children continue to live in conditions of fear, violence, and injustice?
Research conducted in three border municipalities highlights that domestic violence, early marriage, and child labor are closely interconnected social issues. Ignoring these challenges leads to profound and lasting socio-economic harm, affecting not only individuals but also weakening society's overall development potential:
Domestic Violence: Women and children experience psychological, physical, and economic abuse, which violates their fundamental rights and erodes trust in legal and social institutions.
Early Marriage: Adolescent girls lose opportunities for education, personal development, and professional fulfillment, increasing their vulnerability and deepening gender inequalities.
Child Labor: Children are deprived of their right to education and full development, often engaging in heavy and hazardous work that endangers their health and safety.
These challenges cannot be addressed in isolation; they are tightly interwoven social phenomena that require a comprehensive, coordinated, and cross-sectoral strategic approach. Without such an approach, fragmented and ineffective policies will further exacerbate social inequalities and threaten the country's sustainable development.
This chapter aims to lay the foundation for targeted, realistic, and context-specific recommendations focused on strengthening the rights and protection of women and children, overcoming social injustices, and fostering a society rooted in justice, security, and inclusivity.
Silence is no longer an option—it is time for open dialogue and results-driven action.

1.Domestic Violence: Legal, Social, and Psychological Aspects

1.1 Legal Mechanisms for Combating Domestic Violence and Their Effectiveness

Problem Despite significant tightening of legislation against domestic violence and improvements in law enforcement responses, preventive measures and victim rehabilitation mechanisms remain weak.

Problem Description In recent years, Georgia has progressively introduced legal mechanisms to combat domestic violence, including the restraining order system, a 24-hour hotline, and standardized police procedures. Despite this progress, the institutional approach primarily focuses on identifying cases and punishing perpetrators, while prevention, victim support, and long-term rehabilitation are implemented in a fragmented manner, without consistent and systemic policies.

Consequences:

- **Police Response**: Formalized and prompt, but often fails to provide comprehensive support to victims of violence.
- **Legal Framework**: Effective in identifying and sanctioning acts of violence, but insufficient in terms of prevention.
- **Victim Situation**: Victims frequently lack integrated and sustainable support mechanisms, hindering their rehabilitation and increasing the risk of repeated violence.

Quotes:

"For the police, handling such crimes is very straightforward. There's a standard form for the administrative protocol—a restraining order, which is prescribed by law." (G-4)

"The police are the most effective in this area. Writing a protocol for a violence case is simple—there's a ready-made form where you just fill in the name and surname." (G-4)

"During domestic violence, neighbors and others intervene more often, usually called by someone from the family." (L-4)

How to Address the Problem?

- Establish comprehensive victim support mechanisms: crisis centers, psychological assistance, and legal consultation.
- Strengthen inter-agency coordination among police, social services, and healthcare structures.
- Develop specialized preventive programs and training courses for police and municipal employees.
- Create platforms to ensure individualized approaches to victims, considering their family and cultural contexts.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Georgia's legislative framework for combating domestic violence has notably strengthened, yet its practical implementation remains predominantly repressive, focusing primarily on registering incidents and punishing perpetrators.

- It is essential to shift the emphasis from mere registration and punishment to prevention, victim empowerment, and rehabilitation.
- The state must develop a systemic approach that integrates legal mechanisms with social and psychological support, ensuring sustainable protection and empowerment for victims.

1.2 Social Taboos and Fears: Why Women Do Not Seek Help?

Problem: Despite the existence of legal protection mechanisms, a significant number of women do not access them due to powerful social barriers—cultural taboos, stigma, fear, and economic dependence.

Problem Description: Women who are victims of domestic violence often refrain from seeking help, even when aware of their rights. Cultural norms and societal expectations in traditional communities foster feelings of guilt, shame, and similar emotions. Many women fear the destruction of their families, losing their children, or being ostracized by their communities. Additionally, some women are economically dependent on their husbands or their families, leading them to forgo protecting their rights and often continuing to live in abusive environments.

Consequences:

- **Hidden Violence**: A large proportion of domestic violence cases remain unreported and fall outside the scope of legal intervention.

- **Abusive Environment**: Many women continue living in abusive conditions, perceiving them as an inevitable part of "family life."
- **Impact of Stigma**: Despite the availability of legal tools, victims avoid using them due to fear of stigma and societal rejection.

Quotes:

"The state has done a lot in this regard; women's rights are protected by law, and attention is paid to women's issues." (G-4)

"The situation has improved now, but many challenges remain. Traditions and the sense of public shame significantly hinder open discussion of domestic violence." (L-3)

"(Women) are afraid; even today, so many women walk around with bruises and stay silent. There are countless reasons—they fear destroying their families, worry they won't be able to raise their children. In these cases, women are victims of their circumstances." (G-4)

"There are many reasons: they fear family breakdown, that they won't be able to raise their children. They are victims of their circumstances." (G-4)

How to Address the Problem?

- Launch educational campaigns to dispel the myth that violence is a "normal" part of relationships.
- Integrate materials on peaceful relationships, gender equality, and human rights into school curricula and community programs.
- Provide anonymous and confidential support channels to reduce the fear of stigma.
- Develop social services and economic support mechanisms to enable women to achieve financial independence.

Conclusions and Recommendations: The existence of legal mechanisms is crucial but insufficient without changing societal perceptions.

- Social taboos, fear, and economic insecurity significantly hinder women from seeking help.
- Education, awareness-raising, and anti-stigma programs must be strengthened, particularly at the community level.
- Support initiatives should be adapted to the cultural context and real barriers faced by victims of domestic violence.

1.3 Challenges in Applying Restraining Orders

Problem: Although the restraining order mechanism is widely used, in some cases it is applied formally, without considering the specific circumstances of the family. Such an approach, particularly in small communities, may negatively impact the victim, the perpetrator, and the overall family environment.

Problem Description: The restraining order is a significant legal tool that enables the prompt isolation of the perpetrator from the victim. However, the practice of issuing orders automatically, without accounting for the family's internal dynamics, relationships, or potential for rehabilitation, often exacerbates abusive relationships and risks destabilizing the family structure entirely. Additionally, victims frequently conceal instances when a perpetrator with an active restraining order returns, failing to report this to the police, which increases the risk of repeated violence. The number of police and social service personnel, as well as resources, is often insufficient in some municipalities or entirely absent. In such conditions, without systemic social and psychological support, the restraining order mechanism often becomes purely repressive, failing to provide a consistent resolution to the problem.

Consequences

- **Isolation Consequences**: The perpetrator is isolated, but the victim often remains without support.
- **Repeated Violence**: Victims hiding the perpetrator's return, coupled with a lack of monitoring, increases the risk of recurrent violence.
- **Family Crisis**: In some cases, families fall into social and economic crises.
- **Community Resistance**: In communities, resistance emerges, as restraining orders are perceived as external interference that disrupts local coexistence norms.

Quotes:
"Any form of domestic violence is unacceptable to me, but when violence occurs in a family, even if it's just an argument, it doesn't mean the person should be thrown in jail. That could bring even worse consequences for the family. It practically destroys the family." (G-1)
"The number of prisoners has increased now. Most are serving sentences for domestic violence.(G-1)
How to Address the Problem?

- Prior to issuing a restraining order, develop an individualized assessment mechanism involving social workers and psychologists.
- Strengthen the monitoring system—police and teams of social workers should regularly verify compliance with restraining orders and assess the victim's situation.
- Provide immediate comprehensive support to victims upon issuance of a restraining order, including temporary housing, material assistance, and counseling.
- Introduce additional measures—not only punishment but also mandatory therapy for perpetrators when rehabilitation prospects exist, aiming to restore family dynamics where feasible.
- Establish feedback channels for women to ensure restraining orders are perceived not as isolation but as a pathway to protection and recovery.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The restraining order remains a vital tool in combating domestic violence but requires flexibility and an individualized approach.
- A repressive measure without support can prove harmful to both the victim and the family as a whole.
- Alongside legal mechanisms, a system of social and psychological support must be developed.
- The use of restraining orders should be integrated into a systemic policy for combating domestic violence, rather than remaining an isolated instrument.

1.4 State Measures and Their Limitations

Problem: Despite significant strengthening of legislation against domestic violence in recent years, social protection mechanisms for victims, particularly in regions, remain weak. Women often lack access to long-term and systemic support that would enable them to leave abusive environments and continue living safely.
Problem Description: Many women are forced to remain with their abusers not due to the absence of legal mechanisms but because they lack viable alternatives for survival. In rural communities, the confidential operation of shelters is challenging due to close social ties, reputational pressures, and traditional expectations, which practically deprive women of the freedom to choose. This is compounded by economic constraints and the difficulty of returning to a parental family, which often itself forms part of an abusive past. Consequently, the effective implementation of modern legislation, including the protection of women's property and inheritance rights, is essential to promote their economic independence.
Consequences

- Women frequently remain in dangerous and abusive environments, seeing no way out.
- Legal guarantees fail to provide practical protection in practice.
- Fear of homelessness, financial hardship, and lack of social support renders women even more vulnerable.

"Shelters in regions don't/can't work: everyone knows everything. You can't hide…" (G-4)
"It is essential that women's shelters offer victims not only temporary housing but also long-term support—including education, vocational training, and employment assistance." (L-3)
"Every girl knows that if she leaves and returns, she'll return to her brother's property, not her father's home." (G-4)
"If I didn't have my own house, I definitely wouldn't have left (my husband's family)." (G-4)
"One of the most important factors is empowering women." (L-3)
"One victim who received help at a shelter later learned a profession and started an independent life." (L-3)
"The main goal is for girls to have choices in education, career, and independent living so they can determine their own futures independently." (L-3)

Solutions

- Establish safe and functional temporary shelters for victims of domestic violence in regions.
- Develop targeted mechanisms for women's economic support, particularly in crisis situations.
- Ensure legal assistance, protection of property rights, mechanisms for obtaining alimony, and opportunities for securing housing.
- Promote deeper cooperation with extended and biological families, respecting traditional values while fully protecting women's rights, including inheritance rights, to enable their safe return to their native environment by overcoming social barriers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Legal measures will not be fully effective without the implementation of a robust social support system.
- The state must prioritize the development of social infrastructure, particularly in villages and small settlements.
- Guarantees of physical safety must be combined with economic and social support systems.
- Only a comprehensive, integrated approach will create real opportunities for women to escape abusive environments and begin independent, dignified lives.

1.5 Deficit of Psychological Support

Problem: Women who are victims of domestic violence, particularly in regions, have virtually no access to qualified psychological assistance. Support is primarily focused on legal measures, while psychological rehabilitation remains outside systemic attention.

Problem Description: Domestic violence inflicts not only physical harm but also causes profound psychological trauma, overcoming which requires long-term support. In regions, psychological services are rarely available, and free, confidential services are practically nonexistent. The absence of a psychological rehabilitation system exacerbates victims' conditions, reduces their ability to leave abusive environments, and increases the risk of recurrent violence.

Consequences

- A significant proportion of women remain trapped in severe psycho-emotional distress even after the violence ceases.
- The lack of qualified psychological assistance complicates addressing critical issues such as fear, guilt, and emotional dependence on the abuser.
- The absence of psychotherapeutic support hinders the rehabilitation process and undermines trust in both legal and social systems.

Quotes

"We have only one psychologist in all of Kakheti, overwhelmed with cases and unable to handle every situation." (L-4)

"They can't talk; one gets upset here, another there, the mother-in-law and others, instead of calming things down, pour fuel on the fire, and the family falls apart—it's a dire situation." (G-4)

"A mother came whose 17-year-old daughter had moved to her husband's family… We're going in circles here; we need a psychologist, a social worker, which we don't have… Someone needs to determine for a court claim whether that girl was taken by force or wants to stay with that family." (L-4)

Solutions

- Ensure every municipality has at least one qualified psychologist specialized in working with domestic violence victims.
- Establish a network of crisis centers offering free, confidential, and accessible psychological assistance.
- Train social workers in basic psychological support skills and standardized referral procedures.
- Develop remote psychological services, including online consultations, especially for residents of remote and underserved villages.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Without psychological assistance, victims often remain trapped in post-violence trauma, unable to achieve full rehabilitation.

- Psychotherapy must become an integral part of the state-supported social protection system, both in crisis and long-term contexts.
- Psychological support services for children, both direct victims and witnesses of violence, must be integrated into the system.
- Access to psychological services should be a fundamental element of social protection, not a privilege.

1.6 Alcohol Consumption and Violence Factors

Problem: Alcohol consumption significantly exacerbates domestic violence, particularly in rural communities where it is often perceived as a normal part of daily life. The normalization of this practice complicates violence prevention and adequate responses.

Problem Description: Alcohol consumption, especially among men, is often viewed not only as a daily habit but also as a social or ritualistic practice (e.g., "two or three glasses" at the end of a workday). This practice, frequently considered a "norm" in communities, becomes a key factor in escalating domestic violence. Economic instability, lack of employment, and stress, combined with alcohol use, create an environment conducive to violence against women and children.

Consequences

- Alcohol intensifies aggressive behavior, leading to instances of physical violence.
- Women often cannot influence the situation due to fear, economic dependence, and societal pressure.
- There is a degree of tolerance in society toward violence committed under the influence, often seen as a "temporary" issue "justified" by modern challenges like unemployment, economic instability, and stress.

Quotes

"A worker in a vineyard earns 50 GEL a day, but by evening, that money is spent on alcohol, causing family problems." (L-2)

"In Gurjaani, the villages of Kvareli, and Kakheti in general, the tradition of 'two or three glasses' is widespread, often turning into a bigger problem. As a result, arguments and violence in families are common." (L-2)

Solutions

- Establish sports and educational centers (e.g., in IT technologies) targeting men and youth.
- Conduct awareness campaigns with community organizations to highlight the link between alcohol consumption and domestic violence.
- Integrate alcohol dependency issues into social assistance consultations and psychological support systems.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Excessive alcohol consumption is not merely a medical or social challenge; it significantly contributes to the emergence and escalation of domestic violence.
- Combating domestic violence should not rely solely on legal measures; a comprehensive approach incorporating psychological, social, and educational components is essential.
- Active engagement with local communities is necessary to shift tolerant attitudes toward violence, including alcohol-related violent behavior.
- Special attention must be given to families where violence recurs periodically under the influence of alcohol, requiring targeted monitoring, preventive intervention, and intensive support.

1.7 Public Perception of Domestic Violence and Toxic Mentality

Problem: Persistent cultural stereotypes and a tolerant attitude toward violence, passed down through generations, make domestic violence a systemic issue. Many women perceive violence as a "normal" part of family life, hindering both the protection of their rights and the rehabilitation process.

Problem Description: Many women grow up in an environment that fosters submissiveness, suppression of personal opinions, and unconditional endurance. Societal expectations reinforce the stereotype that women must tolerate hardships "for the sake of children, family well-being, or respect for elders," while resistance is seen as a deviation from the norm. This mental framework, often

perpetuated by mothers and grandmothers to subsequent generations, sustains abusive patterns, complicating prevention and awareness-raising efforts.

Consequences

- Society develops tolerance for humiliation, aggression, and inequality within families.
- Women refrain from using legal mechanisms, perceiving violence as a routine and inevitable part of life.
- The mechanism of abusive thinking is transmitted to future generations, particularly when older family members justify pressure on younger women based on "their own past experiences," further legitimizing a culture of violence.

Quotes:

"You endure infidelity, neglect, beatings, the mother-in-law's senseless behavior because she's older… How can you justify it by saying, 'I went through the same'?" (G-4)

"We women adopt this victim role well, then blame our children, saying, 'I endured so much for you.'" (G-4)

"Some teenagers rejected the training, believing the discussed topics were against traditional values. A young boy openly protested: 'Why are you interfering with our traditions?'" (L-3)

"My sister doesn't leave the house without her husband's permission… Her husband set it up that way to boost his self-esteem." (G-4)

"An Azerbaijani woman I know has a son and a daughter. She told me: 'If my son doesn't study, fine, as long as he gets involved in work, but my daughter must study, pass medical exams, become a doctor to live with dignity and depend on no one. If someone abducts her, I'll blow up the whole house.' There are such parents—few, but they create a new model that others follow." (L-4)

Solutions

- Develop educational programs on gender equality and non-violent relationships for both women and men.
- Integrate topics on self-esteem, personal boundaries, and mutual respect into school curricula and community initiatives.
- Strengthen women's support groups and safe spaces where open discussions about violence are possible.
- Encourage (anonymously or in supportive formats) the sharing of experiences by women who have survived violence to reduce societal stigma and foster new perceptions of the issue.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Cultural norms play a decisive role in sustaining and perpetuating domestic violence.
- The notion of endurance as a marker of a woman's dignity must be deconstructed, and the role of women in family contexts re-evaluated.
- Preventive efforts should include communication with older generations, who often unintentionally reinforce inherited patterns of abusive behavior.
- Real change will only be possible through a fundamental transformation of societal attitudes.

General Conclusions

1. Improvement and Effectiveness of Legal Mechanisms

Georgia's legislation against domestic violence has significantly strengthened, enhancing legal responses. However, prevention and rehabilitation mechanisms remain weak, limiting the system's effectiveness and its real impact on reducing violence.

2. Social Taboos and Fear

Despite the existing legal framework, a significant portion of victims refrain from seeking law enforcement assistance due to fear and societal stigma, substantially hindering efforts to combat violence.

3. Challenges in Applying Restraining Orders

Restraining orders remain a key tool for reducing violence, but their issuance often fails to adequately consider family contexts, leading to new social challenges.

4. Limitations of State Support

The shortage of crisis shelters in regions, coupled with the absence or underdevelopment of psychological and social support services, continues to pose a serious obstacle to protecting victims of violence.

5. Role of Alcohol in Domestic Violence

Excessive alcohol consumption, particularly in rural communities, is an aggravating factor in domestic violence cases. This situation requires targeted prevention programs and awareness campaigns.

6. Toxic Societal Perceptions

Cultural stereotypes and deeply rooted norms often justify abusive behaviors, perpetuating destructive mentalities across generations. Transforming such perceptions requires long-term education and awareness-raising interventions.

General Recommendations

Domestic violence remains one of the most acute and systemically unresolved social problems in Georgia's regions. Analysis based on interviews reveals that, despite existing legal mechanisms, deep structural, psychological, and cultural barriers hinder both victim protection and violence prevention efforts.

For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)

Strengthening Preventive Mechanisms

- Effective coordination between police, social services, and educational institutions is essential to ensure domestic violence prevention.
- Specialized programs should be established, focused on early identification and prevention of family conflicts.

Flexible Application of Restraining Orders

- Issuance of restraining orders must consider individual family contexts to avoid creating new social challenges.

Support for Social Reintegration

- Social-economic assistance programs should be developed to provide victims with opportunities for financial independence and dignified rehabilitation.
- Crisis shelters must be established in regions, offering not only temporary refuge but also psychological and social support, along with confidential relocation mechanisms.

Development of Psychological Assistance

- The number of psychologists in regions must be increased, with specialized training for working with domestic violence victims.
- Psychological support centers should be accessible in every municipality, free of charge and confidential.

Raising Awareness About Alcohol's Impact

- Awareness campaigns are needed to inform the public about the dangers of the link between alcohol and violence.
- Rehabilitation programs for individuals with alcohol dependency should be expanded and made accessible at the regional level.

Enhancing Police Qualifications

- Law enforcement agencies must ensure retraining of police officers in the specifics of domestic violence and skills for sensitive communication with victims.

2. For Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

Raising Public Awareness

- Regular awareness campaigns should be conducted in communities to inform residents about anti-violence legislation and available support mechanisms.
- Training sessions for women and youth on legal rights and social services are essential, focusing on empowerment and awareness.

Economic Empowerment of Women

- Community organizations should develop initiatives to promote women's economic independence, such as supporting small businesses, self-employment, and entrepreneurship.

Free Legal and Psychological Assistance

- Regional NGOs must provide free professional legal and psychological support to violence victims, including initial consultations and referral services when needed.

Establishing Crisis Centers

- Confidential crisis centers must be created in regions, offering safe, professional, and humane assistance.

Cultural Norms and Educational Programs

- Educational initiatives should be introduced in communities to challenge traditional violent norms and promote values of equality, mutual respect, and human dignity.
- Engaging men in preventive initiatives is a critical prerequisite for reducing violence.

Conclusion

Successful implementation of the above recommendations requires an integrated, systemic approach and active collaboration across sectors (state, local government, NGOs, and community organizations). Only through such collective efforts can an environment be created where domestic violence victims feel protected, and incidents are prevented at an early stage. This is a shared responsibility that will shape the future of a just, equal, and safe society.

2.Early Marriage

2.1 Poverty and Socio-Economic Motivations for Early Marriage

Problem: Parents of girls often perceive early marriage as a means to cope with social and economic challenges. For them, marriage represents a transfer of responsibility to another family, which, in their view, guarantees at least minimal living conditions for the girl.

Problem Description: Economic hardships, insufficient state support, and lack of stable income create a social environment in which early marriage is seen as a rational solution. The inefficiency of the education system, limited employment opportunities, and poverty reinforce the belief that marriage is the only economically viable step.

Consequences

- Girls are often denied the opportunity to receive education and develop their skills.
- Early marriage excludes them from participation in education and the labor market, increasing the risk of poverty.
- A vicious social cycle emerges, where poverty perpetuates poverty.

Quotes

"If it's a girl, I'll marry her off because they'll take care of her there, feed her, and provide for her." (G-4)

"They meet on Facebook or Instagram and elope to Turkey. From there, who will bring them back? No one talks about it; they hide it." (G-4)

Solutions

- The state must strengthen social protection mechanisms for families living on the poverty line to reduce the coerced nature of early marriage.
- Adolescents should have access to information about their rights, educational opportunities, and professional development.
- Communities need awareness-raising efforts about the importance of education and career prospects, facilitated through school and non-formal educational programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Early marriage is not merely a harmful practice rooted in traditional norms but a direct consequence of weaknesses in the socio-economic system.
- Overcoming this issue is impossible without systemic social support reforms, increased access to education, and the creation of real alternatives for youth.
- Economic incentives must be introduced to encourage families to invest in their children's future through education and holistic development rather than early marriage.

2.2 Flaws in the Education System and Lack of Motivation Among Adolescents

Problem: The education system fails to meet the needs and interests of modern adolescents. Teaching methods are largely based on theoretical and outdated content, which does not foster engagement or motivation. Schools, especially in regions, lack the resources to offer experiences that inspire young people to pursue development and self-realization. In such conditions, many girls view staying in school as lacking real prospects, often opting for early marriage instead.

Problem Description: The education system struggles to adapt to the interests of contemporary adolescents. Lessons are irrelevant, and knowledge is impractical, while schools lack the resources to provide experiences that spark interest in development and self-realization. As a result, many girls drop out of school and marry, as education is not perceived in society as a viable solution or prospect.

Consequences

- Loss of interest in school contributes to early marriage.
- Lack of motivation among adolescents negatively affects both academic performance and professional development opportunities.
- Society reinforces the notion that education is not an essential foundation for a dignified life.

Quotes

"Parents ask us to tell kids to go to school. Before, it was the opposite; we had to tell them not to marry their daughters off." (G-4)

"School isn't interesting for kids. When they grow up, I'll send them to work somewhere or have them work with me on the land." (G-4)

"If it's a girl, I'll marry her off because they'll take care of her there, feed her, and provide for her. Around here, early marriage is mainly due to this, not old traditions." (G-4)

Solutions

- Schools should adopt practical and interactive teaching methods, such as project-based learning, to enhance engagement.
- The state and local authorities must provide vocational guidance programs for adolescents, including career counseling.
- Girls should receive information about their rights, including the right to education and self-realization, to prevent early marriage.
- Community involvement in the educational process is essential to transform schools into genuine spaces for development, not merely formal institutions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Education often fails to be associated with future aspirations, pushing adolescents, especially girls, toward alternative paths like early marriage.
- The education system requires the integration of practical, motivating, and innovative approaches that address both labor market demands and personal development needs.
- Schools should serve as hubs for adolescent development, becoming places where young people grow with a sense of their interests, opportunities, and future vision, rather than functioning solely as academic spaces.

2.3 Active Role of Adolescents in Early Marriage Decisions

Problem: The mechanism for decision-making in early marriages is shifting: while in the past, these decisions were primarily made by parents or families, today, adolescents increasingly take an active role in this process. This trend creates a new social reality and gives rise to different types of associated challenges.

Problem Description: Adolescents often make spontaneous, emotional, and poorly considered decisions regarding marriage. This phenomenon is linked to increased access to social media and intensified interactions within it, as well as the weaknesses of the education system and diminished family control. Rapid decisions by adolescents, such as cases of "elopement" or impulsive behavior, reflect a transformation in generational values and highlight the unpreparedness of both the state and families to address these changes.

Consequences

- Marriage decisions are often emotional and impulsive, increasing the risk of divorce and social crises.

- Parents are excluded from the decision-making process and are left to face the consequences after the fact.
- Social systems are not adapted to account for the age at which adolescents make such decisions.

Quotes

"Things have changed a bit now. Before, families arranged marriages, but now girls are more active—they either demand to be married or threaten to elope." (G-4)

"Families ask us to tell their kids to stay in school, hoping we can dissuade them from getting married." (G-4)

Solutions

- Educational and social systems should develop preventive approaches, such as awareness campaigns, discussion formats, and adolescent-focused spaces that foster the development of informed decision-making skills.
- Girls must receive comprehensive information about their rights, including the right to education and self-realization, to prevent early marriage.
- Families should be empowered as equal partners in decision-making, where support and open dialogue replace control and authoritarian approaches.
- State policies should integrate assessments of the influence of social media and digital spaces, including the introduction of digital literacy programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Adolescents' emergence as decision-makers requires coordinated involvement from education systems, parents, and communities.
- Preventing early marriage cannot be reduced to legal regulations alone; offering adolescents real and appealing developmental alternatives is essential.
- Dialogue and collaboration between the state, schools, and families are critical to ensuring adolescents feel safe and supported in their developmental prospects.

2.4 Early Marriage and the Vicious Cycle of Violence

Problem: Girls who marry at an early age often find themselves in abusive or conflictual relationships, for which they are neither psychologically nor economically prepared. This situation creates a vicious cycle of violence and heightens the risk of divorce.

Problem Description: Adolescents typically lack a realistic understanding of family life. They often view marriage through the lens of romantic fantasies shaped by social media and popular culture. However, practical realities—financial difficulties, challenges in managing relationships, and the weight of responsibilities—quickly shatter these illusions. As a result, divorce is common, bringing additional social stigma and psychological trauma for the adolescent. Divorced adolescents generally struggle to return to education or pursue professional development, remaining socially and economically isolated.

Consequences

- The number of divorces increases, accompanied by social stigma, economic dependency, and psychological trauma.
- Girls who marry early face significant challenges in starting or continuing an independent life.
- Experiences of violence are typically not adequately processed and are often perceived as normal.

Quotes

"She was in twelfth grade, engaged, and her husband came with flowers, took her to cafés. She wore gold jewelry. And then? She realized her husband wouldn't treat her like that every day, and they separated." (G-4)

Solutions

- Schools and communities should implement programs that provide adolescents with realistic perspectives on family life, their rights, and responsibilities.
- The education system should strengthen psychosocial support for adolescents, particularly those with experiences of marriage or divorce.

- Integrated support services (social workers, psychologists, career counselors) should be established to help girls return to education or find pathways to professional development.
- Legal measures against early marriage and domestic violence should be updated and strengthened, including mechanisms to protect victims.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Early marriage rarely fulfills the "protective" role often attributed to it by society; instead, it creates new risks.
- Empowering educated women in communities as positive role models is essential, as they can raise generational awareness through their example.
- Violence prevention must be integrated into early marriage prevention strategies, both conceptually and practically.

2.5 Social Vulnerability and Weaknesses in Social Protection Systems

Problem: One of the primary causes of early marriage is social poverty and vulnerability, exacerbated by weak state social protection mechanisms that fail to provide essential support. In such conditions, families are often compelled to seek alternative survival strategies, including marrying off their children at a young age.

Problem Description: In many communities, families face such severe economic hardship that parents see no prospect for continuing their children's education. In this context, marrying off a daughter is perceived as a way to reduce economic burdens and ensure her future. Existing social assistance programs—such as targeted social aid, pensions, and compensations—are either inaccessible or inadequate to meet families' real needs.

Consequences

- Marriage is often viewed not as a value-based choice but as an economic necessity.
- Weak social responses fail to alleviate the pressure on families, leading to children's disengagement from the education system.
- Poverty is frequently passed down through generations, reinforcing a cycle of social exclusion and perpetuating inherited poverty.

"There are many socially disadvantaged and low-income people here, as everywhere. The money the state provides them is truly insufficient." (G-2)

"The doctor prescribes medicines so expensive that an elderly pensioner can't afford them." (G-4)

Solutions

- Social assistance programs must be made more targeted and adaptable, particularly in communities with high rates of early marriage.
- Local governments should be equipped with adequate financial and human resources to provide priority assistance to the most socially vulnerable families.
- A system of small grants, scholarships, and other social incentives should be developed to give adolescents real choices between education and professional development.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Early marriage is often a consequence of poverty and social vulnerability, addressing which requires not only legislative intervention but also systemic changes in social policy.
- Social assistance should become a tool for development, not merely a means of minimal support, with the goal of creating future-oriented alternatives for adolescents.
- State policy must prioritize making education and child welfare accessible, attractive, and a primary choice for all families.

2.6 Discontinuation of Education and the Impact of Early Marriage on Adolescents' Futures

Problem: Early marriage frequently leads to the discontinuation of education, significantly limiting adolescents' professional, social, and economic opportunities.

Problem Description: According to interviews, many girls drop out of school after the seventh grade, coinciding with a rise in early marriages. Discontinuing education substantially reduces young women's access to social capital, hinders their professional development, and increases the risk of poverty being passed down through generations.

Consequences

- A significant portion of adolescent girls fail to complete basic education.
- Lack of education impedes the formation of their economic independence.
- In such conditions, girls remain dependent on their spouses or families, often with little to no opportunity to choose alternative paths for development.

"The majority of girls stop studying after the seventh grade and are married off early." (L-4)
"You explain the same thing for two or three years, and it seems they understand, but… Active girls come from school, you hold trainings, they earn certificates, and suddenly they disappear. Where are they? Married, and their husband doesn't allow them to continue. That's it—your work goes down the drain." (G-4)

Solutions

- Schools should implement targeted interventions—motivation-building, awareness-raising, and support—starting from the primary level.
- Additional support for families is essential to keep adolescents in the education system, including scholarships, coverage of transportation costs, and access to learning resources.
- Promoting the value of education in communities is critical—schools must regain authority as spaces for individual development and social progress.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Discontinuing education at an early age creates a cycle of poverty and social vulnerability that is passed down through generations and becomes systemic.
- Education policy must be integrated into family and community support systems as a key mechanism for overcoming poverty.
- Schools and local governments should work collaboratively to maintain adolescents' engagement in the educational process, preventing one of the primary preconditions for early marriage—limited access to education—from becoming entrenched.

2.7 Limited Freedom of Choice and Traditional Hierarchical Family Structures

Problem: Adolescent girls' freedom of choice is significantly constrained by traditional hierarchical family structures and the dominant influence of the older generation.

Problem Description: Analysis of interviews reveals that in many communities, adolescent girls lack the opportunity to make independent decisions about their futures. Often, grandparents, parents decide on matters such as marriage, childbirth, education, or professional development. In such environments, young people are raised with expectations of obedience, which hinders their personal aspirations, lowers their self-esteem, and diminishes their sense of responsibility for their own lives. This restriction of choice contradicts fundamental human rights and obstructs the realization of democratic values in community social practices.

Consequences

- Adolescents lose motivation as decisions are made on their behalf.
- Intergenerational alienation and crises of personal identity intensify.
- Adolescents' ability and willingness to take responsibility for their futures diminish.

"Grandparents or family elders decide the future of girls; they practically have little to no freedom of choice." (L-9)
"Often, girls' life plans are predetermined by family elders… Education is given less importance, making them financially dependent on their spouse's family." (L-10)
"Early marriage remains a serious problem in Georgia… Frequently, families decide girls' futures, limiting their opportunities for education and economic independence." (L-9)

Solutions

- Community-tailored educational campaigns are essential to inform parents and older generations about the importance of education, self-realization, and freedom of choice for both the child's and society's development.
- The role of schools and social workers in engaging with families must be strengthened.
- Promoting equitable social dialogue within communities is crucial to enhance the significance of young people's voices and participation in decision-making processes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Freedom of choice is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of children and adolescents, and ensuring it is a shared responsibility of the state and communities.
- Encouraging positive role models within communities, where adolescents have the opportunity to shape their own futures, is essential.

2.8 Marriage as a "Transaction" and Societal Attitudes

Problem: In many communities, marriage is perceived not as a voluntary choice and equal partnership between two individuals but as a transaction between families, where social and economic benefits take precedence.

Problem Description: In traditional segments of society, marriage is often viewed as a social agreement between families, based on status, material gain, or ensuring social stability. In such conditions, an adolescent's consent may formally exist, but the decision is effectively made by the older generation. This process is further complicated by societal attitudes that view revisiting traditions as unacceptable. As a result, efforts to change these practices face significant resistance, hindering opportunities to reduce early marriage.

Consequences

- Marriage may become a coerced or unequal agreement, violating adolescents' fundamental rights.
- Strong social pressure stifles open discussion of the issue and impedes effective systemic responses.
- The potential for modern reinterpretation of traditional norms weakens, obstructing progressive changes in communities.

"In traditional communities, marriage is often considered a 'transaction' through which families seek benefits." (L-9)

"At one meeting, a young boy openly protested: 'Why are you interfering with our traditions?'" (L-9)

Solutions

- Awareness-raising efforts are needed in communities to promote an understanding of marriage based on voluntariness, equality, and personal choice.
- The education system should strengthen critical reflection on traditional practices in the context of human rights and gender equality.
- Initiatives supporting youth education, such as informational meetings, leadership programs, and safe spaces, should be introduced to allow adolescents to express their views freely without fear of stigma.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Early marriage as a transactional practice violates adolescents' fundamental rights and limits their personal development and opportunities.
- Community-oriented strategies are essential to help both parents and adolescents analyze traditions and reconsider them without fear of stigmatization.
- Collaboration between the state and civil society should establish a policy framework grounded in the principles of voluntariness, equality, and personal dignity in marriage.

General Conclusions

1. Early Marriage as an Economic Survival Strategy

Poverty and social vulnerability remain key drivers of early marriage. Families often perceive marriage as a means to secure basic economic stability for their children.

2. Inefficiency of the Education System and Lack of Motivation

Girls frequently fail to see the tangible value of education, while schools struggle to foster motivation among adolescents. Low educational quality and economic realities in communities reinforce the prevalence of early marriage.

3. Transformation of Decision-Making Actors

While parents historically made marriage decisions, adolescents are increasingly initiating these choices themselves. This shift necessitates new approaches to preventive policies.

4. Early Marriage and the Vicious Cycle of Violence
Adolescents lack the experience and emotional readiness for family life, leading to conflicts, divorces, and recurring instances of violence.
5. Socio-Economic Factors and Vulnerability
Early marriage is closely linked to poverty, exacerbating the social and economic vulnerability of both girls and their families.
6. Discontinuation of Education and Its Impact
Marriage often results in girls dropping out of school, limiting their professional, social, and personal development and hindering their economic independence.
7. Family and Community Pressure on Adolescent Choices
Decisions within families are frequently made by grandparents or other older relatives, significantly restricting adolescents' freedom of choice, reducing opportunities for self-expression, and impeding the realization of individual potential.
8. Marriage as an Economic Transaction
In traditional communities, marriage is often viewed not as a voluntary partnership but as an economic agreement between families, where benefits take precedence, and individual choice remains secondary.

General Recommendations

Addressing the issue of early marriage requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach, encompassing legal protections, quality education, strengthened social support systems, and the creation of real choices for adolescents.

1. For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)

Strengthening the Education System

- Schools should develop and implement educational modules that inform adolescents about their rights related to early marriage, criminal liability for sexual offenses against minors, the value of education, and career prospects.
- The learning process must integrate interactive and practice-oriented methods to enhance adolescent engagement and motivation.

Enhancing Social Support Systems

- Targeted social programs, including educational subsidies, scholarships, and support for small entrepreneurship, should be expanded for socially vulnerable families.
- Access to resources for vulnerable groups must be increased at the local level.

Preventive Measures to Reduce Early Marriage

- Stricter legal regulations and their effective enforcement are essential.
- Systemic involvement of social workers and psychologists in communities is needed to identify and prevent risks of violence and early marriage at an early stage.

Improving Legal and Institutional Mechanisms

- Local governments should establish effective mechanisms for monitoring and responding to cases of early marriage.
- Structures for early identification, response, and protection must be integrated within education and social systems.

Training School Staff and Engaging Community Leaders

- Teachers and school administrators should undergo training to identify at-risk adolescents and implement preventive measures.
- Preventive activities in communities must involve local authoritative figures, religious, cultural, and civic leaders to enhance the legitimacy of the issue and the likelihood of accepting change.

2. For Community-Based Organizations

Raising Parental Awareness

- Campaigns should be conducted to inform parents about the negative social and economic consequences of early marriage.

- Active parental involvement in educational discussions, meetings, and community events is crucial.

Educating and Supporting Adolescents

- Non-formal education centers should be established, offering programs on career planning, leadership, and skill development for adolescents.
- Targeted initiatives for girls are needed to promote their personal development.

Legal and Psychological Assistance for Adolescents

- Free legal and psychological consultations must be made accessible to adolescents.
- Special attention should be given to protecting and empowering girls facing direct or indirect pressure from families and communities due to early marriage.

Deepening Partnerships with State Structures

- Community organizations should develop strategic collaborations with education, social, and legal authorities.
- As active partners, community organizations must be involved in the formation and implementation of state policies.

Conclusion

Preventing early marriage cannot be achieved through the efforts of a single sector. It requires coordinated and consistent action from the state, the education system, community organizations, and local societies. Only through broad partnerships and inclusive approaches can an environment be created where every child is protected, and their right to education and development is fully ensured.

3. Child Labor

3.1 Social and Economic Foundations of Child Labor

Problem: In rural communities, children's involvement in labor is driven by both economic necessity and cultural traditions. Parents and some community members do not perceive this practice as a violation of law or a restriction of children's rights but rather as part of upbringing and family responsibility. This poses a threat to the protection of children's rights and their full developmental opportunities.

Problem Description: Child labor, particularly in agriculture, is especially prevalent in regions populated by ethnic minorities. According to prevailing social norms, children are expected to assist their families from an early age. Labor is viewed as an essential life experience or even a form of practical education. However, in many cases, children's physical labor is driven by severe socio-economic conditions, particularly in families where parents are in emigration or lack stable income.

Consequences

- Children are unable to attend classes fully or arrive at school exhausted.
- Motivation for education declines, limiting opportunities for knowledge acquisition and self-development.
- Children face premature economic pressure and grow up in conditions of increasing social inequality.

"The school schedule is even tailored to the work process—classes start in the afternoon so children can work with their parents in the morning." (L-2)

"Many children begin working in greenhouses or vineyards from early morning and only then go to school. Some wake up at 5 a.m., work, and arrive at school without having slept." (L-2)

Solutions

- Raise awareness at the local level about children's rights and the importance of education for both parents and other community members.
- Develop and strengthen social protection mechanisms for families to gradually reduce the need for child labor.
- Schools should design flexible educational models that provide children with heavy workloads realistic opportunities to continue their studies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Child labor should not be viewed solely through the lens of cultural traditions. It must be evaluated in terms of risks to children's education and development.
- The state and communities should collaborate to create an environment where children's labor does not compromise their developmental opportunities.
- There is a need to rethink labor culture and position education as a priority value, guided by children's interests.

3.2 Child Labor: Practical Experience or Exploitation?

Problem: Child labor is often perceived as a beneficial practice, but it carries significant risks, including exploitation, denial of education, and threats to children's physical and psychological health.

Problem Description: For part of society, child labor is seen positively as a means to instill responsibility, work ethic, and self-development. Many parents believe that involving children in household activities prepares them for independent life. However, when labor is unregulated, excessive, or inappropriate for a child's age and capabilities, it directly violates their fundamental rights. Observations indicate that children often lack time for school or homework preparation. Physical exhaustion, health risks, and psychological stress are among the harms that child labor can cause.

Consequences

- Children are deprived of a full education, limiting their future opportunities.
- Risks of health damage and psychological stress increase.
- Child labor becomes normalized in society as a traditional cultural practice, hindering its recognition as a problem and efforts to prevent it.

"Parents choose between picking peppers and attending school classes, prioritizing work." (L-3)

"Despite the importance of family labor, these children are effectively losing their right to education." (L-2)

"The mother's main concern was that the child didn't return home in time and 'ruined the work' in the vineyard… She forcibly removed the child from a meeting, using violence, in front of other children." (L-3)

Solutions

- Develop flexible educational approaches that allow children to balance family obligations and studies, particularly in rural communities.
- Conduct awareness-raising campaigns, led by non-governmental organizations and community groups, about children's rights and the value of education.
- Ensure integrated programs by local and central authorities that offer children alternatives to labor, such as scholarships, non-formal educational spaces, and social services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Child labor, even in a family context, must not become an obstacle to education, health, or personal development.
- Beyond strengthening control mechanisms, there is a need to reassess cultural perceptions, prioritizing children's best interests.
- The state, schools, and communities must work together to create an environment where children can access education in appropriate conditions, free from pressure, laying the foundation for their successful future.

3.3 Impact on Education and Motivation Challenges

Problem: Child labor significantly restricts access to education and undermines learning motivation. Dropping out of school is often driven not only by economic necessity but also by an education system that fails to meet adolescents' interests and needs.

Problem Description: Children in rural communities frequently begin working in the mornings—in greenhouses, vineyards, or on family farms—making it challenging to attend classes regularly or engage in the learning process. In many regions, school schedules are adjusted to accommodate seasonal labor, further diminishing the priority of education in the eyes of both the community and the

students themselves. Schools often fail to serve as an engaging space for adolescents, due to ineffective and outdated teaching methods. This is compounded by low teacher motivation and a disconnect between the educational process and real-life demands. As a result, many students see no future in education, perceiving it as lacking prospects, and shift toward informal labor markets.

Consequences

- A significant portion of students drop out between grades VII–IX.
- Lack of education perpetuates the cycle of poverty across generations.
- Schools lose their role as a tool for social mobility.

"School isn't interesting for the child. When they grow up, I'll send them to work somewhere or have them work with me on the land." (G-4)

"Parents ask us to tell their kids to go to school. Before, it was the opposite—we had to tell them not to marry their daughters off." (G-4)

"Many children wake up at 5 a.m., work, and go to school at 10 a.m. without having slept." (L-2)

Solutions

- Strengthen non-formal, practical, and context-tailored learning components in schools.
- Introduce motivational programs that demonstrate the concrete, tangible benefits of education to children.
- Conduct targeted awareness campaigns with community leaders and parents to bolster support for education.
- Update the content and methods of the educational process, taking into account local social realities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The lack of motivation for education is closely tied to child labor and requires a comprehensive, multi-level response.
- Structural reform of the education system is essential to make it content-rich, flexible, and oriented toward regional and community needs.
- In collaboration with local communities, innovative educational programs should be developed that integrate work ethic with the value of education, positioning learning as a genuine guarantee of future success.

3.4 Physical and Psychological Risks of Child Labor

Problem

Unregulated and intensive labor, particularly in agricultural settings, leads to both physical and psychological stress. The lack of rest and education hinders children's holistic development and increases psychological strain.

Problem Description: Children working from dawn to dusk in greenhouses, vineyards, or other demanding conditions experience chronic exhaustion, which negatively affects their physical health, academic performance, and overall self-esteem. Essential age-appropriate activities—play, rest, and free time—are virtually absent from their daily routines. Additionally, social and family expectations, such as high responsibility and constant demands for efficiency, intensify psychological pressure. Children often perceive themselves as neither fully effective students nor productive workers, leading to diminished self-esteem, loss of motivation, and an increasing risk of disengagement from school.

Consequences

- Chronic exhaustion, health issues, and reduced motivation become evident.
- Interest in school wanes, and the risk of self-isolation grows.
- Children prematurely lose their childhood and take on responsibilities inappropriate for their age.

"Children work from morning and go to school without sleep. How can they study? They can't even try." (L-2)

"It may be necessary for the family, but a child needs rest and free time. They're a little person."*(G-4)*

Solutions

- Regulate labor and structure children's involvement in household activities through programs that define workload limits and ensure oversight.
- Foster integrated collaboration between schools and healthcare systems for regular monitoring of children's physical and psychological well-being.

- Strengthen psychological support in schools through coordinated efforts of psychologists, social workers, and educators to identify and address early signs of exhaustion and stress.

Conclusions and Recommendations
- Regulating child labor through legal mechanisms alone is insufficient. Integrated psychosocial support structures must be activated for both prevention and response.
- Ensuring a balance between labor and rest is critical for children's harmonious development, requiring systemic efforts at both family and institutional levels.
- Schools should implement multidisciplinary support mechanisms to address children's exhaustion and stress comprehensively, restore their psycho-emotional well-being, and ensure full engagement in the educational process.

3.5 Restricted Access to Education Under Conditions of Child Labor

Problem: Child labor creates a significant barrier to accessing education. In rural communities, children often miss classes, arrive late, or come to school unprepared because they are engaged in physical labor from early morning. In such realities, work is seen as a necessity for family survival, while education is frequently considered a secondary priority.

Problem Description: Rural families are often forced to choose between labor and education. As a result, children lack sufficient time, energy, or motivation for learning. Tasks such as tilling land, harvesting crops, or other physical work become an integral part of their daily lives. This significantly limits their full engagement in the educational process, negatively impacts academic performance, and reduces prospects for social mobility.

Consequences
- Children's motivation and interest in learning diminish.
- Cases of early school dropout increase.
- Low academic achievement restricts future professional and social development opportunities.

"A child wakes up at 5 a.m., works in the vineyard, and then goes to school. Exhausted, without sleep—how can they learn?" (L-2)

"School isn't interesting for children—parents think it's better for them to work than waste time at school." (G-4)

"Parents choose between picking peppers and attending classes, prioritizing work." (L-3)

Solutions
- Schools should introduce flexible schedules and compensatory programs to support children engaged in labor, enabling them to access education.
- The Ministry of Education and social service agencies should jointly develop a targeted support system to identify at-risk children and provide them with assistance.
- Awareness-raising campaigns in communities should promote education not as a formal obligation but as a long-term investment in a child's successful future.

Conclusions and Recommendations
- Despite families' economic needs, education must be recognized as a child's primary priority.
- A systemic approach integrating education, social protection, and labor regulation mechanisms is essential.
- Schools, local governments, and communities should collaboratively create an environment where child labor no longer reinforces poverty, and education becomes an effective tool for overcoming it.

3.6 Psychological and Physical Impacts of Child Labor

Problem: Child labor not only restricts access to education but also harms children's health, psycho-emotional well-being, and self-esteem. Children often work alongside adults in demanding conditions, which is incompatible with their age-specific developmental needs.

Problem Description: During agricultural seasons, children work from morning in vineyards, greenhouses, or fields. Such workloads lead to chronic exhaustion, sleep deficits, and physical depletion. Moreover, children lack sufficient time for rest and play, which are essential for social and emotional development. As a result, they may develop apathy, anxiety, or aggressive behavior, experience reduced concentration, and face an increased risk of isolation from peers.

Consequences

- Low self-esteem and a lack of motivation for personal development emerge.
- Emotional stress, social isolation, and strained peer relationships become evident.
- Health issues include chronic fatigue, back and limb pain, vision deterioration, and other medical problems.

"Children who don't rest, wake up early, and go to bed late are always exhausted—it affects them greatly. They're no longer emotionally stable." (L-4)

"One of our students was severely exhausted. Their hands hurt, their eyes were tired. They didn't even want to come to school anymore." (L-2)

"A child can't be a child—they work like an adult but don't get what a child deserves." (G-4)

Solutions

- During agricultural seasons, a balance between children's labor and rest must be ensured at both family and community levels to support their holistic development.
- Schools should strengthen psychological support systems for students systematically engaged in family labor, with coordinated involvement of psychologists, educators, and social workers.
- Parents need better information about children's physical and emotional developmental needs, delivered through individual consultations and community-based awareness campaigns.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Children's physical and emotional well-being must become a priority in education and social policy.
- Collaboration between the state, schools, and communities is essential to create supportive mechanisms that ensure children's safe and fulfilling development.
- Childhood should not be reduced to labor obligations—children must live as future citizens with the right to development, joy, dignity, and happiness.

3.7 Public Awareness and Weak Institutional Response

Problem: Society's attitude toward child labor is often tolerant or indifferent, hindering the effective enforcement of existing legislation and obstructing the formation of adequate policies at the societal level. Against this backdrop, state institutions' responses are inconsistent and lack systemic coordination.

Problem Description: For some segments of society, including teachers, community leaders, and parents, child labor is perceived as an acceptable and beneficial practice, seen as an expression of loyalty and responsibility toward the family. Arguments such as "It's better to work than to be idle" are common. This attitude aligns with a flawed institutional system: schools lack structured mechanisms to identify and prevent child labor, while local governments and state agencies fail to ensure systematic monitoring and prompt responses to existing cases.

Consequences

- Child labor remains an invisible, unacknowledged, and unresolved issue.
- Schools, social services, and local authorities are unable to intervene promptly and effectively.
- Societal attitudes impede the practical implementation of existing legislation, its effective use, and the initiation of necessary policy or structural changes.

"It's good when a child works alongside the family. That's how they learn responsibility." (L-2)

"Parents don't understand that child labor can be harmful. Some even proudly declare it." (L-3)

"There's no guidance in schools on what to do when you suspect a child is working." (G-4)

Solutions

- Launch large-scale awareness-raising campaigns about children's rights and the importance of education, utilizing media, schools, and community gatherings.
- Provide professional training for teachers and social workers to equip them with the knowledge and skills to identify child labor and respond appropriately.
- Local governments should establish effective monitoring and response mechanisms while facilitating community dialogue on the risks of child labor and alternative opportunities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Transforming societal attitudes is possible only through dialogue grounded in education, critical thinking, and equality.

- Coordination between education, social protection, and labor inspection structures must be strengthened at both preventive and responsive levels.
- Combating child labor should not be limited to legal frameworks—it must become a societal value choice and be established as a state policy priority.

General Conclusions and Recommendations

Child labor in Georgia, particularly in rural communities, is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon rooted in economic necessity, cultural traditions, and weak motivational mechanisms within the education system.

On one hand, children's involvement in family labor is perceived as a means to foster work ethic, independence, and responsibility. On the other hand, unregulated labor practices seriously violate children's rights, including their rights to education, rest, and psycho-physical development.

1. Child Labor as a Traditional Family Practice

In rural communities, children's participation in labor is often seen as a natural part of family life. Parents view it as an essential component of skill development and upbringing.

2. Organized Labor Models and Family Financial Stability

In some communities, particularly those populated by ethnic minorities, labor distribution is strictly organized, and the educational process is often adapted to family work schedules. While such practices contribute to families' financial stability, they may limit children's full developmental potential.

3. Balancing Labor and Education

If labor supports a child's personal development without restricting access to education, it can serve a supportive function. However, in practice, physical and emotional exhaustion often negatively impacts the learning process and the child's overall well-being.

4. Work Ethic and Entrepreneurial Logic in Community Economies

The experience of Azerbaijani farmers is grounded in clear economic logic—they cultivate only as much land as the family can manage independently. This creates a self-sufficiency model that, to some extent, supports social stability within the community.

5. Innovative Approaches to Integrating Labor and Education

Models like the American "Learning to do, doing to learn" highlight opportunities for the organic integration of labor and education. Piloting such approaches in Georgia's context could provide a systemic and tailored response to the issue of child labor.

6. Heavy Forms of Labor and the Risk of Neglecting Education

In some cases, parents prioritize labor over education. Children fully engaged in physical work lack the time and energy for learning, which restricts their social mobility and perpetuates mechanisms of inherited poverty.

Recommendations

1. For State Structures (Central and Local Levels)

- **Flexibility and Adaptation of the Education System**

A long-term strategy is needed to account for the seasonal nature of agricultural labor. School schedules and teaching formats should be adapted to the socio-economic realities of communities without compromising children's educational progress.

- **Integration of Practical Components in Education**

Educational programs should incorporate elements of work ethic and practical skill development in age-appropriate, safe, realistic, and responsibility-oriented formats.

- **Strengthening Child Rights Protection Mechanisms**

Coordinated efforts among labor inspections, social workers, and school staff are essential to ensure timely identification, assessment, and prevention of child labor.

- **Alternative Educational Models**

Develop educational approaches that combine general education with the economic context of communities and adolescents' future professional needs, supported by scholarship systems, non-formal education, and basic vocational programs.

2. For Community-Based Organizations

- **Raising Community Awareness**

Targeted, community-based awareness campaigns are essential for parents, children, and community leaders, emphasizing children's rights and the long-term value of education.

- **Career Support for Youth**

Community organizations should develop non-formal educational spaces, career counseling, and training programs to assist adolescents in planning steps toward self-realization, education, and professional development.

- **Economic Literacy and Entrepreneurship Encouragement**

Communities should introduce economic literacy programs to enable children and adolescents to understand the importance of financial independence and the true value of labor.

- **Integrated Social Support Services**

Community schools and local centers can pilot integrated models that link the educational process with family economic contexts, ensuring that learning does not conflict with family support or community solidarity.

Conclusion

Addressing the issue of child labor requires a systemic, multisectoral, and consistent policy approach. Close collaboration among education, social protection, local governance, and community-based organizations is essential to create an environment where every child has opportunities for full development, education, and realization of their rights, benefiting both their own future and society as a whole.

"The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking."

Albert Einstein

Sustainable Development Concept and the 2030 Agenda

Definition and Evolution of the Concept

Sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"[13]. This concept is tied to the constraints of economic growth amidst scarce natural resources. These challenges are exacerbated by financial limitations and institutional barriers[14].

The term gained international recognition in 1987 through the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) report "Our Common Future," which first integrated the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability into the UN's political framework.

Three Dimensions of Sustainable Development

The sustainable development concept encompasses three core dimensions:

- **Social Dimension**: Focuses on equality, inclusivity, education, healthcare, and poverty eradication.
- **Economic Dimension**: Entails sustainable economic growth, quality employment, and rational resource use.
- **Environmental Dimension**: Based on ecosystem preservation, climate change adaptation, and natural resource protection[15]. Equity implies intergenerational and intragenerational fairness[16].

Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration

In 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, 178 countries adopted the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (Agenda 21)[17], which includes 27 key principles. Notable among them are:

- The central role of humans in sustainable development (Principle 1);
- Poverty eradication (Principle 5);
- Environmental protection for present and future generations (Principles 3, 4);
- Differentiated responsibilities of states in addressing global challenges (Principle 7);
- Inclusive governance (Principles 19–22).

The 2030 Agenda: Global Framework

In 2015, the UN General Assembly (70th session) unanimously adopted a landmark document—Resolution A/RES/70/1: "Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," which outlines a global vision for protecting the planet, human well-being, and social justice[18]. The agenda is built on the 5P principles:

- **People**: Eradicating poverty and hunger, ensuring fundamental human rights.
- **Planet**: Protecting natural resources, preserving ecosystems, and addressing climate challenges.
- **Prosperity**: Enabling dignified lives for all.
- **Peace**: Building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.
- **Partnership**: Strengthening global cooperation to achieve sustainable goals.

The 2030 Agenda integrates 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets, aiming to balance social, economic, and environmental dimensions while creating a globally inclusive model.

---

[13] Le Blanc, D., et al. 2012. Development cooperation in the light of sustainable development and the SDGs: Preliminary exploration of the issues, UNDESA: Rio+20 working papers

[14] Meadows, D., and Randers, J. "Beyond the Limits", London: Earthscan Publications, 1992

[15] Guillén-Royo M. Sustainability and wellbeing: Human-scale development in practice. London, UK: Routledge, 2016

[16] Sharma, Swati & Sharma, Prateek & Kumar, Archna. 2020. A critical review of studies related to construction and computation of Sustainable Development Indices. Ecological Indicators. 112. 10.1016/j.ecolind.2019.106061

[17] United Nations, Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, Volume 1, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference. https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N92/836/55/PDF/N9283655.pdf?OpenElement

[18] https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

Progress and Challenges of Sustainable Development Goals

The 17 SDGs include 169 targets and 232 unique indicators[19] representing an interconnected and complex process. Their successful implementation by 2030 is critical for achieving global social, economic, and environmental sustainability[20]

Significant progress was made in the early stages of SDG implementation across various areas. However, global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, and climate-induced disasters, have shown that this progress is fragile and slow[21].

Currently, the SDG implementation process is at its midpoint, but indicator analysis suggests insufficient progress, with the world lagging behind 2030 targets. To accelerate global progress, key priorities include:

- Developing integrated, coherent, and targeted policies by governments.
- Strengthening national and local institutional capacities, particularly in data collection and monitoring.
- Enhancing public sector efficiency and accountability.

Coordinated and strategic actions at national and international levels are critical for accelerating SDG progress[22].

[19] Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Available: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/Global%20Indicator%20Framework%20after%20refinement_Eng.pdf s

[20] https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals?gclid=Cj0KCQjwpc-oBhCGARIsAH6ote_9BqbgoQIGtvaAcQGDbLJLMCxXEPEIe3ZiLg4zK_ckFPGlgJNfpOQaAs-6EALw_wcB/

[21] https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf, p. 4

[22] https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf pp. 4-5

Georgia's Sustainable Development Agenda and Challenges

Implementing the SDGs is a key prerequisite for strengthening human security and well-being in Georgia. Analyzing the Georgian model and assessing its future development prospects are of critical importance.

Nationalization of SDGs and Strategic Framework

Since 2015, Georgia has undertaken the nationalization of SDGs, integrating them into national policies. Considering the country's social, economic, and environmental challenges, national priorities were established, sectoral tasks defined, and implementation timelines set. Baseline (2015) and target (2030) indicators were also determined.

In 2016, Georgia presented its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) at the UN High-Level Political Forum, affirming its active engagement in global processes. In 2018, indicators and targets were revised to better align with national contexts, resulting in 17 goals, 93 targets, and 201 indicators prioritized. On November 12, 2019, Government Decree №2328 approved the National SDG Document, integrated into Georgia's political strategy and the EU Association Agreement. Ninety-three percent of nationalized goals align with the Association Agreement's requirements, and 63% directly relate to EU-agreed priorities[23].

Georgia's SDG Priorities and Imbalances

Per Georgia's model, among the 5P principles (**People, Prosperity, Peace, Planet, Partnerships**), the country focuses most on **People and Prosperity. Peace and Planet** are secondary priorities, while Partnerships receive the least attention[24].

Key Challenges in SDG Implementation

Georgia's second VNR in 2020[25] highlighted achievements and systemic challenges hindering effective SDG implementation. Key barriers include:

- **Collaboration Deficit**: SDG implementation responsibilities are primarily centralized, limiting local governments' and private sector involvement.
- **Low Citizen Engagement**: Limited public participation hampers needs-based policy development.
- **Insufficient Decentralization**: Policy implementation at the local level is constrained by a lack of public officials' skills and administrative resources.
- **Low Localization of Goals**: Despite a national action plan and international partnerships, SDG policies are unevenly implemented at regional and local levels.

Future Prospects

Georgia's strategic goal is to enhance SDG localization, improve institutional efficiency, and strengthen coordination. This requires:

- Increasing local government involvement.
- Deepening public-private sector collaboration.
- Promoting citizen engagement.
- Accelerating decentralization.
- Integrating sustainable development principles into economic and social policies.

Successful SDG implementation in Georgia demands a coordinated, inclusive, and predictable policy framework. Only a systemic approach can achieve transformative progress by 2030 and ensure alignment with global goals[26].

[23] National Voluntary Review, 2020
[24] UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2021-2025, Tbilisi 2020, p. 17
[25] National Voluntary Review, 2020, p. 9
[26] National Voluntary Review, 2020, p. 8

The Role of Security in SDG Implementation

1. Security and Sustainable Development: Interdependence

The relationship between security and sustainable development is multidimensional. The 2030 Agenda considers Peace (within the 5P framework: **People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, Partnership**) a key principle for SDG implementation. Conflicts, violence, and instability hinder progress, depleting human, economic, and institutional resources[27]. Financial constraints and institutional barriers further exacerbate these challenges.

Peace is an outcome of sustainable development. The Agenda states: "There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development"[28]

2. Human Security — A Contemporary Paradigm

Modern security approaches transcend state-centric models, embracing the concept of human security. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 1994 landmark report, traditional security fails to address risks directly threatening individual well-being. Human security is grounded in the principle of "freedom from fear and want," encompassing long-term protection from systemic challenges (e.g., hunger, diseases, displacement) and immediate threats (e.g., conflict, unemployment, violence). Within this framework, national security is viewed through the lens of human security, protecting populations from diverse threats such as hunger, crime, environmental risks, and social conflicts. The model aims to empower communities, promote solidarity-based economic and social policies, and enhance individuals' capacities to cope with crises.

The human security paradigm is closely linked to economic, social, and cultural policies, requiring inclusive, people-centered strategies for both prevention and sustainable development.

3. Evolution of Security: From State-Centric to Holistic Vision

Historically, security was tied to protecting state sovereignty (Westphalian Peace, 1648), forming a foundational principle of international relations, with military power as its basis. However, 21st-century global challenges—pandemics, climate change, radicalism, cybersecurity, and terrorism—highlight the limitations of this rigid model[29]. Security challenges are multifaceted:

- Climate crises trigger forced migration, resource competition, and social tensions.
- Poverty and social inequality exacerbate conflict and radicalism.
- Social vulnerability increases risks of violence.

4. Sustainable Development — A Tool for Security

Sustainable development not only requires a secure environment but also serves as a strategic tool for enhancing security and preventing conflicts. Reducing poverty, inequality, and alienation fosters stability and societal resilience. National policies rooted in human security create an effective framework for implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring inclusive, long-term approaches that address local and global risks.

5. Contemporary Public Security Challenges

Modern public security faces multifaceted, complex challenges. Key threats impacting individual and structural security include:

- Organized crime.
- Human trafficking and illicit drug trade.
- Persistent high crime rates in regions.
- Social poverty and economic inequality as root causes of crises.

Economic insecurity, unfair wealth distribution, nepotism, and corruption fuel societal polarization, fostering radicalism and crime, posing systemic threats to security stability[30].

---

[27] https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice

[28] We are determined to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development." – Preamble to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

[29] Stockholm Environment Institute (2015), INTEGRATING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY, p. 8-9; https://www.americanprogress.org/article/sustainable-security-101/

[30] Adm. James Stavridis, U.S. Southern Command 2008 Posture Statement

Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

1. Essence and Significance

Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda is among the most challenging to achieve. It is premised on the inseparability of peace, security, and development. Conflicts, institutional weaknesses, and political instability hinder sustainable development, while poverty, inequality, marginalization, and social alienation are key drivers of conflict. Financial constraints and institutional barriers exacerbate these challenges. Goal 16 focuses on forming effective, transparent, and accountable institutions based on the rule of law, human rights protection, and democratic mechanisms[31].

2. Key Targets

Goal 16 encompasses critical directions:

- 16.1: Reduce all forms of violence.
- 16.2: End exploitation, trafficking, and violence against children.
- 16.4: Control illicit financial and arms flows, combat organized crime.
- 16.A: Strengthen security institutions, particularly in developing countries.

Progress is monitored through indicators:

- Objective: Statistics on homicides and conflict victims.
- Perception-based: Citizens' sense of safety[32].

3. Security Sector Governance and Challenges

Strengthening the security sector requires:

- Ensuring the rule of law.
- Increasing access to justice.
- Eliminating discrimination.
- Responding to community needs (regardless of gender, age, or ethnicity).
- Inefficient security systems significantly increase risks of conflict, violence, and human rights violations, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, deepening societal divides, and fostering institutional distrust. Effectiveness depends on resources, qualifications, and dialogue with citizens[33].

4. Georgia's Commitments and Challenges

Georgia has fully adopted the core targets of SDG 16, which include:

- Forming transparent, effective, and accountable institutions.
- Creating an enabling environment for citizen participation in decision-making.
- Reducing organized crime and strengthening law enforcement mechanisms.
- Increasing engagement in international governance processes.
- Despite these efforts, systemic challenges persist:
- Citizen engagement and institutional accountability declined by 10% from 2019–2023, complicating democratic consolidation.
- Access to public information decreased by 24% from 2017–2023, limiting societal capacity for effective monitoring and oversight.
- Participation in local government council meetings is low, indicating formalized decision-making and inadequate representation of citizen interests at the institutional level[34] .

SDG 16 is foundational for the effective implementation of other SDGs. Its success is closely tied to:

- Strengthening democratic institutions.
- Empowering and engaging citizens.
- Restoring mutual trust between state and society.

---

[31] https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/linking-good-security-sector-governance-and-sdg16

[32] https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/DCAF_BG_21_SustainableDevelopment_0.pdf, p. 4

[33] https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/DCAF_BG_21_SustainableDevelopment_0.pdf , p. 5

[34] Local Self-Government Index, Unified National Assessment of Georgia's Municipalities 2023, November 2023, p. 5

Improving these factors is critical to ensuring sustainable, peaceful, and inclusive development in line with the 2030 Agenda.

Security Challenges in Target Municipalities

The target municipalities—Gardabani, Sagarejo, and Lagodekhi—border the Republic of Azerbaijan, necessitating special attention to security policy formulation and implementation. Due to their geographic location, overcoming security challenges depends on coordination between the two countries' institutions, their strategies, and effective implementation. Policies developed by the Georgian and Russian Azerbaijani governments on security issues significantly impact these municipalities' overall security environment.

Security Context and Key Challenges

As emphasized in previous contexts, the primary goal of contemporary security is ensuring human security, an integral part of national security. This requires protecting fundamental rights and freedoms and relies on law enforcement institutions, as well as social, economic, and humanitarian infrastructure conditions. In this context, the target municipalities require particular focus on analyzing crime-fighting mechanisms and assessing law enforcement efficiency. Their border location heightens the relevance of transnational crimes, notably:

- Human trafficking.
- Illicit drug and arms trafficking.
- Illegal movement of smuggled goods and financial flows across state borders.

Developing a security's development requires comprehensive analysis, coordinated approaches, and active citizen engagement to enable border municipalities to achieve SDG targets in a secure environment.

Human Security Components According to UNDP

Based on research, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) identifies human security as influenced by multifaceted factors, grouped into seven key categories:

- **Economic Security**: Population's economic well-being, employment opportunities, and financial stability.
- **Food Security**: Access to food, nutritional quality, and sustainable production.
- **Health Security**: Access to and quality of medical services, control of infectious diseases.
- **Environmental Security**: Ecosystem sustainability, natural resource management, and adaptation to climate change impacts.
- **Personal Security**: Protection from violence, crime, and other threats.
- **Community Security**: Ensuring social stability, public order, and effective legal frameworks.
- **Political Security**: Protection of human rights, democratic governance, transparency, and accountability[35].

Economic Security

Economic security entails guaranteed basic income, derived from employment or state social assistance programs. This component is a cornerstone of human security, directly impacting social stability and serving as a determinant of a society's economic condition.

Labor Force Conditions in Target Municipalities

According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, approximately 60% of Georgia's population is considered labor-capable. However, in the target municipalities, the share of employed or hired workers is relatively low, averaging 7–8%. In Gardabani, this figure rises to 18%, driven by higher economic activity in the region. A significant portion of the labor-capable population in these municipalities is self-employed in agriculture, primarily in small-scale farming. Additionally, the share of the population receiving monthly state social assistance is high, ranging from 7–11% [36].

Economic Hardship and Its Social Impact

Interviews with focus groups indicate that economic hardship remains a critical challenge in the target municipalities. Low economic activity drives internal and external migration, threatening demographic structures and undermining social stability. Poverty is closely linked to social issues, including:

- Underdeveloped infrastructure.
- Challenges in education and healthcare systems.
- Early marriage.
- Domestic violence and other social ills.

Social Welfare Indicators in Target Municipalities

Lagodekhi faces the most severe social welfare conditions among the target regions. In 2022, 67% of its population was registered as socially vulnerable, nearly double the rates in Sagarejo (34%) and Gardabani (37%). During the COVID-19 pandemic, social vulnerability peaked in 2021 across all three municipalities. While conditions partially improved by late 2022, only Gardabani returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Investments and Employment Indicators

Lagodekhi ranks lowest among the target regions in attracting investments and average salaries. Detailed economic activity data for Gardabani is unavailable. In Lagodekhi and Sagarejo, key economic sectors include:

- Wholesale and retail trade.

---

[35] United Nations Development Programme, 1994, "New Dimensions of Human Security," Human Development Report 1994, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 24

[36] SSIP, Social Service Agency, Statistical Information on the Number of Subsistence Allowance Recipients by Age Group, 2023. Available: https://ssa.moh.gov.ge/statistik.php?lang=1&id=20221207000222585529955 1&v=0#page-2

- Vehicle and motorcycle repair.
- Manufacturing.
- Agriculture, forestry, and fishing.
- Transportation and storage.
- Construction.

In Lagodekhi, the daily number of market traders has declined since 2019, reaching a low of 582 in 2022. Financial and insurance activities, as well as arts, recreation, and entertainment sectors, are minimal, indicating low economic diversification and heavy reliance on agriculture[37].

Food Security

Food security refers to each individual's ability to access a basic food basket at any time, both physically and economically[38]. This concept encompasses not only food availability but also its quality and sufficient quantity. While food shortages are not always evident, economic resource scarcity often poses a significant barrier to ensuring food security. Thus, gaps in economic security directly impact food security, exacerbating existing challenges.

Food Security Programs in Target Municipalities

The 2021–2026 development priority documents of the target municipalities—Gardabani, Sagarejo, and Lagodekhi—include social programs that address food security. These programs are tailored to vulnerable groups and incorporate cultural considerations. Key initiatives are as follows:

Sagarejo Municipality

- **Free Meals Program for Vulnerable Populations**: Covers 220 beneficiaries, providing regular meal support.
- **Children's Nutrition Program**: Supports 10 children with nutritional assistance.
- **One-Time Food Distribution**: Provides food packages to socially vulnerable and marginalized groups during holidays, including ethnic minorities, such as during Novruz Bayram celebrations.

Lagodekhi Municipality

- **Free Meals Program for Vulnerable Populations**: Serves 138 beneficiaries.
- **Medical Assistance Program**: Benefited 1,185 vulnerable individuals.
- **Support for Victims of Violence, Single Mothers, Orphans, and Newborns**: Assisted 338 families.
- **Support for Families with Severe Disabilities and Children**: Provided aid to 144 families.
- **Budget Allocation**: In 2022, the municipal budget allocated 1,627,500 GEL for health and social welfare programs[39].

Gardabani Municipality

- **Infant Nutrition Program**: Offers 80 GEL financial assistance to eligible families.
- **Additional Social Support**: Identified 99 beneficiaries with special needs outside the standard social program.
- **Budget Allocation**: In 2023, the municipal health, social welfare, and child rights protection service implemented 22 programs with a budget of 3,665,704 GEL[40].

Analysis and Recommendations

Sagarejo stands out for its diverse and needs-based approach to food security programs. Other municipalities should adopt similar practices to expand the scope of social programs, particularly in nutrition support. Additionally, ensuring information accessibility is critical. Municipal websites must provide comprehensive, up-to-date details on social programs to enable citizens to access resources and participate effectively.

---

[37] Statistical Information by Regions and Municipalities of Georgia (geostat.ge)

[38] United Nations Development Programme, 1994, "New Dimensions of Human Security," Human Development Report 1994, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 27

[39] https://lagodekhi.gov.ge/ge/meris-2024-clis-angarishi/

[40] https://gardabani.gov.ge/gamgeoba/meris-angarishi/

Healthcare and Accessibility

Healthcare is a core component of human security, closely tied to population health and the availability of state-provided medical services. A comprehensive analysis of healthcare requires examining two key aspects:

- Population health status and trends in major diseases.
- Healthcare infrastructure, staffing levels, and budget allocations.

Population Health and Major Diseases

Georgia faces diseases typical of both developing and developed countries. Key health concerns include:

- **Respiratory Infections**: Approximately 182,000 new cases annually over the past three years.
- **Cardiovascular Diseases**: Around 64,000 cases per year.
- **Cancer**: Approximately 10,000 new cases annually[41].

Environmental factors, such as air and water pollution, significantly influence the prevalence of respiratory diseases and cancer. Thus, healthcare system effectiveness is closely linked to environmental conditions and dependent on robust environmental protection policies.

Healthcare Services and Budget Allocation

Healthcare is a priority in the target municipalities, yet challenges persist due to limited medical staff and hospital bed capacity, which fail to meet population needs. Over the past decade, the number of healthcare workers in these municipalities has fluctuated without consistent or predictable growth[42].

According to the 2021–2026 development priority documents, local governments implement healthcare initiatives using targeted state transfers. Budget allocations are as follows:

- **Gardabani**: Healthcare budget increases annually.
- **Sagarejo and Lagodekhi**: Budgets peaked in 2022–2023 but are projected to decline significantly in subsequent years.

Rural Ambulatory Funding

- **Sagarejo**: Allocated 106,600 GEL in 2023, but only 6,000 GEL annually thereafter.
- **Lagodekhi**: Allocated 85,900 GEL in 2022, with funding discontinued from 2023.
- **Gardabani**: No budget allocation for rural ambulatory services[43].

Healthcare Accessibility and Challenges

Municipal websites provide information on active healthcare programs, a progressive step for citizen access[44]. However, focus group interviews and local population feedback highlight several issues:

- **Infrastructure Deficiencies**: Outdated medical equipment reduces service quality.
- **Poor Road Infrastructure**: Delays emergency medical response due to transportation challenges.
- **Staff Qualification Shortages**: Residents report insufficient expertise among medical personnel, impacting service quality.
- **Bureaucratic Barriers**: Some facilities struggle to utilize state programs effectively, creating additional obstacles for citizens.

Environmental Security

Environmental security comprises two main dimensions:

- **Local Ecosystem Conditions**: Determined by regional natural resource management and environmental policies.
- **Global Ecosystem Conditions**: Encompassing climate change, resource depletion, and pollution.

Environmental Issues and Challenges

Environmental degradation has worsened in recent years due to uncontrolled resource use, urbanization, and industrial growth. Rising pollution and resource scarcity, coupled with population growth, pose significant challenges to sustainable development.

---

[41] National Statistics Office of Georgia, Cancer Incidence by Age and Sex, Available: https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/54/jandatsva

[42] Statistical Information by Regions and Municipalities of Georgia, geostat.ge

[43] Target Municipalities' 2021–2026 Priority Documents, Health and Social Welfare Subsections

[44] Target Municipalities' Official Websites

Environmental Strategies in Target Municipalities

The 2021–2026 development documents identify ensuring a clean and sanitary environment as a key municipal priority. To achieve this, municipalities operate cleaning and environmental services responsible for:

- Cleaning rural and urban spaces and waste removal.
- Maintaining and rehabilitating parks and recreational areas.
- Preserving and expanding green spaces.

Local Population Feedback and Identified Issues

Focus groups and interviews in the target municipalities revealed several environmental concerns:

- **Household Waste Management Challenges**:
    - Insufficient waste bins and irregular waste collection.
    - Non-systematic cleaning services with no fixed schedules.
- **Unregulated Use of Chemical Pesticides:**
    - Low public awareness of proper pesticide use poses ecological risks.
    - Widespread pesticide application threatens human health, soil, and water systems.
    - Large-scale awareness campaigns are needed.
- **Industrial Pollution and Regulatory Non-Compliance:**
    - Some factories lack modern filtration systems and fail to meet environmental standards, contributing to air pollution.
    - Local residents' efforts to engage authorities on environmental rights often go unanswered.

Personal Security

Personal security, a critical component of human security, involves protecting individuals' lives, physical, and psychological well-being. Threats to personal security may include:

- State-sponsored violence (torture, repression).
- External state threats (armed conflicts, terrorism).
- Ethnic and religious tensions.
- Criminal group activities (organized crime, trafficking).
- Domestic and gender-based violence.
- Child abuse and exploitation.
- Self-harm and substance abuse.

Personal Security in Target Municipalities

Unfortunately, crime-related statistical data for the target municipalities is not publicly available. Despite multiple attempts, recent crime data could not be obtained from relevant state agencies. Thus, analysis relies on national-level crime trends.

National Crime Statistics:

- Since 2019, overall crime rates have slightly but steadily declined.
- The crime resolution rate averages 60% and is increasing.
- Transnational crimes constitute a small proportion.
- Violence against women: 1,458 cases in 2023; 413 in Q1 2024.
- Domestic violence: Approximately 15,000 cases annually in 2022–2023; ~4,000 in Q1 2024.

Analysis and Challenges

While overall crime rates are decreasing and resolution rates improving, domestic and gender-based violence remain significant issues. In the target municipalities, these problems may be exacerbated by:

- Economic and social hardships.
- Traditional patriarchal norms.
- Weak institutional support.

Law enforcement response times, victim protection mechanisms, and access to support services require systemic strengthening.

Community Security

Community security ensures citizen safety across social, cultural, ethnic, and religious affiliations. Individuals belong to social units—families, ethnic groups, villages, cities, religious communities, or states. Strong community ties often protect vulnerable members, but ethnic, religious, or social tensions can undermine community security.

Support for Ethnic Minorities in Target Municipalities

The target municipalities prioritize integrating ethnic and religious groups into public life while preserving their identities. Specific approaches include:

Gardabani Municipality

- Supports cultural events for ethnic minorities.
- Operates the "Gardabani Municipality Friendship Center" (NGO), which:
    - Celebrates ethnic group holidays.
    - Promotes cultural expression across communities.

Lagodekhi Municipality

- The 2024–2027 mid-term development document emphasizes preserving cultural traditions alongside infrastructure and economic growth.
- Supports cultural events in ethnic minority communities (e.g., Fona, Kabali, Bolkvi), including Kostaoba and Novruz Bayram.

Sagarejo Municipality

- The 2021–2026 priority document supports ethnic minorities through:
    - Holiday gift distributions.
    - Promoting cultural participation.
    - Fostering intercultural dialogue.
- Youth Support Program (2023–2026) aims to integrate vulnerable groups—ethnic minorities, eco-migrants, and persons with disabilities—into society.

Conclusion

All three municipalities must consistently and equitably assess the importance of preserving ethnic minority identities and their societal integration, implementing coordinated efforts to achieve these goals.

Political Security

Political security ensures individuals' rights to live in an environment where fundamental rights and freedoms are protected, free from political repression or interference. It is closely tied to citizen political engagement, governance transparency, and government accountability.

Municipal Governance Effectiveness

Key indicators for assessing governance effectiveness in the target municipalities include:

- Quality of services provided to residents.
- Governance transparency.
- Support for entrepreneurship.
- Improvement of living conditions.

Gardabani Municipality

- Effectiveness index has increased since 2020 but remains low at 47.27% in 2023.
- Motivation for improving living conditions: 39.39%.
- Entrepreneurship support: 33.28%, notably low.

Sagarejo Municipality

- Higher effectiveness index in 2023: 58.46%.
- Entrepreneurship support: 46.68%.
- Living conditions improvement: 38.65% [45].

[45] Georgia Municipalities Index 2023, Annual Ranking Study, Tbilisi, 2022

Lagodekhi Municipality

- Participated in the Municipalities Index for the first time in 2023; assessment incomplete due to insufficient data.
- Historically high ratings in other areas since 2017.
- Transparency and openness in 2023: 76% [46].

Municipal Websites and Information Transparency Challenges

Analysis of municipal websites and focus group interviews revealed both progress and systemic gaps.

Positive Trends:

- All three municipalities maintain official websites, serving as key communication channels.
- Electronic information access is available, though functionality needs enhancement.

Challenges:

- Incomplete reflection of ongoing activities on websites.
- Infrequent and untimely document updates.
- Low public awareness of website usage.
- Lack of information in minority languages, limiting engagement and awareness among ethnic groups.

[46] Local Self-Government Index, National Assessment of Georgian Municipalities, November 2023

Localization of Sustainable Development Goals: Outcomes in Georgia and Target Municipalities

Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) involves incorporating local contexts into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda[47]. This process places significant emphasis on local and regional governance, as they are best positioned to achieve SDGs through support for bottom-up initiatives.

Importance of Localization

Localization comprises two primary dimensions:

- **Integration into Local Policy**: Local authorities must adapt the 2030 Agenda to their social, economic, and environmental strategies to ensure the adequate realization of global goals in specific settings.
- **Support from Local Governance**: Municipalities and regional structures should play an active role in SDG implementation, including through community engagement, partnerships, and decentralized decision-making.

Despite their global nature, SDGs are translated into practical actions at the local level. Cities, villages, and regions are the spaces where abstract goals transform into concrete, measurable outcomes[48].

Outcomes of SDG Localization in Georgia

Georgia began localizing SDGs in 2015, focusing on several strategic components:

- **Nationalization**: SDGs were integrated into national policy, with an action plan tailored to Georgia's needs.
- **Defining National Priorities**: Out of 17 global goals, 93 tasks were prioritized for Georgia, with 201 indicators established for progress monitoring.
- **Document Alignment**: The country's 36 strategic documents and requirements under the EU Association Agreement are fully aligned with sustainable development principles.

Georgia's Localization Model: Key Principles and Existing Challenges

Georgia's SDG localization model is based on five core principles integrated into both national and local policies:

- **People**: Enhancing population well-being, reducing poverty, and addressing social inequality.
- **Prosperity**: Supporting inclusive economic growth and creating employment opportunities.
- **Peace**: Preventing conflicts, strengthening social cohesion, and ensuring security.
- **Planet**: Protecting ecosystems, promoting sustainable resource use, and facilitating climate change adaptation.
- **Partnership**: Actively involving civil society, businesses, and international partners in decision-making processes.

Key Challenges in the Localization Process

Despite progress, several systemic challenges hinder the comprehensive implementation of SDGs:

- **Limited Local Government Engagement**: Most municipalities lack sufficient financial, administrative, and analytical resources for effective SDG implementation.
- **Lack of Monitoring and Data**: The absence of statistical data in certain regions significantly complicates progress assessment and inclusive planning.

---

[47] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf

[48] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf p.6

- **Incomplete Decentralization**: Local governments still lack the necessary independence, financial autonomy, and authority required for SDG realization at the local level.

Localization Outcomes in Target Municipalities

The study covers three target municipalities—Gardabani, Sagarejo, and Lagodekhi—where SDG localization progresses at varying levels and intensities. Each municipality illustrates both achievements and systemic challenges.

Gardabani Municipality

- **Economic and Urban Development Projects**: Investments are directed toward infrastructure improvement and entrepreneurship promotion.
- **Environmental Activities**: Some steps have been taken to improve waste management.
- **Low Employment Rates**: Only 18% of the population is formally employed, with the remainder self-employed or receiving social assistance.
- **Deficit in Social Programs**: Few notable initiatives are recorded in healthcare and education sectors.

Sagarejo Municipality

- **Inclusive Economic Initiatives**: Programs have been implemented to facilitate the integration of ethnic minorities.
- **Support for Sustainable Agriculture**: Subsidies for local farmers are increasing.
- **Financial Resource Constraints**: Infrastructure projects face fiscal limitations.
- **Uneven Distribution of Healthcare Programs**: Budgetary funding for rural ambulatory services was practically eliminated after 2023.

Lagodekhi Municipality

- **Natural Resource Protection**: Management systems for protected areas have been strengthened.
- **Strong Environmental Focus**: Environmental projects are prioritized.
- **High Poverty Levels**: 67% of the population is registered as socially vulnerable, twice the rates in Sagarejo and Gardabani.
- **Investment Deficit**: The municipality records the lowest indicators for both employment and economic activity.

Lagodekhi faces particularly acute challenges due to high poverty and a lack of investments, posing significant obstacles to sustainable development. Successful SDG implementation at the local level depends directly on strengthening local governance, efficient financial support distribution, and active citizen participation. These three components are transformative factors in the localization process for target regions.

Enhancing the Role of Local and Regional Governments in Sustainable Development

The successful implementation of SDGs relies significantly on active public participation and a sense of ownership over the process. Strengthening the role of local and regional governments creates a foundation for increased civic engagement, deeper partnerships, and the development of multi-sectoral collaboration.

Raising Awareness and Developing Multi-Sectoral Collaboration

Access to information and awareness-raising at both national and local levels are critical components of SDG implementation. This process gains particular importance through the active collaboration of various societal sectors, including:

- **Civil Society**: Active citizens and local NGOs that directly identify and respond to community needs.
- **Private Sector**: Business initiatives and investments that promote sustainable economic development.
- **Academic Sector**: Research institutes, universities, and educational institutions with relevant knowledge and expertise.

- **Community Organizations**: Social, environmental, and economic groups working on specific themes at local and regional levels.

Distinct Role of Local Governments

Local governments represent the level of authority closest to citizens, directly addressing their needs. They serve as a crucial bridge between central authorities and local communities, capable of:

- Strengthening public participation in decision-making processes.
- Identifying and analyzing citizen needs.
- Ensuring the formulation of policies that account for local contexts.

However, in practice, a frequent issue arises: local governments often lack a clear understanding of their responsibilities and potential in achieving SDGs. In some cases, resource scarcity is perceived as a reason for low engagement, hindering the strategic role they should fulfill [49].

Lack of Feedback from Target Municipalities: A Reflection of Systemic Challenges

Despite efforts to assess the awareness and readiness of Gardabani, Sagarejo, and Lagodekhi municipalities through a specially designed questionnaire, no feedback was received from these local governments. This circumstance points to several systemic challenges that impede effective SDG localization at the local level:

- **Low Awareness**: Local governments do not fully recognize the importance of SDG implementation at the local level or their role in the global agenda.
- **Administrative Resource Deficits**: Municipalities may lack specialized staff or designated personnel to coordinate sustainable development issues.
- **Institutional Barriers**: Effective localization requires local governments to have adequate financial and administrative autonomy, which is currently significantly limited.
- **Low Civic Engagement**: The local population lacks sufficient information about the essence and importance of SDGs, limiting community involvement and reducing overall ownership.

Integrating Local Perspectives into National Strategies for SDGs

To achieve SDGs, national governments adopt strategic documents based on the 2030 Agenda. The success of these strategies depends significantly on consensus and coordinated action across all governance levels. The role of local governments is particularly critical, as most SDGs are implemented in practice at the local level[50].

Importance of Bottom-Up Initiatives and the Role of Local Governments

While the SDG framework strategy is formulated at the national level, its effective implementation requires enhancing the competence and autonomy of local governments. Local authorities must be granted appropriate powers, resources, and initiative to base SDG implementation on bottom-up visions tailored to local needs.

Challenges of Centralized Management Systems

- If local governments only act as executors of central authority directives and lack real decision-making mechanisms, this significantly restricts the potential for successful SDG implementation.
- Top-down decisions that do not account for local contexts and specific needs are typically less effective and fail to ensure sustainable results.

Importance of a Bottom-Up Initiative-Based Model

For the success of the sustainable development process, it is essential that local governments are equally responsible participants:

- **Local Priority Setting**: Local governments should independently determine which SDGs are priorities for them and develop tailored strategies.

---

[49] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf p.9-15

[50] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf p.17

- **Inclusive Governance**: Citizens, civil society, and the private sector must have active participation in policy development and decision-making processes.
- **Access to Resources**: Local governments should be provided with adequate financial, human, and technical resources to implement independent, effective, and sustainable policies in their territories.

Institutional Challenges of SDG Localization

Although achieving SDGs is a global priority, their practical implementation occurs primarily at the local level. This process requires effective local governance and functional institutional mechanisms. The example of Georgia clearly reveals systemic difficulties that impede successful SDG localization.

Key Institutional Challenges for Local Governments

- **Limited Autonomy**: Local governments lack sufficient authority and structural competence necessary for SDG planning and implementation. Their role is often limited to executing central directives.
- **Financial Resource Deficit**: Achieving sustainable development goals requires stable and adequate funding. Local budgets, however, are typically limited and largely dependent on central government transfers.
- **Lack of Coordination and Transparency Issues**: At the local level, there is a lack of strong institutional mechanisms to ensure multi-sectoral and multi-level collaboration. Additionally, financial allocation is often not characterized by transparency and sustainability.
- **Technical Capacity Shortages**: Local governments in many cases lack sufficient qualified staff and technological resources, complicating both SDG monitoring and the process of their effective implementation.

Recommendations for Overcoming Institutional Barriers

- **Strengthening the Decentralization Process**: Local authorities should be granted legal and functional independence to enable them to plan and execute sustainable development policies independently.
- **Enhancing Financial and Technical Support**: The state needs to allocate more budgetary resources to local governments, retrain specialists, and provide technological support.
- **Coordination of National and Local Policies**: It is essential that locally developed strategies align with the national agenda, with both levels equally involved in the decision-making process[51].

[51] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf p.18

Localization of Sustainable Development Goals: A Global Approach

The localization of the 2030 Agenda does not merely involve implementing global or national goals at the local level. Rather, it entails creating conditions in local spaces that make achieving global goals feasible within specific social, economic, and environmental contexts[52].

Foundations of Localization
Effective SDG localization requires a systemic approach and the strengthening of multi-level governance. Particular attention should be paid to the following aspects:

- **Strengthening Local Governance**: Local governments must be granted sufficient authority, human, and financial resources to independently plan and implement local strategies.
- **Harmonizing National and Local Strategies**: National-level policies must respond to the needs and priorities of local communities. Local visions should be recognized as a significant component of the national agenda.
- **Inclusive Approach and Multi-Sectoral Engagement**: Local development policies should be based on public dialogue, involving equal participation of civil society, the private sector, and other interested groups in decision-making processes.

Role of National Legislation in the Localization Process

The capabilities of local governments are directly dependent on the legislative framework that defines their authority, budgetary independence, and operational freedom. Accordingly, national legislation can serve as either a facilitator or a barrier to SDG localization.

Enabling Conditions for SDG Localization

Effective SDG localization requires an institutionally robust and functional environment that enables local and regional governments to engage independently, proactively, and sustainably in the SDG implementation process.

Prerequisites for Localization

To realize the sustainable development agenda at the local level, the following components must exist and be effectively integrated into the governance system:

- **Legal and Political Framework**: Local governance must operate in a democratic, human rights-based environment that ensures the rule of law, transparency, and legal guarantees for decision-making at the local level.
- **Decentralization Level and Legislative Framework**: Local governments must have clearly defined competencies, financial autonomy, and institutional capacity to independently plan and implement strategic policies.
- **Multi-Level Governance Mechanisms**: Close and equitable collaboration between central, regional, and local governments is necessary to align policies and efficiently distribute resources.
- **Financial Resource Availability**: Local authorities should secure funding not only from the central budget but also through internal revenues, international grants, and partnership mechanisms.
- **Capacity Development**: SDG implementation requires retraining professional staff, enhancing local personnel skills, and establishing robust planning, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms**: The localization process must be accompanied by transparent, data-driven mechanisms that ensure accurate progress assessment, analysis, and public information.
- **National Urban Strategy**: Sustainable urban development serves as the foundation for successful SDG localization in cities and villages[53].

---

[52] UCLG, 2015. 'The Local Dimension of the 2030 Agenda', motion adopted by the World Council of the UCLG, Paris, December 2015.
[53] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf p.18-19

UN Guidelines: Decentralization and Access to Services

In the process of localization, particular importance is given to the international guidelines adopted by the United Nations, which establish standards for decentralization and access to basic services.

- **International Guidelines on Decentralization and Access to Basic Services for All** – approved by the UN-Habitat Governing Council in 2007/2009 [54].
- **Main Principle**: Empowering local governments to ensure functional, financial, and political independence for both development and the protection of citizens' rights.
- **Recommendation to National Governments**: National governments should adopt these guidelines and ensure their practical implementation, enabling full engagement of local governance in the SDG localization process.

Multi-Level Governance and Cooperative Governance Model

Multi-level governance represents a system for decision-making and policy implementation, within which state policies are formulated and executed through collaborative relationships in vertical (between local, regional, and central levels), horizontal (between entities at the same level, such as ministries or local governments), or both directions[55].

Key Elements

- **Vertical Coordination**: Collaboration between local, regional, and central levels in policy planning, implementation, and monitoring.
- **Horizontal Coordination**: Interaction between ministries, government agencies, and local governments to strengthen partnerships.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Engagement**: Alongside the public sector, the private sector, civil society, academic institutions, and local communities should be actively involved in decision-making and implementation processes.

Why Is This Model Important?

- **Harmonization of Local and National Visions**: Successful SDG implementation requires alignment of national and local strategies and integration with global priorities.
- **Inclusive Decision-Making**: Multi-stakeholder engagement enhances the accuracy, effectiveness, and legitimacy of policy decisions.
- **Transparency and Accountability**: Citizens must have access to processes and information, participate in shaping public policy, and monitor the execution of decisions[56].

Georgia's SDG Coordination and Monitoring System

Georgia's national model is based on the principles of multi-level governance. The Inter-Agency Council on Sustainable Development Goals, accountable to the Prime Minister, serves as the primary coordinating body for SDG implementation. The council's activities are grounded in principles of inclusivity, multi-stakeholder engagement, and institutional consensus[57].

Composition of the Council

- Representatives of central executive authorities (ministers and agency heads).
- Chairpersons of relevant parliamentary committees.
- The Public Defender's Office and leading non-governmental organizations.
- Representatives of local governments (mayors' participation established since 2019).

---

[54] https://unhabitat.org/books/international-guidelines-on-decentralization-and-access-to-basic-services

[55] Stephenson 2013. Twenty years of multi-level governance: Where Does It Come From? What Is It? Where Is It Going? https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01024837/document

[56] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf p.22

[57] Regulation of the Inter-Agency Council on Sustainable Development Goals, Order of the Prime Minister of Georgia #14, January 23, 2020 https://sdg.gov.ge/text-page/33

- Representatives of the UN and other international partner organizations (participating in an advisory role without voting rights)[58].

Inter-Agency Council for SDG Monitoring and Working Groups

SDG Working Groups

- **Social Inclusion Group**: Covers Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 17.
- **Economic Development Group**: Addresses Goals 1, 8, 9, 10, 17.
- **Democratic Governance Group**: Responsible for Goals 5, 10, 16.
- **Sustainable Energy and Environmental Protection Group**: Covers Goals 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17.

Specialized Working Groups and Limited Role of Local Governments in SDG Implementation

In Georgia, specialized thematic working groups actively operate in the SDG implementation process, overseeing specific directions and goals.

Functions of Working Groups

- Integration of SDGs into national and local policies.
- Coordination of monitoring and evaluation processes.
- Support for local governments with relevant tools and recommendations.

Analysis of National Documents and Limited Role of Local Governments

Analysis of the strategic document for SDG implementation reveals a significant gap: local governments are practically excluded from the implementation chain. Despite their unique potential for direct interaction with the population and identifying needs, responsibility for all key tasks is concentrated at the central government level.

Representation of Municipalities at the Indicator Level

In the national document, local governments are mentioned only in indicators related to four goals, and they are not designated as responsible entities for any tasks:

Goal	Indicator	Responsible Agency
SDG 1: No Poverty	Number of municipalities adopting disaster risk reduction strategies	State Security Council Apparatus
SDG 5: Gender Equality	Share of women's representation in local bodies	Government Administration / Gender Equality Commission
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities	Proportion of solid waste collection, recycling, and disposal	Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture
SDG 16: Inclusive Governance	Representation of ethnic groups in local councils	Government Administration / Inter-Agency Gender Equality Commission

Importantly, the national document does not designate any tasks to be directly implemented by local governments.

State Audit Service Assessment and Recommendations

The State Audit Service of Georgia assessed the efficiency of SDG implementation processes from 2016 to 2018, providing a detailed analysis of existing mechanisms and their shortcomings. The report identifies several systemic issues that hindered the full integration of SDGs into the country's development strategy.

[58] Regulation of the Inter-Agency Council on Sustainable Development Goals, Order of the Prime Minister of Georgia #14, January 23, 2020 https://sdg.gov.ge/text-page/33

Key Issues Identified in the Report

- **Insufficient Integration of SDGs into National Policy**: The Basic Directions Document (BDD) for 2019–2022 did not reflect national SDG commitments, indicating that the sustainable development agenda was not fully integrated into central strategic documents.
- **Lack of Municipal Involvement**: The role of local governments was not reflected in priority documents, hindering SDG localization and increasing dependence on centralized management.
- **Inconsistency of National Documents with SDGs**: There were no mechanisms to ensure compatibility between national strategic documents and SDG goals and indicators.

Changes in the 2022–2025 Document

Following the audit, the 2022–2025 development documents showed some improvements in reflecting SDGs:

- Enhanced reflection of SDGs in national policy, though the process remains fragmented, covering only part of the nationalized goals without a comprehensive alignment map.
- Continued limited municipal involvement: local governments appear only in select indicators, and their responsibilities are not systematically integrated into strategic and budgetary processes[59].

Lag in Local-Level Implementation and Efforts to Address It

Georgia's 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) report explicitly notes that local governments were minimally involved in SDG implementation. Despite being closest to population needs, their systemic role was not fully considered[60]. The report emphasizes that a special action plan was being developed to align with the 2019 Decentralization Strategy to ensure effective SDG localization. This initiative aimed to establish strong connections between local governance and national policy.

2021 Plan: A Step Toward Localization

A significant advancement in the localization process was the plan adopted on July 12, 2021, by the Inter-Agency Council on SDGs, which focused on implementing SDGs at the local level. Key objectives included:

- Establishing and implementing local engagement mechanisms in all Georgian municipalities by 2025.
- Raising awareness among local authorities and the population about the essence and importance of SDGs.
- Ensuring SDG implementation at the local level in at least 60% of Georgia's municipalities.

[59] mdgradi_ganvitarebis_miznebis_efeqtianobis_auditis_angarishi.pdf
[60] Georgia's Voluntary National Review Report, 2020, p. 13

Strategic Framework for Localization and International Guiding Principles

While there is no universal model for SDG localization, internationally established guiding principles outline the following key directions:

- Goal 17, Target 17.4 (2030 Agenda) emphasizes the need for synergistic cooperation between different levels and branches of government.
- **Horizontal and Vertical Integration**: Strengthening cooperation between agencies and between central and local levels, aligning with the principle of "Leaving No One Behind."
- **Decentralization Principle**: Based on the need to empower local governments, essential for realizing citizens' fundamental rights and adopting sustainable solutions.

Link Between Localization and Democratic Governance

The success of the localization process is closely tied to strengthening democratic institutions. According to the Constitution of Georgia, citizens regulate local issues through local government bodies. Thus, localization policies cannot succeed without politically and institutionally empowering local governments.

Decentralization Strategy and the Role of Local Governments

Effective implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is impossible without increased delegated powers and institutional strengthening of local governments. The local level is closest to citizens, directly addressing their needs and challenges.

Legal Basis: Subsidiarity Principle

The legal framework for local governance in Georgia is based on the subsidiarity principle, which clearly delineates powers between the state and municipalities:

- The subsidiarity principle promotes decision-making at the level where implementation is most effective, often at the local government level.
- It emphasizes addressing citizens' needs and their connection to decision-making entities. Based on this principle, the 2020–2025 Decentralization Strategy considers subsidiarity a key foundation. According to the strategy, public functions should be delegated to local governments unless central implementation is more effective or economically justified. However, implementation is constrained by limited financial resources and institutional barriers, hindering the empowerment of local governments.

Role of Local Governments in SDG Implementation

Effective SDG implementation at the local level requires active and targeted participation of local governments. Key aspects include:

- **Clear Definition of Functions and Responsibilities**: Aligning local government functions with sectors (e.g., education, healthcare) to enhance policy effectiveness and SDG alignment.
- **Participation in National Policy Planning and Reporting**: Involving local governments in shaping national SDG strategies and reporting mechanisms to ensure local needs are considered and foster national-local collaboration.
- **Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation Systems**: Implementing data systems to track local progress (e.g., social, economic data) to enhance monitoring, accountability, and transparency.

Georgia's Decentralization Strategy and Its Link to SDGs

Georgia's 2020–2025 Decentralization Strategy emphasizes the need to strengthen local governments and aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The strategy integrates three main objectives, consistent with SDG implementation principles:

- **Increased Role of Local Government Units**: Transferring more competencies to local authorities for managing public issues, enhancing decision-making efficiency and flexibility.
- **Provision of Financial and Material Resources**: Enabling municipalities to independently manage budgets and implement infrastructure and social projects.

- **Establishment of Transparent, Accountable, and Effective Governance**: Creating a robust institutional framework to support long-term sustainable development strategies. However, implementation is limited by insufficient financial resources and institutional barriers, which hinder municipal capacity-building.

Local Government Code and Opportunities for SDG Implementation

Georgia's Local Government Code grants municipalities two main types of powers:

- **Own Powers**: Issues within the exclusive competence of municipalities, implemented in accordance with local strategies.
- **Delegated Powers**: Functions related to state strategies assigned by the central government. The Code allows municipalities to undertake any activities not prohibited by law, creating opportunities for active engagement in SDG-related areas:
- Promoting employment.
- Supporting agriculture and cooperatives.
- Developing tourism.
- Local healthcare initiatives.
- Promoting gender equality.
- Environmental protection and ecological initiatives.
- Supporting innovative development.
- Strengthening education, sports, and youth policies. Municipalities have the legal basis and practical tools for effective SDG implementation. Activating their role, encouraging local initiatives, and ensuring systemic integration into state policy are essential.

Role of the Decentralization Strategy in SDG Implementation

The National Decentralization Strategy, approved by Government of Georgia Decree #678 on December 31, 2019, aims to strengthen local governments. It promotes consideration of population interests, active citizen participation in governance, and effective resolution of local issues, laying the foundation for SDG implementation at the local level. The document's introduction emphasizes that the strategy's objectives support SDG achievement and deepen the institutionalization of the localization process. However, implementation is constrained by limited financial resources and institutional barriers, hindering municipal capacity-building.

Main Objectives of the Strategy

The Decentralization Strategy is based on three main directions:

1. Strengthening the Role of Local Government Units

- Transferring part of public affairs to local authorities.
- Ensuring the full exercise of municipalities' powers.
- Adhering to the subsidiarity principle—decision-making at the level where implementation is most effective.

Key Directions of the 2022–2023 Action Plan

The strategy's action plan outlines specific tasks:

- Granting municipalities full powers and eliminating legislative gaps.
- Completing legislative initiatives to institutionally and financially strengthen local governance.

Adopted Legislative Changes

Within the framework of decentralization, legislative reforms were implemented:

- Amendments to the *Local Government Code* defining the calculation procedure for delegated powers.
- Transfer of powers to municipalities in social, economic, and infrastructural spheres, promoting decentralized management of local development.

Guidelines and Resources Developed for Local Governments

Methodological tools and guidelines were developed to support municipalities:

- Procedures for handling administrative complaints—to ensure rapid response to citizens' rights.
- Feedback management guidelines—to establish effective communication mechanisms.
- Instructions for using the municipal services electronic portal—to enhance service accessibility.
- Model for calculating waste management fees—to promote environmental sustainability.

The Decentralization Strategy fosters the empowerment of local governments and creates conditions for the systemic localization of SDGs. Its implementation has translated into legal and administrative tools, enabling municipalities to purposefully contribute to the country's sustainable development.

2. Increasing the Powers of Local Governments

A central task of the Decentralization Strategy is the consistent expansion of municipal competencies, implying increased functional capabilities at legal and administrative levels.

Key Directions

- Identifying powers to be transferred—defining areas where local governance is more effective and tailored to community needs.
- Strengthening technical and legal support—providing municipalities with tools and a legislative framework.
- Localizing social and infrastructural projects—transferring project management authority to local governments.

According to the 2022–2023 Action Plan

- Defining additional powers and completing legislative regulation.
- Institutional consultations—dialogue with central agencies to ensure effective transfer of delegated powers.

Adopted Legislative Changes

- Establishing a procedure for calculating financial and material resources to implement delegated powers.
- Initiating the transfer of additional financial resources to support the exercise of new powers.

3. Financial Support for Local Governments

The success of decentralization depends on municipalities' financial sustainability and self-financing capabilities. However, limited financial resources and institutional barriers constrain this process.

Key Directions

- Increasing the volume of transfers—expanding targeted and general transfers.
- Ensuring transparency in budgetary processes—improving mechanisms for financial allocation and control.
- Facilitating the attraction of additional funds—for social, economic, and healthcare initiatives.

Steps Taken in 2022

- Developing a targeted transfer formula to support the implementation of delegated healthcare services.
- Establishing a financial scheme defining:
    - Employee remuneration.
    - Administrative expenses.
    - Transportation costs.

Outcome

- Increased targeted transfers, reflected at the local level, particularly in target municipalities, where funding and implementation of social and infrastructural projects have grown.

Financial Strengthening of Local Governments Within the Decentralization Strategy

A key priority of the Decentralization Strategy is the financial and material empowerment of local governments, essential for effectively implementing delegated functions and promoting sustainable development at the local level. However, limited financial resources and institutional barriers hinder this process.

Key Tasks in Financial Independence

The Decentralization Strategy integrates two directions:

- Promoting municipal revenue growth—expanding own revenue sources and transferring a state financial share.
- Introducing financial equalization mechanisms—eliminating financial disparities among municipalities to ensure equitable implementation of social and economic projects.

Ongoing Legislative and Administrative Initiatives

In 2022, a draft amendment to the *Budget Code* was prepared, which includes:

- Increasing the share of revenues from state property disposal for local budgets.
- Gradually increasing municipal revenues to enhance financial sustainability.

Additionally, legislative changes are underway to:

- Simplify property transfer and registration procedures for municipalities.
- Improve legal and technical ownership of property resources.

Material Support and Property Resource Management

In 2022, an electronic program for managing and accounting municipal assets was developed, assisting municipalities with:

- Real estate inventory.
- Property base administration.
- Planning local economic strategies using resources.

According to data:

- In 2022, 1,207 real estate units were transferred.
- By the end of 2023, the transfer of 2,500 objects is planned.

Strengthening municipalities' financial and material capabilities creates conditions for independent decision-making, essential for consolidating decentralization and localizing SDGs.

SDG Implementation at the Local Level

1. Assessing Local Needs and Defining Priorities

Effective implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) begins with a systematic assessment of needs and clear definition of priorities. Financial constraints and institutional barriers limit the effectiveness of this process. Key stages include:

- Analysis of local and regional programs.
- Identification of challenges and needs.
- Detection of cross-sectoral linkages.
- Assessment of alignment with national priorities and SDGs.

Challenges in Municipal Involvement

According to the 2019 State Audit Service report, municipal involvement remains low, and this issue persists. Key shortcomings:

- Municipalities do not formally participate in SDG implementation.
- They are not involved in the activities of the Inter-Agency Council.
- In national documents, they are mentioned only as information providers.

Template-Based Strategies

The 2023–2026 strategies of Gardabani, Lagodekhi, and Sagarejo are largely template-based, indicating neglect of local specifics. Key priorities:

- Infrastructure development.
- Environmental protection and cleaning.
- Education.
- Culture, youth, and sports.
- Healthcare and social welfare.
- Governance and general expenses.

Gardabani's strategy is an exception, linking sports promotion to SDG 4 (inclusive education). No similar examples are recorded in other municipalities.

SDG Implementation: Unconscious Alignment

Despite the lack of formal integration, municipal programs partially align with SDG tasks:

- **SDG 1 (No Poverty)**: Social assistance for vulnerable groups.

- **SDG 3 (Good Health)**: Support for outpatient clinics, disease prevention.
- **SDG 4 (Quality Education)**: Promotion of preschool and school infrastructure.

Recommendations for Enhancing Involvement

Municipalities often implement SDG-aligned programs unconsciously, increasing the risk that policies fail to meet needs. Improvements require:

- Informing municipalities about SDGs and providing tools.
- Encouraging local initiatives.
- Strengthening coordination between central and local authorities.

These measures will enhance local government empowerment and tailor SDG implementation to local needs.

2. Collaborative Governance—A Tool for Joint Priority Setting

Local SDG implementation requires collaborative governance, uniting local, regional, and central authorities, communities, businesses, academia, and the non-governmental sector. Multi-stakeholder governance includes:

- Forming institutional coordination mechanisms.
- Inter-municipal cooperation for territorial development.
- Sharing knowledge and practices among municipalities.

The Decentralization Strategy recognizes this approach, emphasizing:

- Population participation in decision-making.
- Public-private partnership mechanisms.
- Joint planning and implementation of projects.

However, practice lags due to resource scarcity and limited collaboration experience.

3. Alignment of Local Action Plans with SDGs

Local development plans should reflect a holistic vision of the territorial unit and adopt an integrated SDG approach. Financial and institutional constraints limit this process[61].

Policy Planning Standardization

Government of Georgia Decree #629 regulates the development, monitoring, and evaluation of policy documents. Its objectives are:

- Creating evidence-based documents.
- Ensuring alignment with SDGs.
- Standardized, results-oriented management.

The decree applies only to documents submitted to the government, excluding municipal plans. Consequently, local SDG integration remains low.

Support for Municipal Planning

The 2022–2023 Decentralization Action Plan includes:

- Forming a municipal planning system (a draft law was prepared in 2022, initiated in 2023).
- Approving a methodological guideline.
- Developing or updating plans in 25 municipalities by 2023.

SDG Localization in Municipalities

In 2021, the Inter-Agency SDG Council approved a localization action plan, involving municipalities by 2025. The plan includes training on monitoring and reporting[62].

According to 2024 data, the SDG Council Secretariat conducted "SDG Monitoring and Reporting" trainings:

- In Tbilisi (September 28–29)[63].
- In Batumi (September 21–22)[64].

---

[61] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf p. 28

[62] https://sdg.gov.ge/news-details/77

[63] Attended by 18 representatives from 6 municipalities (Sachkhere, Kharagauli, Akhaltsikhe, Dedoplistskaro, Sagarejo, Marneuli), https://sdg.gov.ge/news-details/77

A total of 42 representatives from 24 municipalities participated. However, Sagarejo, Lagodekhi, and Gardabani were not represented, indicating a lack of targeted support and low engagement.

4. Mobilizing Local Resources

The success of local governments depends on effective budget planning and allocation. SDG implementation at the local level requires resource mobilization, including:

- Strategic allocation of local budgets based on priorities.
- Partnerships with the private sector.
- Engagement of communities and civil society.
- Utilization of academic and research resources[65].

Importance of Partnerships

The Decentralization Strategy promotes public-private collaboration. Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) and Public-Private-People Partnerships (P4) enable:

- Increased funding for social projects.
- Job creation through collaboration with local businesses.
- Joint implementation of infrastructural projects.

In 2022, a readiness assessment for public-private collaboration was conducted in three municipalities, but Sagarejo, Lagodekhi, and Gardabani did not participate, indicating a lack of inclusivity.

5. Strengthening Effective and Accountable Leadership

SDG implementation requires:

- Improving institutional infrastructure.
- Introducing innovative technologies.
- Developing local leaders' and management skills[66].

According to UNDP's approach, capacity development is based on[67]:

- **Institutional Arrangements**: Addressing structural issues, improving policies.
- **Leadership**: Developing leadership, strategic planning, and communication.
- **Knowledge**: Providing education and professional development opportunities.
- **Accountability**: Introducing transparency, combating corruption.

Challenges

The Decentralization Strategy notes that local government service delivery is limited, as these areas were traditionally controlled by central institutions[68].

Key challenges:

- Insufficient allocation of financial resources.
- Lack of staff competencies.
- Need for basic infrastructure improvements.

Innovative Solutions

In 2022, an electronic information flow management system was introduced in 63 municipalities, including:

- An online citizen services portal (ms.gov.ge).
- An electronic document management system (mm.gov.ge).
- An interactive geospatial data map (maps.gov.ge).

---

[64] Attended by 24 representatives from 8 municipalities (Poti, Keda, Abasha, Ozurgeti, Lanchkhuti, Chokhatauri, Mestia, Lentekhi), https://sdg.gov.ge/news-details

[65] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf, p.29-30

[66] www.unep.org/documents.multilingual/default.asp?DocumentID=52&ArticleID=87&l=en

[67] Lavergne, Réal and John Saxby (2001). Capacity Development: Vision and Implications. CIDA Canadian International Development Agency, Capacity Development, Occasional Series.

[68] Furtado, Xavier (2001). Decentralization and Capacity Development: Understanding the links and the implications for Programming. CIDA occasional series on Capacity Building

These systems enhance governance efficiency and enable citizens to access services through a single-window principle.

Proactive Budgeting

In 2022, financial analysis was conducted in 56 municipalities, leading to memoranda with 39 municipalities to increase transparency. Additionally:

- The program budgeting methodology was updated.
- Public financial management improvements began.
- A professional development concept was developed to enhance staff qualifications.

6. Promoting Co-Responsibility for Strategic Projects

The success of strategic projects requires multi-stakeholder partnerships and adherence to the participation principle. Multi-stakeholder engagement (NGOs, private sector, communities, research institutes, citizens) promotes:

- A culture of co-responsibility—engagement reduces dependence on the state and increases community activity.
- Efficient resource mobilization—joint use of financial, human, and technological resources enhances project sustainability.
- Increased governance accountability—sector involvement improves oversight and transparency.

7. Collaboration Formats for Development

Collaboration between local governments, central authorities, international donors, and the civil sector increases opportunities for attracting additional resources. Key directions:

- Coordination with international organizations (UNDP, World Bank, EU, USAID) for technical assistance, funding, and knowledge transfer.
- Attracting financial and technical resources through international cooperation[69].

Monitoring and Evaluation of Sustainable Development Goals

Monitoring and evaluation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) involve 231 indicators. Developing localized indicators is essential for advancing local data collection systems.

Monitoring and Evaluation Aspects[70]

Key directions:

- Integrating local and regional data into national monitoring and reporting.
- Ensuring the involvement of local governance and stakeholders when reviewing national plans.
- Aligning local plan monitoring mechanisms with SDG indicators.
- Incorporating local achievements into national progress reports.

Data Collection System

Monitoring must adapt to local realities to enable the definition of localized indicators. Key focuses:

- Prioritizing vulnerable groups and regions where conflict, economic lag, or infrastructural issues hinder SDG achievement.
- Efficient data management and localized analysis.

In 2022, the National Statistics Office (GeoStat) created a municipal statistics portal, enabling comparison of regional and municipal indicators. Future integration of databases into national strategies is essential.

[69] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf p. 33

[70] Roadmap for Localizing the SDGs: Implementation and Monitoring at Subnational Level https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf p.37

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Margaret Mead, *cultural anthropologist, Strategy and Policy Director at the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA).*

Conclusions and Recommendations: Strategic Approaches to Problem Solving

This chapter is not just an analytical overview; it is a call to action, rooted in data and the experiences of local communities in Georgia's border regions.

The findings reveal key challenges identified through a comprehensive analysis of these areas. They highlight how security, social and economic development, environmental sustainability, and natural resource management are deeply interconnected. Integrated strategies are essential to address these challenges and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The recommendations are based on facts and local needs, serving as practical tools for institutions focused on regional development, security, social policy, environmental protection, and natural resource management. They urge stakeholders to:

- *Simplify administrative processes to eliminate delays in infrastructure projects, ensuring alignment with community priorities.*
- *Implement transparent monitoring systems with regular public updates to build trust and accountability.*
- *Engage communities through substantive consultations to reflect their needs in project planning and execution.*
- *Tailor centralized policies to the unique conditions of border regions for context-specific solutions.*
- *Promote sustainable resource management by balancing economic growth with environmental protection.*
- *Enhance coordination among government, municipalities, and donors to streamline project delivery.*

Implementing these recommendations within policy frameworks can strengthen social and economic resilience, restore ecological balance, ensure sustainable resource use, prevent conflicts, and bolster long-term security in border regions. This will advance SDGs and foster thriving communities.

This chapter is not a mere set of conclusions—it is a direct call to action for governments, organizations, and communities to enact these measures and transform Georgia's border regions into secure and sustainable areas.

Social Issues: Conclusions and Recommendations

Education Quality and Infrastructure

Conclusions

Systemic challenges in education access and quality were identified across all three municipalities:

1. **School Infrastructure and Technology**: Many schools lack essential technical equipment (projectors, audio systems, visual aids), limiting teaching quality and student motivation.
2. **Shortage and Poor Conditions of Kindergartens**: In numerous villages, kindergartens are either non-functional or in poor infrastructural condition. Parents often incur additional transport costs to send children to other settlements, exacerbating social inequalities.
3. **Challenges in the Learning Process**: Overcrowded classrooms hinder individual student progress and reduce the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches.
4. **School Collaboration**: Cooperation with local community organizations and self-governance bodies is weak and disorganized.
5. **Role of School Monitors**: The actions of school monitors sometimes negatively affect students' psycho-emotional well-being, necessitating a review of their roles and standards.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- Improve school infrastructure by equipping rural schools with necessary technical resources, such as projectors, audio systems, and modern whiteboards, to enhance teaching quality.
- Increase the number of kindergartens, with a focus on regions populated by ethnic minorities, to ensure all children have access to early education and preparation for integration into Georgian-language learning environments.
- Reduce class sizes and increase teaching staff to enable individualized approaches and improve learning outcomes.
- Revise and increase education budgets at the local level to address critical issues in educational quality and infrastructure.
- Provide regular training for school monitors and psychologists to equip them with competencies to foster a safe and supportive environment for students.

2. For Community Organizations

- Strengthen collaboration with schools and local self-governance bodies to introduce supplementary educational activities, such as Georgian language courses, financial literacy programs, or environmental awareness initiatives.
- Organize free educational courses for youth and parents, covering Georgian language, economic literacy, and social skills, to enhance community learning opportunities.
- Advocate for educational improvements by engaging in policy discussions at the state level, focusing on infrastructure challenges and teaching quality.

Vocational Education

Conclusions

The absence or insufficiency of vocational education opportunities poses a significant challenge in all three municipalities:

1. **Lack of Vocational Education Infrastructure**: There are insufficient vocational training institutions, restricting local youth access to qualifications and employment opportunities.
2. **Misconceptions About Vocational Education**: Many youths prioritize higher education for the sake of a diploma rather than acquiring in-demand labor market skills, while vocational education is still perceived as less prestigious.
3. **Deficit in Practical Skills**: The education system focuses primarily on theoretical knowledge, leaving students without practical skills and reducing their employability.

4. **Limited Support for Entrepreneurship**: Access to programs supporting entrepreneurship, especially for youth and women, is restricted, hindering self-employment and economic stability.
5. **Role of Non-Governmental Organizations**: Community and NGOs play a vital role in supporting vocational education and entrepreneurship, but their impact is limited by scarce systemic and financial resources.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- Establish vocational training centers in each municipality to provide youth with opportunities to acquire practical skills aligned with local labor market needs.
- Launch information campaigns to promote vocational education and shift societal stereotypes, highlighting its value for career development.
- Integrate educational and business sectors by fostering partnerships between vocational institutions and local businesses, enabling students to gain hands-on experience.
- Develop targeted programs, such as grants, concessional loans, and mentorship, to support youth entrepreneurship initiatives and foster economic independence.
- Introduce specific educational initiatives to enhance women's participation in vocational training, promoting their social and economic empowerment.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- Expand non-formal vocational training programs, offering courses and workshops focused on in-demand professions to meet local market needs.
- Develop entrepreneurship training programs for youth and women, covering business planning, financial management, and market analysis to support economic initiatives.
- Collaborate closely with schools and vocational institutions to provide students with comprehensive information about vocational education opportunities.
- Create internship, mentorship, and employment programs to boost youth employability and connect them with local job markets.
- Promote social equity through targeted educational and employment programs that enhance women's economic participation and support their socioeconomic independence.

Intensification of Georgian Language Teaching in Multiethnic Regions

Conclusions

1. **Increasing Georgian Language Proficiency Among Youth**: Growing engagement of ethnic minority students in Georgian-language education fosters deeper social integration and enhances civic participation.
2. **Lack of Infrastructure and Resources**: The scarcity of Georgian-language schools and preschools creates significant barriers to educational access in multiethnic regions.
3. **Language Barriers in Education**: Insufficient Georgian language skills at the primary level hinder students' academic progress and long-term development.
4. **Challenges with Teaching Staff**: A shortage of educators trained in bilingual education, coupled with teachers' lack of knowledge of students' native languages, reduces teaching effectiveness and quality.
5. **Difficulties in Adult Language Acquisition**: Many ethnic minority adults lack opportunities to learn Georgian, limiting their full participation in social and economic activities.
6. **Access to State Services**: Low Georgian language proficiency restricts ethnic minorities' access to public services, contributing to social and economic marginalization.
7. **Instability in Education Policy**: Frequent changes in the Ministry of Education's teacher certification policies reduce motivation for Georgian language learning and impede integration efforts.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- Expand Georgian language instruction at the preschool level by increasing the number of Georgian-language kindergartens in rural areas to facilitate early language acquisition.
- Develop infrastructure for Georgian-language schools by opening new schools or expanding existing ones to ensure access to education in Georgian for all interested students.
- Train teachers for bilingual education through specialized programs and create bilingual textbooks to improve teaching quality and effectiveness.
- Introduce free Georgian language courses for adults in multiethnic regions to support their integration into the labor market and civic life.
- Simplify administrative services by establishing multilingual information centers in municipalities (as a temporary measure) to assist residents with legal and administrative issues.
- Ensure stability in education policy by adopting a long-term, consistent strategy for Georgian language teaching to support sustained integration efforts.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- Collaborate with preschools and schools to improve the quality of Georgian language instruction through targeted coordination and support programs.
- Organize free, tailored Georgian language courses for adults to address their specific needs and enhance integration opportunities.
- Implement mentorship programs for youth, involving both ethnic minority and Georgian students, to provide language support and accelerate integration for preschool and school-age children.
- Strengthen ties with state institutions to secure financial and logistical support for Georgian language learning initiatives.
- Leverage digital platforms, mobile apps, and remote learning tools to increase access to Georgian language education, particularly for those unable to attend in-person courses, enabling personalized and effective learning.

Integration Issues in Multiethnic Regions

Conclusions

1. **Growing Recognition of Education's Importance**: Parents increasingly value education's role in their children's future, boosting their engagement and civic responsibility.
2. **Importance of Early Integration**: Social bonds formed in preschools create a supportive environment, facilitating children's adaptation, peer integration, and social skill development.
3. **Integrative Role of Cultural and Sports Events**: Joint cultural and sports activities reduce language barriers, strengthen intercultural ties, and foster shared community spaces.
4. **Barriers to Social Integration**: Complex documentation processes, property issues, and legal barriers hinder ethnic minorities' full participation in social and economic activities.
5. **Divided Identity**: Azerbaijani communities often experience dual-state identity, complicating integration in both Georgia and Azerbaijan.
6. **Asymmetry in Integration**: Ethnic minorities frequently perceive insufficient reciprocal efforts from Georgian society to support mutual integration.
7. **Trends of Ethnic Isolation**: Despite progressive policies, some regions show persistent social isolation of ethnic minorities, reducing their civic engagement and weakening national identity.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- Promote integration through education by increasing the number of preschools and Georgian-language schools in multiethnic regions to support early and consistent engagement with the state language and culture.

- Strengthen programs to overcome language barriers by expanding accessible, high-quality Georgian language courses for both youth and adults.
- Support joint cultural and educational initiatives to foster collaboration among ethnic groups, deepen intercultural dialogue, and strengthen integration processes.
- Address administrative and legal barriers by simplifying property registration procedures and establishing multilingual information centers at the municipal level to provide legal and administrative support.
- Enhance civic awareness through regular campaigns by local authorities and schools on civic responsibilities, constitutional rights, and the importance of societal participation to build trust and engagement in democratic processes.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- Organize joint cultural and sports events in collaboration with local and state educational institutions to promote cooperation and intercultural connections among ethnic groups.
- Provide multilingual legal and administrative assistance through community-run information centers to support ethnic minorities in navigating documentation and registration processes.
- Expand access to education by offering targeted language courses and vocational training programs to enhance employability and economic empowerment.
- Develop platforms for societal dialogue to facilitate experience sharing, mutual understanding, and reciprocal integration between ethnic minorities and Georgian society.

Healthcare Services and Demographic Challenges in Multiethnic Regions

Conclusions

1. **Underdeveloped Healthcare Infrastructure**: Local medical facilities fail to meet modern standards, forcing residents to seek care in other regions or the capital.
2. **Language Barriers and Lack of Information**: Azerbaijani communities lack full information about state healthcare programs, significantly limiting their access to services.
3. **Low Access to Medications**: Expensive prescribed drugs pose a heavy economic burden for socially vulnerable groups.
4. **Environmental Impact on Health**: Industrial pollution (e.g., Rustavi cement factory) and contaminated drinking water pose serious health risks.
5. **Limited Access to Social Protection Services**: Language barriers and lack of information prevent many citizens from benefiting from state social programs.
6. **Absence of Occupational Safety Standards in Agriculture**: Violations of safety regulations endanger workers' health in this sector.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Central and Local Authorities)**

- Strengthen healthcare infrastructure by upgrading local medical facilities and expanding service offerings to provide quality care on-site.
- Ensure linguistic accessibility by providing healthcare and social service information in Azerbaijani to increase community engagement.
- Improve emergency medical services by enhancing the availability of ambulances in rural areas.
- Increase access to medications through targeted subsidy mechanisms for socially vulnerable groups.
- Enhance environmental safety by tightening monitoring of industrial pollution and chemical use in agriculture, with regular inspections of food products for harmful substances.
- Improve drinking water quality by rehabilitating water infrastructure and introducing modern filtration systems.
- Enforce occupational safety regulations in agriculture through standardized protocols and effective compliance mechanisms to reduce workplace risks.

- Raise awareness of social programs by establishing information centers at medical facilities to provide comprehensive consultations on state services.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- Introduce cultural mediator programs to facilitate communication between ethnic minorities and healthcare professionals.
- Raise healthcare awareness through local media campaigns (TV, radio, social networks) focusing on prevention, healthy lifestyles, and service access.
- Support environmental and health monitoring by collaborating with medical institutions and food safety agencies to identify risks promptly.
- Develop initiatives for women's healthcare and empowerment, focusing on improving service access in communities with cultural barriers, and prioritize prevention of domestic violence and early marriage with robust support mechanisms.

Environmental Issues and Quality of Living Environment

Conclusions

1. **Waste Management Issues**: Despite free waste collection in some municipalities, improper disposal persists, increasing pollution and public health risks.
2. **Air Pollution and Industrial Impact**: Cement factories and other industrial sites degrade air quality, contributing to respiratory diseases and allergies.
3. **Water Pollution and Inadequate Sanitation**: Contaminated irrigation systems, high chemical content in drinking water, and faulty sewage systems threaten food supply and sanitary safety.
4. **Uncontrolled Use of Agricultural Chemicals**: Farmers' non-compliance with safety rules for chemical use causes systemic soil, water, and ecosystem pollution.
5. **Lack of Environmental Education**: Residents lack sufficient information on soil contamination, chemical risks, and the benefits of organic fertilizers.
6. **Challenges in Transitioning to Organic Fertilizers**: High costs, technical difficulties, and societal stereotypes hinder widespread adoption despite some farmers' use of organic fertilizers.
7. **Low Environmental Awareness Amid Economic Issues**: Economic and social challenges lead some residents to deprioritize environmental concerns, undermining long-term environmental policy effectiveness.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures**

- Tighten waste management regulations with stricter enforcement and monitoring to reduce improper disposal.
- Prevent industrial pollution by introducing modern filtration systems and conducting regular environmental monitoring at industrial sites.
- Improve irrigation and drinking water quality through infrastructure upgrades and filtration system implementation.
- Enforce strict controls on chemical content in agricultural products to ensure compliance with safety norms.
- Subsidize organic fertilizers and eco-friendly technologies to enhance affordability and adoption.
- Conduct information campaigns to raise public awareness of environmental issues and sustainable practices.
- Strengthen environmental inspections with regular monitoring of industrial and agricultural activities.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- Increase public participation in environmental campaigns and waste management programs to foster community responsibility.
- Promote energy-efficient technologies through targeted awareness and adoption programs.
- Provide farmers with consultations and training on organic agriculture and safe agro-technologies.
- Establish local environmental monitoring groups to track pollution incidents and report data to relevant authorities.
- Develop information platforms with local media to disseminate environmental knowledge and updates.
- Implement educational campaigns and community initiatives to promote environmental culture at the local level.

Infrastructure Deficits and Access to Public Services in Municipalities

Conclusions

1. **Water Supply Issues**: Some rural residents lack stable access to clean drinking water, with quality often failing sanitary norms, especially in summer, increasing health and hygiene risks.
2. **Preschool Education Infrastructure**: Despite progress, the shortage of kindergartens in villages limits access to early education.
3. **Lack of Sports and Cultural Infrastructure**: Many municipalities lack sports and cultural facilities, restricting youth engagement in healthy and social activities.
4. **Public Transport Access Problems**: Limited transport routes connecting villages to cities reduce access to employment, education, and healthcare.
5. **Poor Internal Roads**: Unmaintained roads and irregular upkeep complicate mobility, particularly in winter and spring-autumn seasons.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- Modernize drinking water infrastructure with filtration systems and regular quality monitoring to ensure safe supply.
- Increase preschool education access by opening new kindergartens in villages and upgrading existing facilities.
- Develop transport systems by introducing new public transport routes and improving existing services to enhance mobility and access to essential services.
- Rehabilitate internal roads with regular maintenance to ensure safe and consistent travel.
- Invest in sports and cultural infrastructure, such as sports fields and youth centers, to support community engagement.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- Raise awareness of water resource use through campaigns promoting conservation and proper usage.
- Support rural preschools by developing programs to expand kindergarten networks and train educators.
- Promote youth social initiatives by strengthening youth centers and clubs as platforms for sports, cultural, and community activities.
- Advocate for priority infrastructure issues by collaborating with local authorities to improve public service access.
- Enhance public awareness and engagement by informing residents about available services and involving them in infrastructure decision-making processes.

Accessibility of the Social Protection System

Conclusions

1. **Limited Income Sources**: Most residents in municipalities are elderly, relying on pensions as their primary income, which is insufficient for economic stability. Limited employment opportunities increase poverty and drive migration.
2. **Information Access Issues**: Many socially vulnerable families lack information about state programs and social services, restricting their participation.
3. **Insufficient Support for Elderly and Disabled Persons**: Local services are underdeveloped and fail to meet the specific needs of elderly and disabled individuals.
4. **Social Challenges**: Early marriage, domestic violence, and women's economic vulnerability remain serious issues, driven by socioeconomic difficulties and cultural norms.
5. **Child Labor**: Poverty and traditional practices lead children to work in agriculture alongside parents, hindering education and future opportunities.
6. **Language Barriers and Service Access**: State program information is typically available only in Georgian, posing a barrier for Azerbaijani-speaking residents.
7. **Inefficient Municipal Communication**: Municipal websites are often outdated, and information on social projects is frequently inaccessible, complicating public access.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- Enhance social assistance programs by revising eligibility criteria to reach more vulnerable families.
- Improve information mechanisms by creating multilingual platforms detailing state programs, subsidies, and social services.
- Introduce tailored programs for elderly and disabled persons, such as home care services and specialized transport, at the local level.
- Promote social equality through educational and legal measures to prevent early marriage and domestic violence.
- Strengthen policies to prevent child labor, particularly in impoverished families, addressing root causes like poverty.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- Raise awareness of social services through community campaigns to inform residents about available programs.
- Reduce language barriers by organizing free Georgian language courses in ethnic minority regions to improve access to state services.
- Develop social inclusion programs to support women's economic empowerment, prevent early marriage, and aid domestic violence victims; monitor student absenteeism, especially during seasonal work periods.
- Encourage civic engagement by promoting public participation in local governance and advocating community needs to decision-makers.

Note: Critical social issues—violence against women, early marriage, and child labor—are systemic crises detailed in the chapter "Systemic Social Crisis of Violence and Inequality."

Economy: Conclusions and Recommendations

Economic Challenges and Development Prospects in Border Regions

Conclusions

1. **Financial Resource Deficit**: Local self-governments lack sufficient funds to implement economic initiatives, hindering regional development.
2. **Lack of Infrastructure Projects**: The absence of large-scale infrastructure investments limits business, trade, and tourism growth.
3. **Underutilized Transit Potential**: Despite the strategic transit role of border regions, local economies gain little benefit, as transit revenues flow to the central budget.
4. **Transport Limitations**: Weak logistics infrastructure and lack of railway connections restrict local production's market access, increasing product costs.
5. **Low Investment Activity**: Economic stagnation deters private sector growth and complicates attracting foreign investment.
6. **Impact of Border Regulations**: The expansion of border zones (0.5–1 km) and movement restrictions on locals have significantly disrupted farmers' activities.
7. **Economic Consequences of Border Closure**: The temporary closure of the Azerbaijan border (from 2020, extended to spring 2025 due to quarantine measures) negatively impacted economic activity in border municipalities, particularly in trade, agriculture, and tourism, with reduced tourist flows and export market access harming local business sustainability.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- Increase local budgets to fund economic initiatives, enabling municipalities to drive regional development.
- Prioritize large-scale infrastructure projects, such as roads and logistics hubs, to boost business, trade, and tourism.
- Redirect a portion of transit revenues to local budgets to support economic growth in border regions.
- Develop transport infrastructure, including railway connections, to improve market access and reduce production costs.
- Create incentives for investment, such as tax breaks and streamlined regulations, to attract private and foreign capital.
- Revise border zone regulations to ease movement restrictions for local farmers, ensuring minimal disruption to agricultural activities.
- Support economic recovery post-border closure by providing subsidies and market access programs for affected sectors like trade, agriculture, and tourism.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- Advocate for increased local funding by engaging with authorities to prioritize economic development needs.
- Promote infrastructure projects through community-led campaigns to highlight their benefits for business and tourism.
- Facilitate public-private partnerships to leverage transit potential for local economic gain.
- Support logistics improvements by advocating for better transport links and collaborating with local businesses.
- Organize investment forums to connect local entrepreneurs with potential investors, fostering economic activity.
- Provide training and resources to farmers to adapt to border regulations and maintain productivity.
- Develop community-based tourism initiatives to revive the sector post-border closure, focusing on local culture and attractions.

Economic Development in Border Regions

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- **Stimulate Infrastructure Projects**: Invest significantly in transport infrastructure, including roads and railways, to improve logistics and expand business opportunities.
- **Strengthen Local Budgets**: Allocate a portion of transit revenues to local municipalities to bolster regional economies.
- **Revise Border Regulations**: Develop clear, realistic regulations to allow farmers, entrepreneurs, and the tourism sector to operate without restrictions in border zones.
- **Economic Diversification**: Promote diverse sectors beyond trade and tourism, particularly light industry and processing, to create a sustainable economic base.
- **Investment Attraction Strategy**: Formulate a long-term policy to attract domestic and foreign capital, supporting small and medium businesses, job creation, and innovative economic models.
- **Support Local Businesses**: Implement tax incentives, targeted subsidies, and concessional loan programs to enhance the competitiveness of small and medium enterprises.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Advocate for Regional Development**: Actively engage in advocating economic issues, raising concerns with government bodies to prioritize regional growth.
- **Support Farmers and Small Businesses**: Develop programs to assist local farmers and entrepreneurs in improving production and market competitiveness.
- **Promote Tourism and Marketing Strategies**: Create innovative marketing approaches to boost regional tourism, increase visitor flows, and develop new routes.
- **Increase Public Awareness**: Organize community campaigns to inform residents about investment opportunities, business resources, and tourism potential.
- **Facilitate Cross-Border Trade Recovery**: Collaborate with state structures to support local product sales and restore cross-border trade relationships.

Financial Literacy and Sustainable Agricultural Development

Conclusions

1. **Low Financial Literacy**: Farmers in Lagodekhi municipality often lack knowledge in financial planning, cost management, and profit allocation, leading to debt accumulation and instability.
2. **Financial Planning Errors and Debt Growth**: Farmers take loans without long-term assessments, complicating timely debt repayment.
3. **Inefficient Resource Use**: Many farmers undervalue their labor as a financial resource, hindering accurate cost assessments and reducing agricultural efficiency.
4. **Uneven Financial Strategies**: Some farmers, including ethnic minorities, use effective models, while others engage in disorganized spending, leading to financial crises.
5. **Labor Organization Issues**: Unplanned, chaotic work processes reduce resource efficiency and overall agricultural productivity.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- **Implement Financial Literacy Programs**: Organize regular training for farmers on financial planning, budgeting, and responsible borrowing.
- **Improve Agricultural Credit Policies**: Adopt flexible regulations for agro-loans to reduce reckless borrowing risks and enhance farm financial stability.
- **Develop Grant Programs**: Activate state and international grant opportunities to support farmers in creating profitable strategies and efficient resource use.

- **Establish Consultation Centers**: Create accessible local services for farmers to receive guidance on financial management and strategic planning.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Financial Literacy Training and Awareness**: Conduct practical seminars on cost management, income planning, and profit distribution for farmers.
- **Support Labor Organization and Family Farms**: Develop initiatives to strengthen family farm models and achieve sustainable results.
- **Facilitate Experience Sharing**: Create platforms for farmers to access successful financial and agricultural practices from neighboring regions.
- **Promote Entrepreneurship**: Support projects enabling farmers to start or expand additional business ventures, reducing financial risks.

Employment and Economic Challenges

Conclusions

1. **Limited Employment Opportunities**: A severe shortage of jobs in municipalities drives internal and external migration, especially among youth.
2. **Intensified Migration**: Economic difficulties prompt residents to move to cities or abroad, causing demographic shifts and weakening local social structures.
3. **Low Income Levels**: Agricultural earnings typically fail to provide a stable living standard, with few economic alternatives available.
4. **Mismatch with Labor Market Needs**: Many residents lack modern professional skills, reducing employment prospects locally and regionally.
5. **Diverse Economic Practices**: Azerbaijani farmers often employ more effective financial and production models, achieving greater stability than others.
6. **Seasonal Employment Dominance**: Most residents rely on seasonal agricultural or livestock work, which fails to ensure stable income or social protection.
7. **Low Wages**: Regional wages lag behind urban centers and foreign markets, fueling migration.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- **Promote Regional Employment**: Attract targeted investments and encourage small and medium entrepreneurship to create jobs, reduce migration, and enhance socioeconomic stability.
- **Develop Vocational Education and Retraining**: Design programs aligned with modern labor market demands to improve residents' employability and mobility.
- **Expand Grant and Financial Support**: Provide accessible grants, concessional loans, and international donor-backed mechanisms to support economic initiatives and farmers.
- **Support Processing Industries**: Promote agricultural product processing to increase employment and ensure local production sustainability.
- **Modern Agricultural Strategy**: Introduce eco-friendly, innovative technologies to reduce environmental impact and boost agricultural productivity.
- **Facilitate Migrant Return and Reintegration**: Develop programs to motivate emigrants' return, offering employment support and economic reintegration opportunities.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Disseminate Employment Information**: Inform residents about local job opportunities, vocational retraining, and professional education programs.
- **Entrepreneurship Development Programs**: Train youth and farmers in business management to foster economic self-sufficiency.
- **Conduct Labor Market Research and Training**: Organize training on professional skills and financial literacy to meet market needs.

- **Promote Social Entrepreneurship**: Develop models that enhance employment and efficient use of local resources.
- **Reduce Economic Migration**: Implement local economic projects offering viable income alternatives to residents.

Economic Impact of Migration

Conclusions

1. **Loss of Intellectual and Labor Resources**: Migration depletes skilled workers and entrepreneurs, reducing regional economic and intellectual potential.
2. **Labor Market Imbalance**: Workforce shortages hinder sustainable economic development.
3. **Limited Economic Opportunities**: Population decline complicates local business and economic initiatives.
4. **Social Stability Challenges**: Family separation and prolonged parental emigration increase children's psychological and social vulnerability, lowering educational motivation.
5. **Reintegration Difficulties**: Lack of jobs and stable income forces returned migrants to leave again.
6. **Cultural Shifts and Adaptation Challenges**: Migrants face reintegration issues and difficulties adapting to new social environments.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- **Attract Investments and Diversify Economy**: Develop alternative sectors and jobs to reduce forced migration.
- **Local Migration Prevention Initiatives**: Support small businesses with grants, promote agriculture and processing industries, and improve infrastructure.
- **Facilitate Reintegration**: Provide information and consultation services for returned migrants, including retraining, job support, and business initiatives.
- **Stimulate Intellectual Resource Return**: Develop programs to encourage skilled professionals' return with favorable business conditions.
- **Strengthen Education and Retraining**: Enhance vocational education and skill development programs to equip youth with market-relevant qualifications.
- **Support Labor Migrants**: Create initiatives to facilitate migrants' return and integration into the local economy.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Economic Reintegration Programs**: Organize training and events to support returned migrants with employment and small business development.
- **Strengthen Social Support Systems**: Establish psychological support programs for children affected by parental emigration to improve emotional well-being.
- **Develop Local Economic Initiatives**: Promote projects that enhance rural economic independence and self-employment.
- **Support Entrepreneurship**: Foster small and social enterprises to create stable income sources for residents.
- **Empower Women**: Promote initiatives to enhance women's economic empowerment and reduce migration-related vulnerabilities.

Agricultural Development and Local Production Enhancement

Conclusions

1. **Dependence on Seasonal Production**: Poor greenhouse infrastructure leads to reliance on imported products in winter and early spring.

2. **Competition with Imports**: Local producers struggle against cheaper imports, particularly from Turkey.
3. **Lack of Processing Industries**: Absence of processing facilities makes farmers dependent on intermediaries, reducing profits.
4. **Low Bioproduct Production**: Farmers lack knowledge, resources, and incentives to produce bioproducts, limiting export potential.
5. **Energy and Infrastructure Issues**: High energy costs and lack of processing plants reduce agricultural productivity.
6. **Poor Vineyard Quality**: Many vineyards fail to meet standards for high-quality wine or table grapes.
7. **Labor Culture and Initiative Gaps**: Soviet-era collective farming influences reduce individual initiative and economic independence.
8. **Product Sales Challenges**: Farmers rely on Tbilisi and Rustavi wholesale markets, limiting sales scope and regional market growth.
9. **Inefficient Land Use**: Abandoned or unused agricultural land and sold pastures hinder livestock development.
10. **Equipment Shortages and Ineffective Agro-Insurance**: Lack of modern equipment and weak insurance mechanisms increase agricultural risks.
11. **Misuse of Chemical Fertilizers**: Low environmental awareness causes soil degradation and ecological issues.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- **Encourage Agricultural Investments**:
  - Subsidize small and medium processing plants to reduce intermediary reliance and increase farmers' income.
  - Introduce energy subsidy programs to lower electricity and gas costs for agricultural enterprises.
  - Regulate imports or subsidize local production to protect domestic producers from cheap foreign goods.
- **Develop Sales Channels and Infrastructure**:
  - Establish municipal agro-markets with modern standards.
  - Support e-commerce platforms for farmers.
  - Promote agricultural cooperatives to strengthen farmers' market positions.
- **Promote Bioproduct Production**:
  - Subsidize eco-friendly farming and facilitate bioproduct certification.
  - Increase access to biological fertilizers and encourage their use.
- **Enhance Agro-Insurance Systems**:
  - Expand anti-hail and flood protection systems in the region.
  - Introduce subsidized agro-insurance for small farmers to mitigate climate risks.
- **Support Agricultural Equipment Acquisition**:
  - Provide concessional loans and grants for small and medium farmers to purchase modern equipment.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Improve Agricultural Competencies and Skills**:
  - Conduct training on modern agro-technologies and eco-friendly farming.
  - Organize consultations to boost crop yields.
- **Support Market Access and Farmer Associations**:
  - Promote local products through branding and marketing.
  - Foster cooperatives for joint sales efforts.
- **Raise Environmental Awareness**:
  - Educate farmers on proper chemical fertilizer use.
  - Seek international grants and partners to support eco-friendly agriculture.

Tourism Sector Development

Conclusions

1. **Untapped Tourism Potential**: All three municipalities possess high tourism potential, but infrastructure deficits and limited investments hinder its full utilization.
2. **Underdeveloped Ecotourism**: Areas like Lagodekhi Protected Area offer significant opportunities, but lack of infrastructure and services limits visitor numbers.
3. **Lack of Long-Term Investments**: Absence of large-scale projects impedes strategic, sustainable tourism development.
4. **Infrastructure Deficits**: Shortages in accommodation, catering, and road infrastructure negatively impact tourism growth.
5. **Limited Utilization of David-Gareji Complex**: Border status uncertainties and infrastructure gaps restrict this cultural heritage site's promotion.
6. **Undiversified Tourism Products**: While ecotourism is somewhat emphasized, wine, gastronomic, and cultural tourism remain underdeveloped.

Recommendations

1. For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)

- **Improve Tourism Infrastructure**:
  - Rehabilitate roads leading to key sites (e.g., Lagodekhi Reserve, David-Gareji Complex).
  - Develop eco-friendly infrastructure, including trails, rest areas, and ecotourism facilities.
  - Enhance lighting and safety standards at cultural and natural landmarks.
- **Attract Long-Term Investments**:
  - Strengthen public-private partnership programs to develop hotels and tourism facilities.
  - Launch grant and concessional loan programs for small and medium tourism businesses.
- **Develop David-Gareji Complex Infrastructure**:
  - Build roads, information centers, parking, and recreational spaces.
  - Negotiate border status issues to ensure tourist accessibility.
- **Promote Regional Tourism Branding**:
  - Create a tourism brand for border municipalities highlighting natural, cultural, and historical assets.
  - Plan international campaigns with tailored marketing strategies for target countries.
  - Participate in global tourism exhibitions to promote local products and opportunities.

2. For Community Organizations

- **Strengthen Local Tourism Initiatives**:
  - Provide training for residents and entrepreneurs to improve tourism service quality.
  - Promote rural ecotourism by creating routes showcasing local lifestyles and bioproducts.
  - Collaborate with local producers to integrate ecotourism, cultural routes, and historical sites.
- **Diversify Tourism Routes and Products**:
  - Develop gastronomic tourism through local cuisine promotion and culinary festivals.
  - Support ethnographic tourism to showcase local traditions and culture.
  - Promote cycling and adventure tourism with appropriate infrastructure.
- **Enhance Tourism Information Accessibility**:
  - Strengthen local information centers to provide multilingual, modern, and detailed tourist information.
  - Translate and distribute tourism materials (guides, websites, print) in English, Russian, Azerbaijani, and other languages.

Processing Industry and Agricultural Development

Conclusions

1. **Lack of Processing Facilities**: No agricultural product processing occurs in pilot municipalities, reducing farmers' income and market competitiveness.
2. **Canning Industry Crisis**: High infrastructure costs (gas, water, electricity) have halted canning production.
3. **Sales Challenges**: Farmers are limited to local and regional markets, restricting income potential.
4. **Underutilized Industrial Potential**: Agro-industrial opportunities exist, but production infrastructure remains partially or fully unused.
5. **Decline of Industrial Sector**: Soviet-era canning, alcohol, and processing plants no longer operate, impacting employment and economic growth.
6. **Agricultural Degradation**: Lack of processing industries contributes to the decline of the agricultural sector and weak farm economies.

Recommendations

2. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- **Revive and Support Processing Industry**: Build or modernize agricultural processing and canning factories.
- **Provide Subsidies and Concessional Tariffs**: Offer preferential energy tariffs and targeted subsidies to stimulate the processing sector.
- **Optimize Supply Chains**: Improve agricultural product logistics to expand farmers' market access.
- **Create Industrial Zones**: Establish special economic zones in Gardabani and Lagodekhi for agro-product processing enterprises.
- **Introduce Modern Agrotechnologies**: Train farmers and enhance access to technologies for more efficient agricultural land use.

3. **For Community Organizations**

- **Collaborate with Local Farmers**: Promote farmer cooperatives to enhance access to processing resources and product sales.
- **Diversify Markets**: Support efforts to access international markets and promote exports.
- **Provide Education and Consultations**: Organize training on agricultural management, marketing, and business skills for farmers.
- **Support Eco-Friendly Production**: Promote organic farming to give local products a competitive edge.

4. **For Business Sector and Investors**

- **Fund Local Enterprises and Farmer Partnerships**: Private investors should collaborate with farmers to finance processing industries.
- **Develop Logistics**: Invest in efficient storage and transportation to boost competitiveness.
- **Introduce Innovative Technologies**: Modernize enterprises to reduce production costs and improve product quality.

Industrial Development Challenges and Economic Growth Prospects

Conclusions

1. **Lack of Industrial Strategy**: No long-term vision exists for strengthening the industrial sector or integrating local production into national economic chains.
2. **Fragmented Production Cycle Support**: Mechanisms fail to cover the full production cycle, from raw material extraction to processing, logistics, and exports.
3. **Weak Local Institutional Environment**: Municipalities lack financial, legal, and human resources to implement large-scale industrial programs.

4. **Mono-Economic Dependency**: Municipalities rely on seasonal agriculture, with low diversification in processing or modern industrial services.
5. **Poor Integration with Economic Networks**: Limited involvement in national industrial programs and rare participation in regional or cross-border investment platforms.
6. **Low Investment Appeal**: Absence of industrial parks, tax incentives, and logistics infrastructure deters local and foreign investments.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- **Develop Long-Term Strategies**: Create regional programs integrated into national industrial policies.
- **Promote Industrial Parks and Economic Clusters**: Establish zones with accessible infrastructure, tax incentives, subsidies subsidies, and services for small and medium businesses.
- **Integrate Local Production into Export Markets**: Support local businesses, especially in agro-processing, to access to access international markets.
- **Strengthen Local Governance Competencies**: Train municipalities for effective economic planning and administration.
- **Encourage Inter-Regional Collaboration**: Create platforms for sharing best practices between successful industrial zones and weaker municipalities.
- **Invest in Infrastructure as Growth Foundation**: Fund transport, energy, logistics, and digital networks to support industrial initiatives.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Raise Economic Awareness**: Organize seminars to educate residents on industrial development benefits and community roles.
- **Advocate for Industrial Projects**: Protect local entrepreneurs' interests and monitor investment program transparency.
- **Develop Local Production Initiatives**: Prepare projects for small and medium businesses in processing, logistics, and services.
- **Promote Sustainable Industrial Development**: Advocate models combining economic efficiency with environmental and social responsibility.

Investment and Economic Development Prospects

Conclusions

1. **Challenges in Attracting Investments**: Economic policy instability and lack of decision-making transparency undermine investor confidence.
2. **Legal and Institutional Barriers**: Inefficient judicial systems and weak legal guarantees create an unfavorable business environment.
3. **Unequal Competition for Investors**: Local entrepreneurs face limited access to financial resources, grants, and infrastructure compared to foreign investors.
4. **Lack of Coordinated Business Strategy**: Weak coordination between central and local authorities hinders consistent economic growth.
5. **Weak Municipal Role in Economic Initiatives**: Limited financial and legal resources restrict local governments' ability to support economic development.
6. **Untapped Economic Resources**: Natural, labor, and infrastructure resources are underutilized due to investment shortages and insufficient government support.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- **Improve Investment Environment**: Implement reforms to ensure economic stability and strengthen legal mechanisms to boost investor confidence.

- **Support Local Investors**: Create financial, grant, and technical support mechanisms, including concessional loans, business consultations, and innovation funding.
- **Develop Regional Economic Strategies**: Formulate plans reflecting regional social, economic, and geographic conditions for sustainable growth.
- **Empower Municipalities**: Grant local authorities resources and mandates to implement economic initiatives.
- **Leverage Regional Potential**: Invest in infrastructure and support agriculture, processing industries, and other priority sectors.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Provide Information Support**: Educate residents on entrepreneurship and investment opportunities through programs.
- **Promote Local Businesses**: Support the creation and growth of small and medium enterprises.
- **Participate in Economic Policy**: Engage communities in local decision-making to reflect their interests.
- **Collaborate with State Structures**: Build partnerships with local and central authorities for joint economic projects.

Land Registration, Ownership, and Pasture Management

Conclusions

1. **Land Registration Challenges**: Unregistered inherited land in border villages creates legal uncertainties.
2. **Opaque Privatization Process**: Privatization policies often disregard local interests, breaching fairness principles.
3. **Poor Pasture Management**: Privatization of pastures limits farmers' access to traditional resources, reducing economic viability and increasing social tensions.
4. **Inefficient Agricultural Land Use**: Bureaucratic barriers and weak regulation enforcement hinder rational land use and agricultural development.
5. **Uncontrolled Land Sales to Foreigners**: Land transfers to foreign investors without local involvement fuel distrust and social discontent.

Recommendations

1. **For State Structures (Local and Central Authorities)**

- **Simplify Land Registration**: Develop programs addressing historical land use and unregistered inheritance, offering free legal aid.
- **Ensure Community Involvement in Privatization**: Make land-related decisions transparently with local participation, adhering to fairness principles.
- **Revise Pasture Management Policy**: Create mechanisms prioritizing collective or local farmer access to pastures.
- **Regulate Irrational Land Use**: Establish standards to promote agricultural development and preserve land's agricultural status.
- **Refine Land Sale Policies**: Develop a legal framework balancing investment attraction with local interest protection.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Provide Legal Support**: Assist residents with land registration, especially for incomplete documentation.
- **Enhance Information Campaigns**: Educate communities on land rights, registration procedures, and fair privatization principles.
- **Support Local Initiatives**: Implement projects promoting sustainable land use, particularly for shared resources like pastures.
- **Foster Dialogue with State Structures**: Collaborate with authorities to improve land management policies.

Ecological Challenges and Sustainable Development in Border Regions

Conclusions

1. **Ineffective Waste Management**: Illegal landfills persist in some municipalities, harming the environment, human health, and biodiversity due to low public awareness and underdeveloped waste sorting/recycling infrastructure.
2. **Uncontrolled Agrochemical Use**: Excessive application of agrochemicals degrades soil and water quality, reduces product safety, and increases health risks, exacerbated by low education and economic instability.
3. **Water Resource Pollution**: Agricultural and industrial waste discharge into rivers and irrigation channels, coupled with weak monitoring, threatens ecosystems and public health.
4. **Soil Pollution and Improper Mulching**: Low-quality polyethylene mulch leads to microplastic accumulation in soil, entering the food chain and posing ecological risks.
5. **Climate Change Impacts**: Frequent floods, hail, and droughts damage agriculture and ecosystems, with inadequate early warning systems and infrastructure.
6. **Biodiversity Loss and Deforestation**: Uncontrolled logging and habitat exploitation reduce local flora and fauna, particularly in border forested and mountainous areas.
7. **Lack of Transboundary Cooperation**: Limited coordination with Azerbaijan and Russia hampers joint biodiversity protection, monitoring, and protected area management.
8. **Limited Organic Fertilizer Use**: High costs and lack of awareness drive reliance on chemical fertilizers, threatening soil sustainability.
9. **Industrial Pollution**: Weak oversight and outdated standards in industry increase environmental risks, burdening local ecosystems.

Recommendations

1. **For State and Local Authorities**

- **Improve Waste Management**:
  - Strengthen controls to eliminate illegal landfills and prevent their re-emergence.
  - Develop municipal strategies for waste sorting and recycling.
  - Direct fines and resource use fees to fund environmental projects and infrastructure.
- **Prevent Water Pollution**:
  - Implement regular monitoring of surface and irrigation water quality with laboratory support.
  - Tighten controls on agrochemical use through licensing and dosage oversight.
  - Impose strict sanctions on industries discharging polluted waste into rivers and channels.
- **Support Sustainable Agriculture**:
  - Subsidize organic fertilizers and eco-friendly technologies.
  - Train farmers on safe chemical use and disposal.
  - Promote biodegradable mulch alternatives.
- **Enhance Climate Change Adaptation**:
  - Strengthen early warning systems and meteorological services.
  - Invest in infrastructure to mitigate floods, hail, and droughts.
  - Restore natural ecosystems as a climate response strategy.
- **Protect Biodiversity and Protected Areas**:
  - Introduce modern ecological monitoring in Lagodekhi and other protected areas.
  - Enhance transboundary cooperation with Azerbaijan and Russia for biodiversity conservation.
  - Strengthen controls on illegal logging and restore protective forest belts.
- **Control Industrial Pollution**:
  - Enforce stricter environmental standards and monitoring for industries.
  - Revise regulations to account for health impacts.
  - Adopt modern filtration and purification technologies and improve air quality monitoring.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Enhance Ecological Education**:
    - Conduct campaigns on waste management, water protection, and safe agrochemical use.
    - Provide farmers with eco-friendly method consultations.
    - Integrate environmental education into schools and youth centers.
- **Expand Citizen Participation**:
    - Form municipal environmental councils with community involvement.
    - Support initiatives for environmental improvement, including waste management and greening.
- **Promote Business Environmental Responsibility**:
    - Encourage collaboration with local entrepreneurs to adopt eco-standards.
    - Disseminate information on eco-certification benefits.
- **Develop Public Oversight**:
    - Establish initiative groups to monitor landfills and environmental violations.
    - Advocate for waste recycling infrastructure through public-private partnerships.
- **Support Voluntary Eco-Activities**:
    - Organize tree planting, cleanup, and educational events.
    - Ensure sustained support for eco-initiatives via grants and civic engagement.

Economic-Related Ecological Challenges

Conclusions

1. **River and Irrigation Channel Pollution**: Domestic waste, agrochemicals, and poor sewage systems pollute water sources, threatening ecological sustainability and public health.
2. **Overexploitation of Forest Resources**: Social and economic vulnerability drives illegal logging of valuable oak species, disrupting biodiversity and ecosystem stability.
3. **Excessive Chemical Fertilizer Use**: Unregulated agrochemical application damages soil, water, and human health, reducing agricultural sustainability.
4. **Air Pollution and Industrial Waste**: Lack of modern filtration and waste management in industries like cement factories degrades air quality and increases health risks.
5. **Waste Management Deficiencies**: Inadequate municipal systems lead to uncontrolled landfills, polluting soil and water and limiting recycling potential.

Recommendations

1. **For State Authorities**

- **Strengthen Sanitary Oversight**: Implement regular water quality monitoring and enforce industrial waste disposal regulations.
- **Improve Forest Management**: Increase access to alternative energy sources, restore forests, and tighten penalties for illegal logging.
- **Regulate Agrochemicals**: Educate farmers on safe fertilizer use and enforce market controls.
- **Control Industrial Pollution**: Enforce emission and waste standards with robust oversight.
- **Enhance Solid Waste Management**: Develop strategies for landfill management, waste sorting, and recycling.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Raise Ecological Awareness**: Conduct campaigns on water pollution, waste management, and safe agrochemical use.
- **Strengthen Citizen Participation**: Collaborate with communities to protect rivers, forests, and ecosystems.
- **Support Eco-Initiatives**: Promote waste sorting, forest restoration, and sustainable agriculture projects.

- **Facilitate Civic Monitoring**: Form groups to monitor industrial compliance and state oversight effectiveness.

Ecological Challenges and Sustainable Development in Lagodekhi Reserve

Conclusions

1. **National and Global Significance**: Lagodekhi Reserve is critical for biodiversity conservation and climate research.
2. **Climate and Human Threats**: Logging, water pollution, and agrochemical overuse degrade the reserve's ecosystem.
3. **Ineffective Disaster Management**: Lack of meteorological stations hinders flood and hail forecasting, increasing damage.
4. **Weak Biodiversity Monitoring**: Insufficient coordination with neighboring countries limits ecological stability.
5. **Unregulated Tourism Risks**: Uncontrolled ecotourism growth could harm the environment without proper oversight.
6. **Deforestation and Soil Erosion**: Illegal logging and loss of windbreaks exacerbate erosion and climate impacts.
7. **Wildlife Protection Needs**: Stray dogs and declining predator populations disrupt ecological balance.
8. **Limited Transboundary Cooperation**: Lack of coordination with Azerbaijan and Russia hinders joint conservation efforts.

Recommendations

1. **For State Authorities**

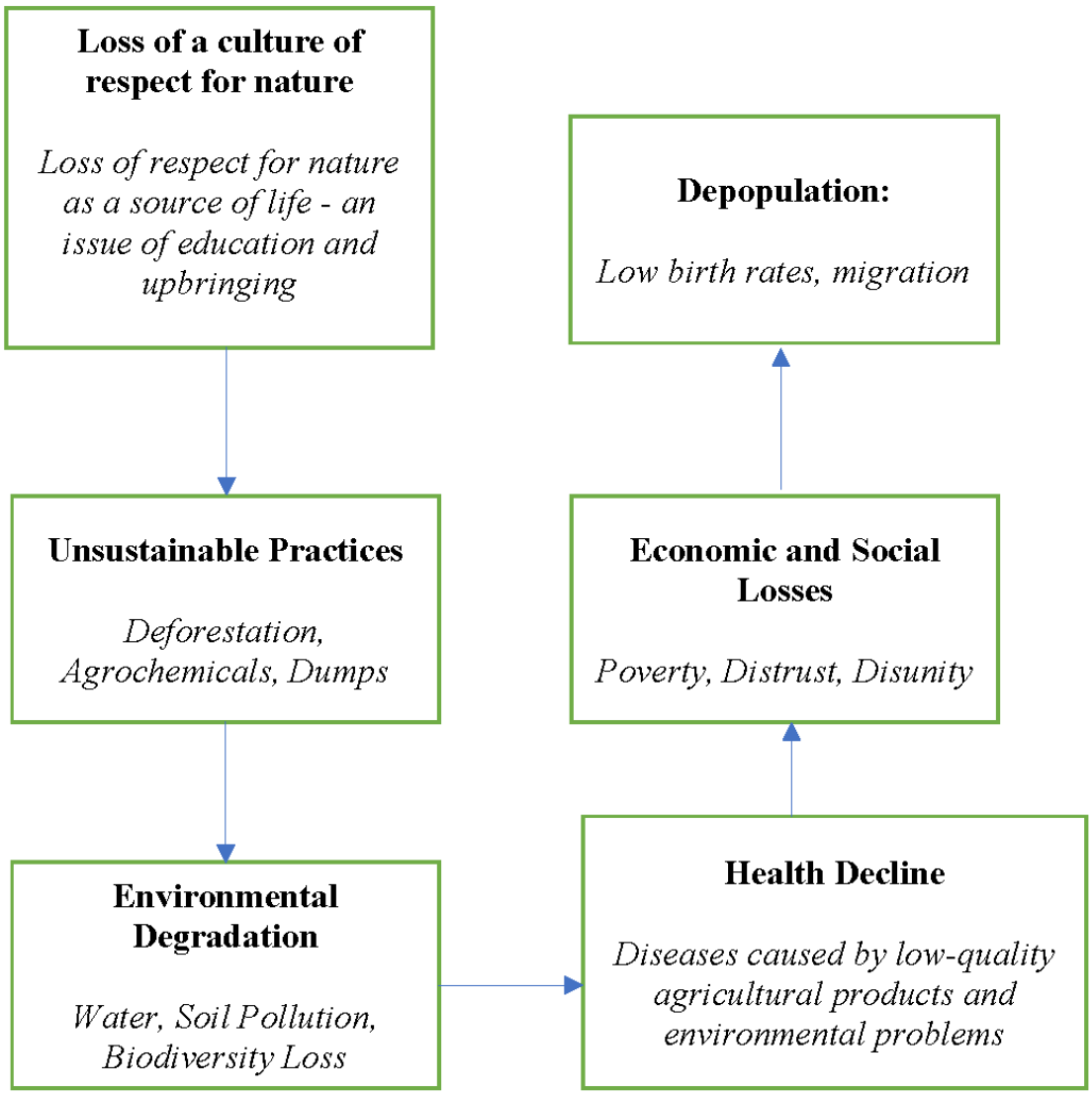
- **Enhance Transboundary Coordination**: Establish cooperation with Azerbaijan and Russia for biodiversity monitoring and risk management.
- **Develop Meteorological Monitoring**: Expand weather station networks for timely disaster forecasting.
- **Improve Environmental Monitoring**: Implement continuous ecosystem and species tracking systems.
- **Control Deforestation**: Enforce anti-logging measures and promote alternative energy access.
- **Restore Windbreaks**: Launch a national program to restore forest belts to combat erosion.
- **Promote Sustainable Tourism**: Regulate ecotourism with visitor limits and environmental oversight.
- **Protect Wildlife**: Develop programs to manage stray animals and conserve key species.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Expand Community Engagement**: Conduct campaigns on ecological risks and involve residents in conservation efforts.
- **Promote Sustainable Resource Use**: Support initiatives for eco-friendly agriculture and forest management.
- **Support Transboundary Collaboration**: Partner with neighboring countries' organizations for joint research and programs.
- **Facilitate Climate Adaptation**: Implement initiatives to enhance farmer and community resilience to climate change.

Loss of Nature-Centric Culture as a Source of Environmental and Social Issues

Causal Relationship Scheme



Infrastructure: Education, Sports, and Healthcare

Education and Sports Infrastructure

Conclusions

1. **Educational Infrastructure Issues**:

- Insufficient kindergartens, especially in ethnically diverse areas, hinder early childhood development.
- Rural early education facilities are inadequate, limiting developmental opportunities.
- Inclusive education and state language programs for minorities are limited.
- Many schools lack modern technologies (e.g., projectors, interactive boards), reducing teaching quality.
- Long walking distances to schools, especially in winter, reduce attendance and motivation.

2. **Sports and Cultural Infrastructure Issues**:

- Underdeveloped sports facilities limit youth engagement and professional opportunities.
- Overcrowded sports halls cannot serve both professional and amateur athletes.
- Limited cultural activities restrict community engagement, particularly among youth.
- Rural areas lack recreational and cultural spaces, increasing social isolation risks for youth.

Recommendations

1. **For State and Local Authorities**

- **Develop Preschool Infrastructure**:
    - Build additional kindergartens in rural and minority-populated areas.
    - Modernize existing facilities with advanced equipment and resources.
    - Expand Georgian language and inclusive education programs for minority children.
    - Subsidize transportation for students from remote villages.
- **Modernize School Infrastructure**:
    - Rehabilitate school buildings and construct new ones in remote areas.
    - Improve technical resources with digital tools, better internet, and audiovisual materials.
    - Increase access to modern textbooks and visual resources.
- **Enhance Sports and Cultural Infrastructure**:
    - Build new sports facilities, including halls, fields, and training centers.
    - Create municipal sports programs and youth initiatives.
    - Develop cultural centers, libraries, and youth hubs.
    - Improve rural access to recreational and sports facilities.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Strengthen Community Engagement**:
    - Organize seminars and campaigns on education's importance.
    - Initiate projects to improve school infrastructure.
    - Develop public monitoring systems for educational facility needs.
- **Support Youth Initiatives**:
    - Encourage youth participation in cultural and sports activities.
    - Create community spaces for informal education and personal development.
    - Organize local sports tournaments to promote physical activity.

Healthcare Infrastructure

Conclusions

1. **Inadequate Medical Equipment**:

- Local medical facilities lack modern diagnostic and treatment technologies, limiting access to quality care.
- Patients often travel to Tbilisi or other cities for specialized tests, incurring high costs and logistical challenges.
- Procedures like colonoscopy or CT scans are only available in major urban centers.

2. **Delayed Emergency Response**:

- Some municipalities lack emergency medical brigades, increasing response times.
- In remote villages, ambulance arrival takes 40–45 minutes, endangering critical patients.

3. **Limited Ambulatory Services**:

- State-funded ambulatories cannot operate 24/7, restricting their capacity.
- Lack of primary care services forces reliance on private clinics or self-treatment, increasing health risks.

Recommendations 1

1. **For State and Local Authorities**

- **Upgrade Medical Facilities**:
  - Equip hospitals and clinics with modern diagnostic and treatment technologies.
  - Establish regional diagnostic centers to reduce travel to urban areas.
  - Ensure access to specialized procedures locally.
- **Improve Emergency Services**:
  - Deploy emergency brigades in underserved municipalities.
  - Enhance ambulance logistics to reduce response times in remote areas.
- **Strengthen Ambulatory Services**:
  - Enable 24/7 operations for state-funded ambulatories.
  - Expand primary care services to reduce reliance on private clinics.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Raise Health Awareness**:
  - Conduct campaigns on preventive care and accessing medical services.
  - Educate communities on available state healthcare programs.
- **Support Local Health Initiatives**:
  - Advocate for improved medical infrastructure through community projects.
  - Monitor healthcare facility performance and advocate for upgrades.

Recommendations 2

1. For Central and Local Authorities

Strengthen Medical Facilities Technically

- Equip municipal medical facilities with modern diagnostic tools to reduce the need for residents to travel to other regions for services.
- Establish mobile diagnostic units to periodically serve rural populations.
- Develop and implement a program for updating medical equipment with support from state and donor organizations.

Enhance Emergency Medical Services

- Increase the number of ambulances and expand their geographic coverage to reduce response times.
- Open additional emergency service points in municipalities.
- Organize first-aid training for residents to improve emergency response capabilities.

Improve Ambulatory Services

- Ensure 24/7 operation of ambulatories in high-demand areas.

- Retrain medical staff based on modern clinical guidelines and standards.
- Strengthen primary healthcare, particularly family doctor services and preventive programs.

2. For Community Organizations

Raise Awareness of Medical Services

- Provide comprehensive, accessible information on free and subsidized state healthcare programs.
- Conduct targeted campaigns on disease prevention and the importance of timely medical consultations in accessible language.

Promote Public Monitoring and Advocacy

- Establish mechanisms for citizens to regularly share healthcare infrastructure needs with local authorities.
- Develop advocacy strategies to foster dialogue with local governments for improving emergency medical systems.

3. For the Business Sector

Partner with Medical Facilities

- Private clinics and businesses can form mobile medical teams to provide basic services to rural residents.
- Pharmaceutical and medical companies should support infrastructure upgrades through technical and financial contributions.

Develop Digital and Remote Services

- Fully utilize digital technologies for remote consultations, including telemedicine.
- Create technical and organizational conditions for online consultations to reduce clinic visits and improve primary care access.

Transport and Road Quality

Conclusions

1. **Lack of Municipal Public Transport**

- Absence of public transport in rural areas hinders mobility, forcing reliance on costly taxis and posing barriers to social and economic reintegration for returnees.

2. **Poor Road Conditions**

- Poor internal village roads impede agricultural product transport and emergency service response.
- Temporary, low-durability repairs lead to rapid road deterioration.

3. **Inefficient Transport System Management**

- Transport schedules and routes do not align with population needs.
- Lack of municipal transport forces reliance on private services.
- Transport decisions often lack systematic analysis of local needs.

Recommendations

1. **For Central and Local Authorities**

- **Develop Public Transport**
  - Introduce at least one municipal transport route from villages to administrative centers.
  - Create subsidized transport mechanisms to ensure affordability for diverse social groups.
  - Plan routes and schedules based on detailed local needs assessments.
- **Develop Road Rehabilitation Programs**
  - Formulate a long-term strategy for rural road rehabilitation with construction standards and quality control mechanisms.
  - Monitor construction materials and technologies to ensure durability and safety.
  - Prioritize roads used by emergency services and public transport.
- **Revise Transport Policy and Develop Municipal Fleets**

- Explore municipal bus procurement to create a stable, affordable transport system tailored to local needs.
- Attract investments for eco-friendly, modern transport to meet environmental standards and improve service quality.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Monitor Transport Needs Systematically**
  - Conduct detailed studies of transport needs and provide analysis to local authorities.
  - Facilitate dialogue between residents and authorities to align transport policies with community demands.

3. **For the Private Sector**

- **Develop Private Transport Components**
  - Establish cooperation mechanisms with private transport companies to create sustainable, competitive local networks.
  - Encourage private investments to improve transport infrastructure and village connectivity.
- **Subsidize Local Transport Services**
  - Enhance affordability of taxis and minibuses to improve inter-village connectivity and service competitiveness.

Drinking Water Infrastructure

Conclusions

Water Supply Issues

- Some villages and urban areas lack full access to centralized water supply, relying on distant wells or natural sources.
- Absence of water filtration and systematic quality monitoring threatens public health.
- Low-quality materials in water systems cause frequent technical failures and water loss.
- Infrastructure fails to ensure uninterrupted supply during high-demand summer periods.
- Lack of planned upgrades and preventive maintenance reduces system reliability.
- Water tariffs often do not reflect service quality, leading to public dissatisfaction and distrust.

Recommendations

1. **For State and Local Authorities**

- **Comprehensive Infrastructure Upgrades**
  - Develop a long-term strategy for modernizing water supply systems with phased network upgrades.
  - Improve water quality monitoring and install modern purification systems in high-risk areas.
  - Use eco-friendly, durable materials and innovative technologies in construction and reconstruction.
  - Secure state and international donor funding to enhance project efficiency and reduce long-term costs

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Monitoring and Awareness Raising**
  - Conduct campaigns on water quality and safe consumption practices.
  - Perform civic monitoring to assess infrastructure project quality and service delivery.
  - Conduct independent water analyses and ensure public access to results for transparency.

- **Support Sustainable Practices**
    - Promote recycled or alternative water sources for non-drinking purposes (e.g., irrigation).
    - Introduce small-scale water purification systems in villages with contaminated sources, such as Iormughanlo, where high mineralization limits water use.

3. **For the Private Sector**

- **Promote Infrastructure Investments**
    - Engage in water supply system modernization and development projects.
    - Involve local businesses in constructing and operating infrastructure to boost regional development and employment.
    - Adopt innovative water purification and usage optimization technologies.
- **Foster International Partnerships**
    - Collaborate with global companies to implement modern solutions and ensure system sustainability.
    - Partner with research institutions for innovative technology adoption.
    - Develop public-private partnership projects for efficient resource use and scaling successful practices.

Sanitary Infrastructure and Air Quality

Conclusions

1. **Sewage Management Issues and Infrastructure Gaps**
    - Many villages and administrative centers lack comprehensive sewage systems (e.g., only 25% of Lagodekhi's population has central sewage).
    - Uncontrolled sewage discharge pollutes rivers, soil, and irrigation channels, threatening agriculture and public health.
    - Sewage entering irrigation channels compromises food safety and sanitation.
    - Poor drainage systems cause flooding during rains, damaging infrastructure and worsening sanitary conditions.
2. **Air Pollution from Industrial Activities**
    - Industrial facilities (e.g., cement factories) in Gardabani, Lagodekhi, and Sagarejo emit dust and pollutants, increasing respiratory disease risks.
    - Residents near industrial zones report strong odors, indicating environmental degradation.
    - Local air quality monitoring is minimal, hindering timely responses, despite external pollution sources like Rustavi's industrial zone.

Recommendations

1. **For Central and Local Authorities**

- **Improve Sewage Management and Infrastructure**
    - Develop a phased program to expand and modernize sewage networks, including modern treatment facilities.
    - Ban sewage discharge into rivers, channels, and open spaces with effective controls and sanctions.
    - Modernize and maintain drainage systems, especially in flood-prone areas.
    - Secure state and international funding for sanitary infrastructure projects.
- **Reduce Industrial Air Pollution**
    - Implement regular air quality monitoring near industrial zones with publicly accessible results.
    - Enforce mandatory filtration systems and emission standards for enterprises.
    - Strengthen local ecological standards with robust oversight and reporting systems.
    - Expand green zones and protective forest belts to improve microclimates and reduce dust and emissions.

- **Curb Unethical Practices by Problematic Enterprises**
    - Amend legislation to prevent systemic violators from re-registering under new entities without addressing violations.
    - Create a registry of owners and beneficiaries of non-compliant enterprises, restricting their permits.
    - Tighten fine enforcement and impose temporary activity suspensions until compliance

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Raise Ecological Awareness and Public Oversight**
    - Conduct campaigns on the health and environmental impacts of polluted water and air.
    - Form initiative groups to monitor sanitary conditions and air pollution, reporting to authorities.
    - Promote resident participation in planning and reviewing sanitary and environmental projects.

3. **For the Private Sector**

- **Enhance Industrial Responsibility**
    - Adopt modern purification and filtration technologies to minimize air and water emissions.
    - Collaborate with municipalities on sustainable development and sanitation modernization programs.
    - Encourage eco-project participation through tax incentives and public recognition for safe practices.

Waste Management Infrastructure

Conclusions

1. **Infrastructure and Organizational Gaps**

- Despite progress, waste management systems remain fragmented and inefficient, leading to persistent and new illegal landfills.
- Insufficient waste bins, especially in rural areas, force residents to dispose of waste in unauthorized locations.
- Limited waste collection vehicles and infrequent pickups hinder system efficiency, creating hygiene and ecological risks.
- Waste separation systems are necessary but lack active public participation.

2. **Social and Ecological Challenges**

- Direct waste dumping into rivers and irrigation channels harms the environment and public health.
- Self-organized waste mobilization by residents highlights insufficient municipal services and the need for civic activism.
- Illegal landfills remain a critical ecological and public health issue, requiring systemic, integrated solutions.

Recommendations

1. **For State and Local Authorities**

- **Strengthen Waste Management Infrastructure**
    - Significantly increase the number of waste bins in villages to reduce illegal dumping.
    - Upgrade and expand waste collection vehicle fleets, ensuring regular and systematic pickup schedules.
    - Eliminate illegal landfills and impose strict sanctions for violations.

3.

- **Promote Waste Separation**
    - Conduct awareness campaigns on the benefits of waste separation to boost public engagement.
    - Develop efficient systems for processing separated waste fractions.
    - Ensure transparent waste management fees linked to service quality.
- **Develop Recycling and Separation Infrastructure**
    - Establish local waste recycling centers in municipalities.
    - Install specialized stations for collecting plastic, glass, and other materials to stimulate local business.
    - Encourage the use of recycled materials in local production.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Raise Ecological Awareness and Monitoring**
    - Strengthen educational programs on waste management and recycling.
    - Organize community discussions and practical training sessions.
    - Support community initiatives for waste collection.
- **Enhance Public Oversight Mechanisms**
    - Form monitoring groups to observe waste management practices and respond promptly to violations.
    - Promote composting and other eco-friendly practices at the community level.

3. **For the Business Sector**

- **Promote Responsible Waste Management**
    - Introduce financial incentives for companies actively participating in waste recycling.
    - Encourage eco-friendly packaging and the adoption of recycled materials.
    - Tighten oversight of enterprise-generated waste to minimize environmental harm.

Energy and Industrial Infrastructure

Conclusions

High Energy Costs and Underutilized Production Potential

- **Most canning and processing plants are non-functional** due to high operational costs (gas, water, electricity).
    - Inefficient energy infrastructure is a major barrier to industrial growth.
    - Despite existing industrial and energy potential, its full utilization is limited by insufficient investment.
    - Industrial facilities are largely outdated or underused.
- **Limited Access to Energy-Efficient Technologies**
    - Eco-friendly technologies like solar panels are unaffordable due to high initial costs.
    - Vulnerable households rely on firewood, increasing ecological risks.
    - Gardabani, a regional energy hub, underutilizes its potential for heating and industrial processes.

Challenges with Alternative Energy Access

- Solar and wind energy are cost-effective long-term but require high initial investments.
- Technological and financial support is needed for energy independence.
- Positive experiences with energy-efficient systems in schools can be scaled to other sectors.

Processing Industry Infrastructure

- **Infrastructure Limitations**
    - Lack of processing plants in Lagodekhi hinders agricultural product utilization and value addition.
    - Farmers sell raw materials at low profits due to limited processing options.
    - High infrastructure costs, energy expenses, and technological gaps limit canning industry development.

- Investment deficits and insufficient state support slow modern processing facility growth.

- **Energy and Logistical Barriers**
  - Energy supply (gas, water, electricity) is a significant financial burden for processing enterprises.
  - Weak logistics and transport infrastructure complicates timely processing and market access.
  - Meeting export standards requires new investments and efficient transport systems.

Recommendations

1. **For State and Local Authorities**

- **Support Processing Industry**
  - Stimulate the creation of processing plants with designated zones for small and medium enterprises.
  - Promote canning industry growth through technological upgrades and co-financing initial costs.
  - Increase state subsidies for agricultural product processing and export support.
- **Improve Energy Accessibility**
  - Review energy tariffs for enterprises and develop preferential schemes.
  - Support energy-efficient technology adoption through grants or low-interest loans.
  - Promote renewable energy (solar, wind) for industrial use.
- **Develop Transport and Logistics Infrastructure**
  - Rehabilitate roads connecting villages and industrial zones.
  - Establish logistical hubs for product collection, storage, and distribution.
  - Enhance export infrastructure to facilitate access to regional and international markets.

2. **For Community Organizations**

- **Raise Awareness and Community Support**
  - Organize informational meetings with farmers on the economic benefits of processing industries.
  - Conduct campaigns to support local production.
  - Inform citizens about state programs and funding opportunities.

3. **For the Business Sector**

- **Encourage Investment and Cooperation**
  - Invest in processing sectors in partnership with local stakeholders.
  - Collaborate with international companies to introduce technological expertise and innovations.
  - Form cooperative models for small enterprises to reduce logistical and production costs.

Tourism Infrastructure Development

Conclusions

- **Lack of Infrastructure and Low Service Quality**
  - Underdeveloped tourism infrastructure limits domestic and international tourist attraction.
  - Low-quality services and limited comfort hinder high-standard offerings.
  - Poorly maintained tourist trails, eco-routes, wine tourism, and pilgrimage paths, along with scarce information centers and recreational spaces, reduce regional appeal.
  - Insufficient hotels and catering facilities, especially near reserves and remote areas, pose significant barriers.

- **Challenges in Leveraging Ecotourism Potential**
    - Lagodekhi Reserve and recreational zones in Sagarejo and Gardabani have high ecotourism potential, but infrastructure fails to ensure safe and comfortable access.
    - Limited investments restrict new route development and existing trail rehabilitation.
    - Insufficient support for ecotourism projects limits private sector engagement.
    - Local services are often technically unprepared, reducing appeal for tourists.
- **Border-Specific Issues Impacting Tourism**
    - Border uncertainties around David-Gareji Monastery create additional barriers for tourists.
    - Border regulations and movement restrictions hinder tourist flow growth, especially for multi-day routes.

Recommendations

1. **For State and Local Authorities – Tourism Infrastructure Development**

- Invest in tourism infrastructure, including hotels, recreational spaces, information centers, and public services.
- Improve tourist trails, eco-routes, and access roads to enhance safety and comfort.
- Build modern sanitary infrastructure to improve service quality and minimize environmental impact.
- Develop a strategic marketing plan highlighting the region's ecological, cultural, and religious potential.

2. **Public-Private Partnerships – Ecotourism Support**

- Develop adventure and ecotourism routes to attract domestic and international tourists.
- Introduce funding mechanisms for ecotourism projects and support local businesses.
- Strengthen management of protected areas and recreational zones, improve guide qualifications, and enhance information provision.
- Boost employment in tourism and encourage local participation in services.
- Develop specialized tourism segments, including pilgrimage routes, leveraging international best practices.

3. **International Cooperation and Border Accessibility**

- Enhance Georgia-Azerbaijan collaboration for cross-border tourism routes, particularly David-Gareji.
- Develop information platforms and guide bureaus to promote regional tourism.

Infrastructure Project Development and Planning

Conclusions

- **Infrastructure Project and Funding Deficits**
    - Lack of major initiatives like railway networks or transport hubs restricts economic growth.
    - Central budget allocations for infrastructure are insufficient to meet municipal needs.
    - Local populations benefit minimally from transit infrastructure's economic potential.
- **Systemic Planning and Management Gaps**
    - Infrastructure projects are planned episodically, leading to inefficient resource allocation.
    - Local needs and resources are often ignored, resulting in less effective, costly projects.
    - State and donor-initiated projects frequently fail to address regional realities, causing public dissatisfaction.
    - Budget absorption at the municipal level remains problematic.

- **Local Governance Potential and Constraints**
    - Some municipalities achieve results in infrastructure projects, but financial and human resources are limited.
    - International and private sector involvement is crucial but hampered by poor coordination.
    - Limited municipal budgets cannot fully meet infrastructure needs.
- **Border Regulations Impacting Economic Growth**
    - Temporary permits for agricultural activities (e.g., 3-month permits) restrict farming.
    - Border closures with Azerbaijan have reduced economic activity, particularly in tourism and trade.
    - Border uncertainties deter investor interest and business development.

Recommendations

Systemic Planning and Increased Central Budget Funding

- Develop a comprehensive regional infrastructure plan based on population, transport, and economic needs.
- Strengthen coordination between local and central authorities to ensure targeted funding and effective monitoring.
- Grant municipalities greater financial autonomy to prioritize and invest in key infrastructure.
- Deepen decentralization and create a strategy ensuring equitable access to infrastructure investments and decision-making.

Systemic Infrastructure Planning and Management

- Develop spatial development plans for municipal centers and rural communities to ensure rational project planning and resource allocation.
- Conduct detailed studies to tailor infrastructure projects to local needs and conditions.
- Review state and donor-funded projects to align with regional socio-economic contexts.
- Increase local governance involvement in project planning and management, providing financial and administrative tools.

Equitable Economic Benefit Distribution and Budget Reform

- Revise central budget allocation principles to ensure fair infrastructure funding for municipalities.
- Create mechanisms to localize and redistribute transit infrastructure revenues to municipalities.
- Develop targeted investment programs for border regions to enhance infrastructure and economic conditions.

Conclusion

This book, dedicated to sustainable development and security challenges in Georgia's border regions—Gardabani, Lagodekhi, and Sagarejo—may not capture the attention of a wide audience in an era dominated by social media and instant content. Yet, its value lies elsewhere: it serves as a mirror reflecting the complex realities of contemporary Georgia—its social, cultural, and environmental challenges interwoven with the richness of its ethnic diversity. We believe this work will find its place in the chronicles of the nation as a testament to its time, its struggles, and its aspirations.

The unique significance of this book lies in its innovative approach to creation. For the first time in Georgia, our research team employed artificial intelligence for content analysis and partial transcription of interviews. This pioneering effort has opened new horizons for research in our country. We recognize that others will follow this path, but we take pride in being the first to combine human intellect with the powerful tools of AI.

The materials presented in this book are not merely the outcome of a single project but a foundation for hundreds of future initiatives. They contain ideas awaiting realization, inspiring actions aimed at fostering sustainable development and enhancing security. Today, as science reminds us that reality is a tapestry of possibilities akin to wave functions, we understand that the future depends on what we choose to create. May this book serve as an impetus for those ready to dream, act, and build a more just and harmonious Georgia.

Literature

1. Connolly, K. (2018, October). Germany summons Turkish ambassador over 'wolf' goal celebration. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com
2. Diakonidze, M. (2019). Leading factors of sustainable rural tourism development: Case of Georgia. Journal of Corporate Governance, Insurance, and Risk Management, 6(1).
3. European Union Water Initiative Plus for Eastern Partnership Countries. (2019). Development of draft river basin management plan for Alazani/Iori river basin in Georgia: Thematic summary – Part I characterisation (ENI/2016/372-403). http://euwipluseast.eu
4. Guillén-Royo, M. (2015). Sustainability and wellbeing: Human-scale development in practice. Routledge.
5. Hansen, M. S. B. (2022). The SDGs in Georgia: An explanatory case study on the roles of humanitarian organisations.
6. Ibietan, J. (2010). The role of local government in rural development issues. Knowledge Review, 20(2), 1–10.
7. Lavergne, R., & Saxby, J. (2001). Capacity development: Vision and implications. CIDA Canadian International Development Agency.
8. Le Blanc, D., et al. (2012). Development cooperation in the light of sustainable development and the SDGs: Preliminary exploration of the issues. UNDESA.
9. Meadows, D., & Randers, J. (1992). Beyond the limits. Earthscan Publications.
10. Metreveli, R. (2020, October 19). David Gareji Monastery Complex – An integral part of ancient cultural heritage of Georgia. Georgian National Academy of Sciences. http://science.org.ge/?p=8247&lang=en
11. Okruashvili, N., Paresashvili, N., & Damenia, N. (2023, May). Organic farming as a priority direction of sustainable development of the agricultural sphere of Georgia. Business and Management. https://doi.org/10.3846/bm.2023.1006
12. Sharma, S., Sharma, P., & Kumar, A. (2020). A critical review of studies related to construction and computation of Sustainable Development Indices. Ecological Indicators, 112. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2019.106061
13. Stavridis, J. (2008). U.S. Southern Command 2008 Posture Statement.
14. Stephenson, M. (2013). Twenty years of multi-level governance: Where does it come from? What is it? Where is it going? https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01024837/document
15. Stockholm Environment Institute. (2015). Integrating sustainable development and security. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/sustainable-security-101/
16. UCLG. (2015, December). The local dimension of the 2030 Agenda [Motion]. World Council of the UCLG.
17. United Nations. (1992). Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, Volume 1, Resolutions adopted by the Conference. https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N92/836/55/PDF/N9283655.pdf?OpenElement
18. United Nations. (2023). The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf
19. United Nations Development Programme. (1994). New dimensions of human security. Human Development Report 1994 (pp. 24, 27). Oxford University Press.
20. United Nations Development Programme. (2021, February). Country programme document for Georgia (2021–2025). Executive Board of the United Nations

Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Office for Project Services.
21. UN-Habitat. (2009). International guidelines on decentralization and access to basic services. https://unhabitat.org/books/international-guidelines-on-decentralization-and-access-to-basic-services
22. Vasstrøm, M. (2019). The role of local government in rural communities: Culture-based development strategies. Local Government Studies, 45(6). https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2019.1590200
23. World Bank Group. (2023). Agriculture, water, and land policies to scale up sustainable agri-food systems in Georgia: Synthesis report and way forward. https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/georgia/publication/agriculture-water-and-land-policies-to-scale-up-sustainable-agri-food-systems-in-georgia
24. Zarandia, E. (2018, September). Expansion of capacity development of local self-government in Georgia. International Conference on Applied Research in Management, Economics and Accounting, Brussels, Belgium.
25. Chirodea, F., Soproni, L., & Marian, M. (2024). European Union Tools for the Sustainable Development of Border Regions. Sustainability, 16(1), 388. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16010388
26. Yi, C., Xu, Z., & Liu, H. (2024). Sustainable development in global border regions. Science, 384(6702), 1309. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adp0639
27. Saunders, A. Protecting sustainable livelihoods with innovative border security. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Republic of the Marshall Islands. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/stories/protecting-sustainable-livelihoods-innovative-border-security_en
28. Regional Program of Action for Peace and Security, Sub-Program of Action for Joint Security Management of Common Borders, Project Number 1.1.3: Development of Border Zones and Promotion of Human Security. (2006, September 21).
29. Lee, C. (2000). Sustainable development of cross-border regions: A methodological study. Chinese Geographical Science, 10(3), 197–20; https://doi.org/10.1007/S11769-000-0049-Y
30. Wang, P., Lu, R., Fan, T., Zhang, L., & Nong, X. (2025). Integrated optimization of border ecosystem services and risks: A multiscale exploration considering the past and future. Environmental Impact Assessment Review, 115, 107986. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eiar.2025.107986
31. Korolchuk, L., & Savosh, L. (2024). Sustainable Development Diplomacy as a Modern Form of Diplomacy in the Context of International Security in Light of the Russian-Ukrainian War. Rocznik Bezpieczeństwa Międzynarodowego, 18(1). https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1255334
32. Modolo, L., Petitjean, J.-L., & Côme, T. (2020). Is the Border Infrastructure a Catalyst for Implementation of a Sustainable Development Management System Within Local Authorities? The Example of the Community of Townships of the Crêtes Pré-Ardennaises. Gestion et Management Public, 8(3), 11–46. https://doi.org/10.3917/gmp.083.0011
33. Korhonen, J. E., Koskivaara, A., Makkonen, T., Yakusheva, N., & Malkamäki, A. (2021). Resilient cross-border regional innovation systems for sustainability? A systematic review of drivers and constraints. Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research, 34(2), 202–221. https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2020.1867518

34. Celaya-Tentori, M., & Barajas-Escamilla, M. R. (2024). The building of cross-border mega-regions: The Cali-Baja experience. Revista de Estudios Andaluces, (48), 67–92. https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/rea.2024.i48.04
35. Lyu, H. (2024). Socio-economic effects of border trade and sustainable development pathways. Journal of Trends in Financial and Economics, 1. https://doi.org/10.61784/jtfe3013
36. Więckowski, M. (2021). Sustainable transport for border areas in the European Union. Europa XXI, 40, 127–136. http://doi.org/10.7163/Eu21.2021.40.9
37. Farion, O., Kupriyenko, D., Demianiuk, Y., & Nikitiuk, A. (2023). Combating cross-border organized crime in the border region of the state: Strategy development methodology. Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, 9(2), 208–229. https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2392246f
38. United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, ODI, and Global Land Alliance. (2022). Sustainable Development and Security of Property Rights in the UNECE Region: An assessment of perceived tenure security for land and housing. Geneva.
39. Xue, S., Xiao, H., & Ren, J. (2024). Cross-border interactions on the sustainable development between global countries. Resources, Conservation and Recycling, 204, 107525. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2024.107525
40. აგეიშვილი, გ., საღარეიშვილი, მ., & ჟამურაშვილი, ლ. (2022). განათლების სექტორის მიმოხილვა: ეთნიკური უმცირესობების და სოციალურად მოწყვლადი ჯგუფების გამოწვევების იდენტიფიცირება. თბილისი.
41. ახობაძე, ს. (2019, January). Development of draft river basin management plan for Alazani/Iori river basin in Georgia, Thematic summary – Part I characterisation. Regional Environmental Centre for the Caucasus.
42. ახობაძე, ს., რუხაძე, ა., ბარნოვი, ე., ჯიბლაძე, ქ., & ზუმბულიძე, მ. (2020). რესურსების შეთანხმებული გამოყენება ტრანსსასაზღვრო აუზებში: წყლის-საკვების-ენერგიის-ეკოსისტემების ურთიერთკავშირის შეფასება, ურთიერთკავშირის შეფასების შეჯამება მდ. ალაზანი/განიხის აუზში (აზერბაიჯანი, საქართველო).
43. European Union Water Initiative Plus for Eastern Partnership Countries. (2020). ალაზნის პილოტურ აუზში სენსიტიური ტერიტორიების იდენტიფიცირება. *Georgia's Environmental Outlook – GEO*.
44. გარდაბნის მუნიციპალიტეტი. (2022). გარდაბნის მუნიციპალიტეტის პრიორიტეტების დოკუმენტი, 2022-2025 წლები.
45. გეჩბაია, ბ., ხარაიშვილი, ე., მუშკუდიანი, ზ., გოლეთიანი, ქ., & წილოსანი, ა. (2021). Challenges of sustainable and equal development of regions in Georgia. *E3S Web of Conferences, 280*, 11007 https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202128011007
46. გოგბერაშვილი, ე. „დარღვევებმა იკლო“ - რა ხარისხის პესტიციდები და აგროქიმიკატები იყიდება ბაზარზე? // Business Media. — 2024. — 17 თებერვალი. — URL: https://bm.ge/news/darghvevebma-iklo-ra-khariskhis-pestitsidebi-da-agroqimikatebi-iyideba-bazarze (წვდომის თარიღი: 24.06.2025).
47. ლაგოდეხის მუნიციპალიტეტი. (2016, September 28). ლაგოდეხის მუნიციპალიტეტის ადგილობრივი განვითარების სტრატეგია 2016-2020.
48. ლაგოდეხის მუნიციპალიტეტი. (2024). ლაგოდეხის მუნიციპალიტეტის მერის მიერ გაწეული საქმიანობის ანგარიში. https://lagodekhi.gov.ge/ge/meris-2024-clis-angarishi
49. ლაგოდეხის მუნიციპალიტეტი. (2024). ლაგოდეხის მუნიციპალიტეტის 2024-2027 წლების საშუალოვადიანი პრიორიტეტების დოკუმენტი.
50. საერთო ენის ძიებაში. (2018). https://liberali.ge/articles/view/3718/saerto--enis--dziebashi

51. საქართველოს გარემოს დაცვისა და სოფლის მეურნეობის სამინისტრო. (2016). საქართველოს ნარჩენების მართვის 2016-2030 წლების ეროვნული სტრატეგია.
52. საქართველოს გარემოს დაცვისა და სოფლის მეურნეობის სამინისტრო. (2022). სოფლის მეურნეობა ძირითადი ტენდენციები, სოფლის მეურნეობა რიცხვებში. თბილისი.
53. საქართველოს გარემოს დაცვისა და სოფლის მეურნეობის სამინისტრო. (2023). Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy of Georgia 2021-2027 and Action Plan 2021-2023, Performance Monitoring Report for 2023.
54. საქართველოს გარემოს დაცვისა და სოფლის მეურნეობის სამინისტრო. (2024). სამოქალაქო თანასწორობისა და ინტეგრაციის სახელმწიფო სტრატეგიის 2023-2024 წლების სამოქმედო გეგმის, 2023 წლის შესრულების ანგარიში.
55. საქართველოს გარემოს დაცვისა და სოფლის მეურნეობის სამინისტრო. (2025). 2022-2026 წლებისთვის საქართველოს გარემოს დაცვის მოქმედებათა მეოთხე ეროვნული პროგრამის, 2024 წლის მონიტორინგის ანგარიში.
56. საქართველოს მთავრობა. (2014). საქართველოს ორგანული კანონი, ადგილობრივი თვითმმართველობის შესახებ. https://mof.ge/show_law.aspx?id=1008
57. საქართველოს მთავრობა. (2014). ხედვა 2030 საქართველოს განვითარების სტრატეგია.
58. საქართველოს მთავრობა. (2015, October 30). საქართველოს მთავრობის დადგენილება №558, საჯარო სამართლის იურიდიული პირის – საქართველოს მუნიციპალური განვითარების ფონდის დაფუძნების, სამეთვალყურეო საბჭოს განსაზღვრისა და მისი დებულების დამტკიცების შესახებ. http://mdf.org.ge/
59. საქართველოს მთავრობა. (2020). 2020–2025 წლების დეცენტრალიზაციის სტრატეგია. https://mrdi.gov.ge/uploads/publications/5e467a975a3be.pdf
60. საქართველოს მთავრობა. (2020). გაეროს მდგრადი განვითარების თანამშრომლობის ხელშეკრულება 2021-2025. თბილისი.
61. საქართველოს მთავრობა. (2022). ძალადობის პრევენციის ეროვნული სტრატეგია (სამუშაო ვერსია). https://www.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=geo&sec_id=405
62. საქართველოს მთავრობა. (2024). დეცენტრალიზაციის 2020–2025 წლების სტრატეგიის განხორციელების 2024-2025 წლების სამოქმედო გეგმა. https://mrdi.gov.ge/pdf/6666f4e9a9416.pdf/matsne-6190776-0.pdf
63. საქართველოს სახალხო დამცველი. (2022). „სოფლის ექიმის“ სახელმწიფო პროგრამის ფარგლებში მოსახლეობისათვის პირველადი ჯანდაცვის მომსახურებაზე ხელმისაწვდომობის მონიტორინგის შედეგები - ინფრასტრუქტურის შეფასება.
64. საქსტატი. (2024). სტატისტიკური ინფორმაცია საქართველოს რეგიონებისა და მუნიციპალიტეტების მიხედვით. https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/54/jandatsva
65. ჩავლეიშვილი, მ., ხარაიშვილი, ე., & ერკომაიშვილი, გ. (2018). The scale of farms and development perspectives in Georgia. *International Journal of Economics and Management Engineering, 12*(4).
66. კანდელაკი, ს. (2020, August). ეთნიკური უმცირესობების ინტეგრაცია საქართველოში: პოლიტიკური ჩართულობის ბარიერები (პოლიტიკის დოკუმენტი #16). საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი.
67. ქადაგიძე, მ., & ჭანტურია, გ. (2023). მიმოხილვითი ანგარიში მდგრადი განვითარების მეოთხე მიზნის განხორციელების შესახებ. თბილისი.
68. ხომერიკი, გ., მელაძე, გ., ნადარეიშვილი, ნ., თუთბერიძე, მ., კვირკველია, ნ., ჯვარშეიშვილი, ს., თავაძე, გ., & ბოკერია, მ. (2022). Demographic issues of social-

economic development of Eastern Georgia: Population as a demographic potential. *Georgian Geographical Journal, 2*(1), 10–23.

69. ნარმანია, დ., კეშელაშვილი, გ., ჩოხელი, ე., & კიკუტაძე, ვ. (2022). Challenges of development of demand-oriented labor market in Georgia. *International Journal of Social Sciences, 11*(2). https://doi.org/10.52950/SS.2022.11.2.006
70. ტაბუკაშვილი, მ. (2015). *Philanthropy for social justice and peace*. 18818 in Georgian Way.
71. თაბუკაშვილი, მ., ნაზაროვა, წ., & სხვ. (2007). სოფლის ღირსება: [წიგნი მოიცავს საქართველოში მცხოვრებ ქალთა უფლებებს]. ISBN: 9789941001871
72. ტურაშვილი, თ., & ნიკურაძე, გ. (2020). მდგრადი განვითარების მიზნების პრაქტიკული სახელმძღვანელო ლოკალიზაციის პრაქტიკული სახელმძღვანელო. თბილისი. https://sdg.gov.ge/uploads/2020/10/1606937843SDG%20Localization%20Manual%20GEO.pdf

Sustainable Development and Security Challenges in Georgia's Border Regions: Gardabani, Lagodekhi, Sagarejo (Research)

This work was supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG) # BRG-I-23-037 „Study of Sustainable Development and Security Issues in the Border Regions of Georgia: The Cases of Gardabani, Lagodekhi, and Sagarejo“

Head of Project: I. Kokaia
Project Coordinator: Ts. Nazarova

Authors: M. Areshidze, I. Kldiashvili, Ts. Nazarova, G. Tsopurashvili

Editors: M. Iashvili, M. Salukvadze

People’s Harmonious Development Society
Tbilisi, 2025