

**COMMUNITIES ON THE
ADMINISTRATIVE
BOUNDARY LINE:
CHALLENGES AND
OPPORTUNITIES**

WRITTEN BY
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COMMUNITIES ON THE ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARY LINE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

"The vicinity of ABL near the village of Kirbali. In the foreground are fruit trees in a territory controlled by the Georgian authorities. In the background are hilly forests and pastures under the de facto control of the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali district authorities.

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Executive Summary

Communities along the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) separating the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region from the rest of Georgia face specific challenges, that has never been mapped. This extensive report aims to present the key findings from the field research targeting these communities.

What are the primary issues that local populations along the ABL face today? This is the key question this study primarily seeks to address. By identifying the most important areas for intervention, we aim to provide an answer to this query. The report will also attempt to provide a response to the question: "HOW can the international and domestic donor community solve the concerns of local communities on the Georgian-Ossetian ABL most effectively?" This report identified more than 50 interventions that could improve the quality of life of these communities, from areas of local economy and SMEs, agriculture, social entrepreneurship, improved possibilities for youth and women, enhancing tourism, access to education and information, blue-green innovations, and settlement-specific interventions. In the next phase, the project team and its experts will prepare feasibility studies to help to materialize these interventions and approach the donor community.

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About the Project

The project's primary goal is to help improve the situation of vulnerable communities on the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL), separating the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region from the rest of Georgia. To achieve this goal, the project is implemented on two levels.

The objective of the first level is to build the local government's capacity in vulnerable communities along ABL in the following areas: regional development, promoting green innovation, social entrepreneurship and social agriculture, local visibility and women's and young people's participation in the decision-making processes.

The project met this goal by transferring the reform experience of Slovakia in support of an effectively functioning state and local administration. The capacities of representatives of local governments from communities at ABL was built with the help of Slovak experts from practice and professional institutions through targeted workshops and study tours in Slovakia.

Moreover, the project increased the resilience of communities along the ALB in the fight against disinformation through the development of local media capacities, local journalism, and local visibility through workshops for selected local government representatives, NGOs and journalists.

The project also increased the active involvement of women and young people in local government decision-making processes in target communities by "activation" through motivational events and by establishing at councils of women and two of youth operating alongside local government bodies. The project also supports the development of transparent activities in markets of the EU through workshops for local governments.

On the other level, the project aimed to formulate recommendations for decision-makers and the donor community by mapping the needs of communities living on ABL, emphasizing women and youth. The project includes field research conducted in target communities on the ABL and interviews with local experts to meet this goal. The study you are reading is the result of this same effort.

The implementation period is from September 2, 2021, till December 31, 2022.

About SlovakAid

The project titled *Development of Communities along the ABL around the Tskhinvali region with the focus on local administration and development* (SAMRS/2021/GE/1/2) was conducted with the support of the Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation (SlovakAid; <https://slovakaid.sk/en/>)

Since its official establishment in 2003, SlovakAid has succeeded in establishing itself on the international scene in the 17 years of its existence and transforming itself from the position of recipient of aid to a responsible donor.

The SlovakAid brand embodies efficiency, addressability and credibility and, despite a relatively low budget, is a strong and serious partner. The progress achieved was also stated in the first evaluation of the development cooperation of the Slovak Republic by the OECD Committee for Development Aid in 2018.

About the Consortium

MESA10 is an independent think-tank focusing on social and economic policies. It was founded in 1992 and is present on the Slovak and international scene ever since. Currently, MESA10 focuses on socio-economic research in the field of economy, structural reforms, public finances, self-government policies, education, regional development and legislation, foreign policy, international economic cooperation and development cooperation. MESA10 members act also individually as advisors for international institutions, such as the World Bank, EBRD or UNDP in several countries of the Western Balkans and Europe's East.

MESA10 experts played a key role in the reform process in Slovakia in the area of public administration, economy, and social services. MESA10 expertise was also used in the process of public administration reform in Slovakia including fiscal decentralization and inter-municipal cooperation. Best practices had been lectured in different countries abroad, including those of the Western Balkans and of the EU's East. MESA10 has experience with managing international projects sharing Slovak transitional experience and know-how abroad. MESA 10 is coordinating the consortium and assists with conducting the field research, providing the independent analysis of the collected data from the field research as well as its interpretation.

Public Union Bridge of Friendship “Kartlosi” (“Kartl”- means “Georgian” and “Osi”- means “Ossetian”) was founded on May 12, 2006, on the initiative of youth from the village of Pkhvenisi. The village is in the Gori region, 5 km from Tskhinvali. Since its establishment, the organization has carried out many events, charity actions, educational projects, and cultural-athletic activities. The target groups of “Kartlosi” are: 1) local population from the Shida Kartli region (with particular attention to youth aged 18-30 years, internally displaced people, people affected by war, minority groups and citizens who live in rural areas of the country), 2) local initiative groups and non-governmental organizations and 3) local authorities.

Strategic Analysis is an independent think-tank from Slovakia providing expertise for the private sector, public institutions, media, and civil society. It focuses primarily on the European Neighborhood. The Strategic Analysis team combines over ten years of experience working and networking across the European Neighborhood. Its expertise includes a thorough knowledge of two regions – the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries in terms of geopolitics, internal politics, international relations, security, the economy, the business environment, civil society, and culture. Strategic Analysis offers expertise and capacities in four different courses: via trainings, support of actions. networking and research.

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Goals, Methods and Limits of the Study

Goals

This study mainly aims to answer the question: "*WHAT* are the main problems that local communities on the administrative boundary line dividing the rest of Georgia from the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region currently face?" We seek to answer this question by identifying the most critical areas for intervention.

In this way, the study will also seek to answer this question: "*HOW* can donors most effectively address the problems of local communities on the Georgian-Ossetian ABL?" This will involve identifying relevant interventions.

Conceptualization

The communities on the ABL between Georgia and the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region comprise the central unit of our analysis (hereafter only "Communities on the ABL").

"The community on the ABL" is a construct that has not yet been firmly defined in the literature. For the purposes of this study, its definition will be as follows: It is a community which (a) is located at a distance of no more than 2 kilometers from the ABL or (b) was particularly affected by the creation of the ABL or (c) it is the central village for several communities located directly on the ABL.

The vast majority of ABL communities fall under group (a). These are settlements which lie directly on the edge of the ABL which, in many cases, have lost lands creating a backbone of their economies and/or suffer from the presence of a vast and dangerous fear zone.

In group (b), there are communities that are not directly adjacent to the ABL but its existence creates problems for them which are comparable to the problems of villages from group (a). The town of Iri can be included among such communities. This settlement is located more than 3 kilometers from the ABL but the creation of the dividing line through the village puts it into severe isolation.

The last (c) group contains larger central towns which are separated from the ABL by other smaller communities and the emergence of the ABL often affected them only to a relatively limited extent. However, research in municipalities such as Mejvriskhevi and Atotsi is essential to understand the opportunities these municipalities provide to nearby communities and the ABL.

Methods

To answer the first question, we conducted explorative research based on field surveys conducted in 34 ABL communities. Survey research has several inherent strengths compared to other research methods. First, surveys are an excellent vehicle for measuring a wide variety of unobservable data such as people's preferences or factual information. Second, survey research is

also ideally suited for remotely collecting data about a population that is too large to observe directly.¹

Surveys were conducted by interviews with local residents using a standardized questionnaire with open-ended questions. During the research, the questionnaire was slightly modified several times to include relevant new questions identified by respondents in the previous stages of the work. This approach somewhat distorted the overall results of the study, especially in terms of the total score that individual problems received (since some questions were only asked in some communities). However, since it is an exploratory part of the research, this approach allowed us to cover, albeit imperfectly, a broader spectrum of problems, including those that we did not anticipate at the beginning of the study but were important to the respondents.

Field surveys allowed us to identify the most fundamental problems of individual target communities according to the opinion of local residents. By analyzing the data thus obtained, we were subsequently able to identify several categories of issues (areas of intervention and partially answer the first question of the study).

To answer the second question, we conducted descriptive research whose aim was to better grasp the nature and context of the main identified problems. To do so, we conducted several interviews with local Georgian experts and three focus groups and searched for best practices from Georgia and abroad. We also implemented some recommendations from our speakers participating in the first part of the project. This allowed us to identify several interventions for each of the relevant areas.

State Support for Communities on the ABL

On October 4, 2013, the Government of Georgia established a Temporary Governmental Commission to respond to the needs of the affected population in the villages adjacent to the ABL. The function of the Commission is to study the needs of the population and draw assumptions, prepare relevant proposals for assistance, and submit them to the Government of Georgia, review and coordinate the implementation of assistance programs and projects and coordinate activities between state structures. The Commission is composed of high-ranking political figures from both the economic team and law enforcement agencies. The Commission is chaired by the Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia.

As part of its activities, the Commission has studied the social and economic situation along the occupation line as a result of which the following areas have been identified in which the local population needs assistance:

1. The problem of heating and total gasification in winter.
2. Problems with drinking and irrigation water supply.
4. Disorder of access roads to the villages.
5. The problem of primary health care.

¹ Anol Bhattacharje, Social Science Research: Principles, Methods and Practices, Second Edition, Tampa, University of South Florida, 2012, Source: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=oa_textbooks, p. 73

6. The problem of houses and roofs damaged as a result of the war.
7. Inability to use agricultural lands as a result of passing barbed wire.
8. The problem of funding students living in villages near the dividing line.
9. Disorder of school and kindergarten infrastructure.

In 2013-2020, the Georgian government spent GEL 19.6 million to provide heating for the rural population. For this period, 31 thousand cubic meters of wood were also allocated to rural families. Moreover, during the winter period, all families are provided with GEL 200 in assistance. In the program's first year, GEL 2,288,000 was allocated from the state budget for this purpose.

The state program also began to supply natural gas to the villages along the ABL. Altogether, 13,915 subscribers were registered from 2013-2015. Gas and electricity supply networks were also restored and rehabilitated. The electricity network was renewed in 43 villages near the dividing line.

One of the state's priorities is to fund students living along the dividing line. In 2013-2020, the number of students funded under the program was 2,408. The funds allocated by the state amounted to more than GEL 4,800,000. In the first semester of the 2020-2021 academic year, 1,990 students (1,054 females) were funded. In the second semester – 2,198 students (1,213 females) within the framework of the student funding program in the villages adjacent to the demarcation line.²

Upgrading infrastructure in villages along the ABL is one of the state's priorities. In 2013-2020, the construction and rehabilitation of roads, houses, gardens, water supply systems and bridges was funded. The total cost of the projects exceeded GEK 160 million.

Moreover, 18 public schools were renovated during this period. In Samegrelo, in the village of Rukhi, a hospital was built that could serve 120 patients. In 2020, new rural dispensaries were constructed and equipped in the villages of Akhalabastumani and Khurcha in the Zugdidi Municipality.

² Public Defender of Georgia, Report on the State of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2021, Source: <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2022040413242699860.pdf>

I. Target Communities and Their Problems

Field Research Statistics

Number of visited settlements: 34

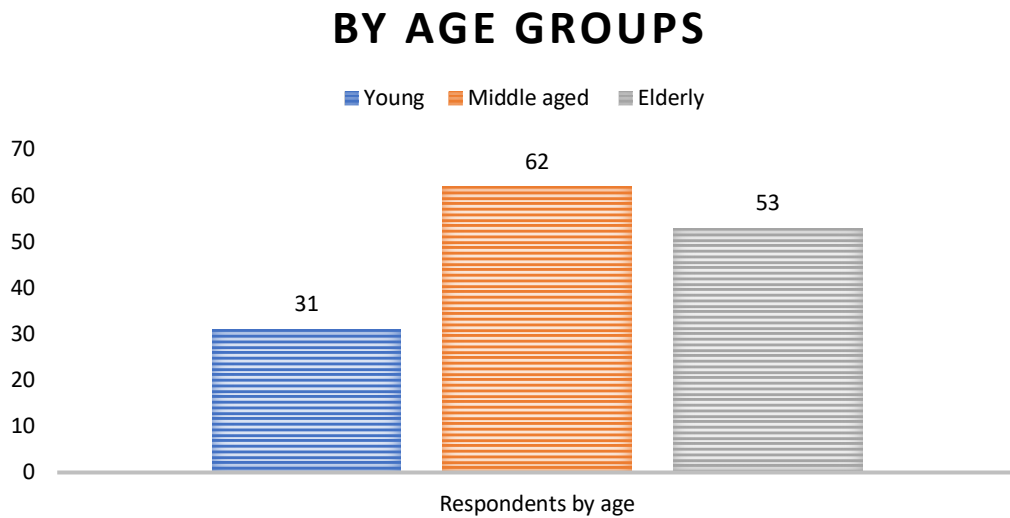
Number of respondents: 145

By age groups

Young (18 – 35): 31

Middle-aged (36 – 60): 61

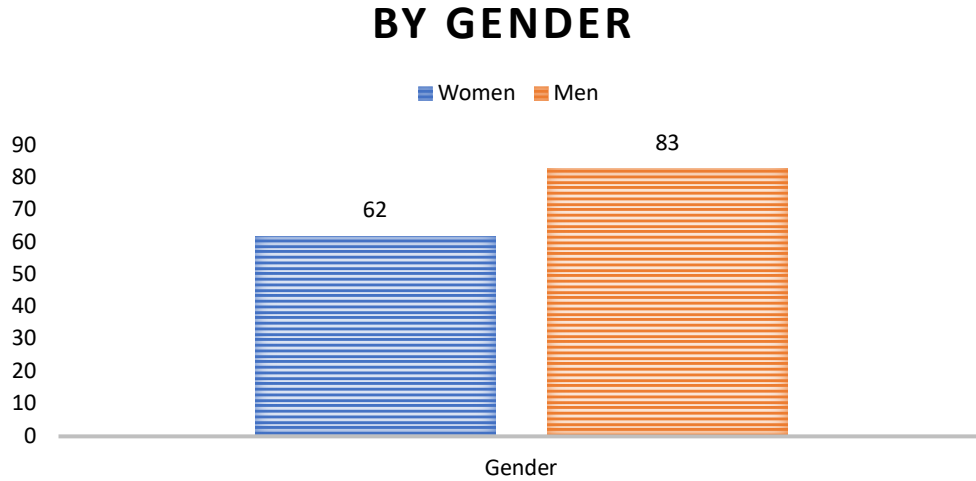
Elderly (50 +): 53



By gender

Total women: 62

Total men: 83



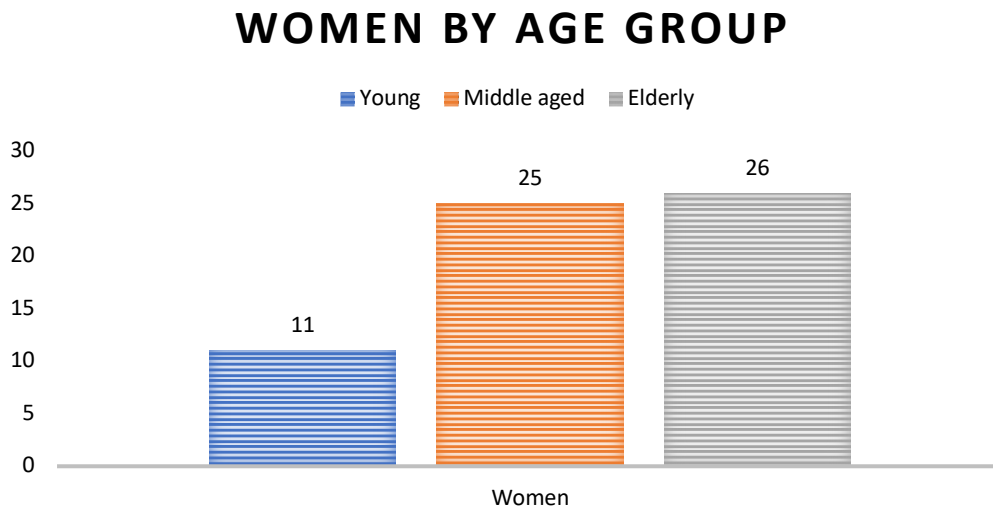
Women by age groups

Young (18 – 35): 11

Middle-aged (36 – 60): 25

Elderly (50 +): 26

Total women: 62



Men by age groups

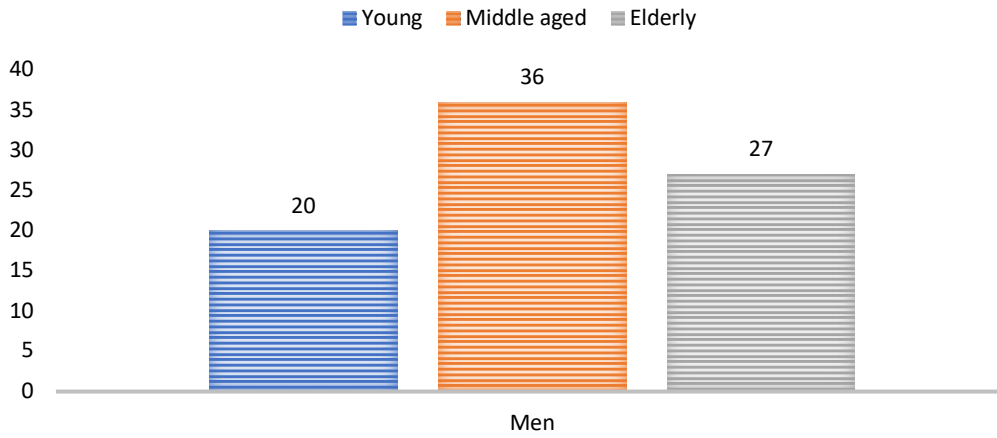
Young (18 – 35): 20

Middle-aged (36 – 60): 36

Elderly (50 +): 27

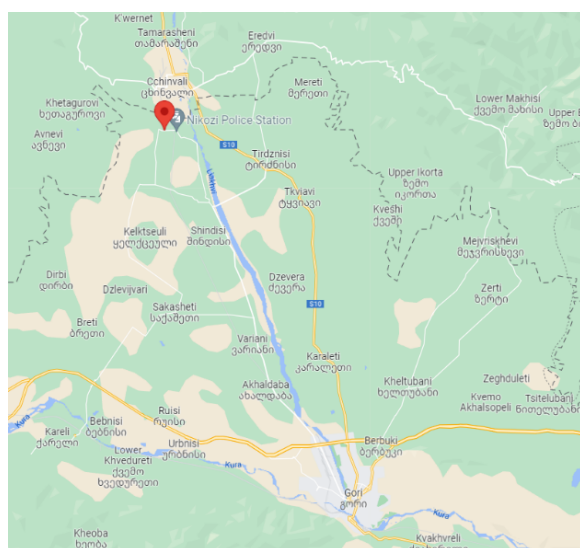
Total men: 83

MEN BY AGE GROUPS



Gori Region

Zemo Nikozi³



Basic Facts

Population: 643

Location: Gori municipality, South of Tskhinvali

Main problem: Absence of market/need for diversification

Other problems: one

Other facts: Several well-established cultural institutions and events

Respondents

Respondent no. 1 – middle-aged man (representative of local self-government)

Respondent no. 2 – young man (director of local ambulance)

Respondent no. 3 – middle-aged woman– (an employee of a clinic and entrepreneur in the sphere of agriculture)

Respondent no. 4 – middle-aged man

Respondent no. 5 – young woman

Respondent no. 6 – middle-aged man

Description

Zemo Nikozi is a historical settlement just south of Tskhinvali and the Episcopa seat. With Kvemo Nikozi and Upper Khviti, it presents a relatively densely populated and well-integrated economic unit with 3,000 inhabitants. Despite many problems, Zemo Nikozi is a relatively dynamic and well-developed community, especially as compared to other villages on the ABL. It is a local center of culture and entrepreneurship. The settlement was among the first affected by the 2008 war but unlike nearby Ergneti, it was not burnt to the ground. Nevertheless, many houses were damaged by fighting and shelling.

Local Economy

As in the case of nearly all ABL communities, locals in Zemo Nikozi are also predominantly self-employed farmers. As respondent no. 1, a representative of local self-government, said – more than 80 percent of locals fit into this category. As she added, there are no prominent employers

³ Field survey in Zemo Nikozi on December 7, 2021.

or SMEs in the village. However, several more prominent farmers and local entrepreneurs offer seasonal work for their neighbors.

Respondents no. 2 and no. 4 added that bigger farmers sell their production to Russia for reasonable prices but local farmers have problems selling theirs on local markets. Respondent no. 4 stressed that the DCFTA did not help local producers since it is too strict and complicated from the point of view and capabilities of local agricultural producers.

As compared to many other communities on the ABL, Zemo Nikozi has not lost any orchards or pastures as was claimed by respondents no. 1, no. 2 and no. 4.

Respondent no. 1 said that approximately 14 locals work abroad and send remittances home. Eight of them work in a factory in Germany. The respondent noted that, unlike in many other villages, locals from Zemo Nikozi never had any troubles with the law and none were deported. Respondent no. 4 stressed that many young people sold their properties to seek work in Europe. However, they do not know the language and rules of the EU and often get into financial problems due to their lack of knowledge. “For example, they think they will work seven days a week for three months and do not understand that this is impossible in Europe. As a result, they cannot calculate their income correctly and instead of earning money in Europe, they return even poorer,” he said.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

All respondents claimed that they are generally satisfied with the local infrastructure. The settlement is well-linked with Gori and Tbilisi. Eight minibuses and buses leave for Gori every day (GEL 2 for a ticket as of October 2021). The bus to the capital leaves twice a day and costs GEL 5 (as of October 2021).

Water

The settlement has good access to both drinking and irrigation water.

Gas

Nikozi is fully gasified. Locals receive a yearly GEL 200 allowance for gas from the government.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

Zemo Nikozi has a relatively big and modern clinic, modernized in three stages thanks to projects prepared by local doctors and financed by foreign donors. The clinic employs a much wider array of medical experts than any other in the proximity of the ABL.

Education

There is an elementary school in each of the three settlements with Zemo Nikozi having a high school and an art school.

Shops and Grocery Stores

All respondents stated they have good access to shops, grocery stores and bakeries.

Culture

Zemo Nikozi is an exception among most ABL communities according to local respondents. The village has an art school and also hosts an annual animation film festival. All respondents praised the local cultural opportunities

Security

Zemo Nikozi has no significant fear zones and residents are not afraid of being detained by Russian border guards. The ABL in this segment is mainly fenced.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Alternatives to the Russian Market

As compared to most communities on the ABL, respondents from Zemo Nikozi were generally satisfied with the situation in their settlement. All respondents agreed that Zemo Nikozi currently does not face any significant and imminent challenges which would severely hinder its development. Similar to most settlements in the area, which have economies based on apple growing, local farmers struggle to find alternatives to the Russian market.

Most respondents agreed that aid to the village should focus in two directions. Respondents no. 1 a no. 2 believe that Zemo Nikozi is in an excellent position to establish a small food processing plant which would process local agricultural production thanks to the density of its population and its relatively well-developed agriculture. This would create several full-time vacancies in the village and might persuade local youth not to leave the town for good. Respondent no. 1 believes this could be a pilot project that might be implemented in other communities on the ABL in the case of success.

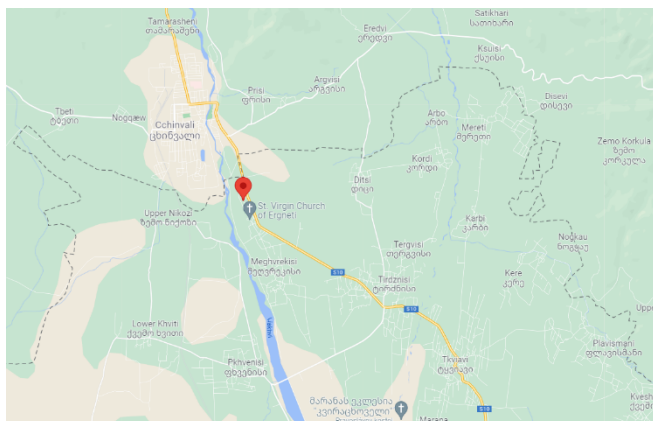
Training, Education and Grants

Respondents no. 2 and no. 4 also stressed a need for more training to teach locals how to write microgrant projects more effectively. In their opinion, attention should also be paid to the superficial knowledge of foreign languages among the local youth.

Respondent no. 3 wrote a project for a microgrant and purchased a drying machine for GEL 3,800 to dry black plums. As she claimed, her business model is very successful and she even temporarily employs two other women from the village to assist her. The machine can dry 100 kg of plums in one and a half days. In the second stage, she plans to write a microgrant for a generator. There are occasional problems with electricity in the region. As a result of one such case, she lost 100 kilograms of plums.

She sells her products in Gori for GEL 10 per kilogram. In Tbilisi, the price is GEL 18 per kilogram. She wants to create a logo and make an agreement with some chains of shops. Last year she produced 3 - 4 tons of plums. From that, she has 720 kg of dried plums.

Ergneti⁴



Basic Facts:

Population: 680

Location: Gori municipality. Nearby Tskhinvali

Main problem:

Isolation due to lack of transport

Other issues:

Lack of agricultural mechanisms, absence of market/need for diversification, absence of shops/grocery stores/bakery, insufficient access to healthcare

Other facts: Nearly the whole settlement was severely damaged during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war.

Respondents

Respondent no. 1 – Middle-aged woman

Respondent no. 2 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 3 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 4 – Middle-aged woman

Description

The village of Ergneti lies on road S10 connecting Gori with Tskhinvali on the Liakhvi River. Unlike many other communities on the ABL, Ergneti is only linked to Tskhinvali in the north and the settlement of Meghvrekisi in the south via the S10. Other geographically close settlements are Zemo Nikozi and Dits, which, however, are not directly linked to Ergneti by road.

Of all the villages on the ABL, Ergneti was traditionally the most economically linked to nearby Tskhinvali where many residents attended school. Following the 1991-1992 South Ossetia war, the “Ergneti Market” was set up in the village, becoming a major trading center for smuggled goods from Russia. Mainly fuel, food, wheat and tobacco products were smuggled from Russia via the breakaway South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region to the Ergneti Market and then to the rest of Georgia. Goods were also smuggled from Georgia to Russia – mostly alcohol used to produce the counterfeit vodka in North Ossetia. The closure of the Ergneti Market in 2004 helped Georgia to increase revenues significantly.

⁴ Field survey in Ergneti on October 8, 2021.

Based on testimonies of residents, besides becoming a trafficking hub, the market in Ergneti also played a significant role in economically revitalizing the economy of nearby settlements and renewing contacts between Georgians and Ossetians.

“After the war, we did not trust each other with the Ossetians. We stopped talking to them. We started to meet with them again when the market was established here. First, we were doing business, then we started visiting each other again and later even marrying each other. After the market was closed by the authorities, relations once again became colder,” told one respondent (woman, 50 years old).

In 2008, Ergneti suffered significant material damage with nearly all houses in the settlement razed. Although many houses were rebuilt with the help of the foreign donor, less than half of the local inhabitants returned to Ergneti after the war.

Local Economy

The economy of Ergneti is still predominantly based on apple growing despite the first attempts for diversification. Local respondents claim that selling their agricultural production in Tbilisi is the best option. However, they all agreed that prices on the market in Tbilisi are still much lower than those on the Russian market where they used to sell their product before the 2008 war.

Ergneti is often visited by traders, primarily Armenians, who buy their products and then sell them on Russian markets. Although they mostly buy it for the same price as on the market in Tbilisi, it saves residents time and freight costs.

There is no employer in the village and locals are primarily self-employed as small farmers with some working additionally as taxi drivers. All respondents would welcome support in developing local SMEs which might provide at least seasonal employment in the village.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

Ergneti, with only one road, is comparatively much more isolated from the rest of Georgia than most communities on the ABL in the Gori municipality. The road connection between Ergneti and Gori is provided by only one minibus which leaves for Gori in the morning and returns in the afternoon. If the minibus does not fill up, it often will not leave at all. Given that this minibus does not work on the weekend, the local community is effectively cut from the rest of Georgia two days a week.

Water

Although the village lost access to water after 2008, the state built an alternative irrigation system. Locals also have access to good-quality drinking water.

Gas

Local respondents appreciate that the settlement has been fully gasified and receive state support of GEL 200 for gas per year.

*Families and Healthcare***Healthcare**

There is a small ambulatory in Ergneti but it does not work every day - only two days per week. The doctor also works as an emergency worker so sometimes he cannot work during those two days. The local nurse can only measure blood pressure and not much more. According to respondents, half of the villagers are older people who need better access to medical healthcare.

Education

As respondents claimed, local families have good access to education. The school in the village (12 grades) was renovated and works well.

Shops and Grocery Stores

The absence of a shop and a bakery is a severe problem for this community. It is further worsened by a lack of transport to other nearby settlements with shops.

Culture

A new cultural center was opened in the village in the summer of 2022.

Security

Despite its proximity to the ABL and Tskhinvali, residents do not often get detained by Russian border guards. As respondent no. 3 said, those who were arrested usually got lost and crossed the ABL. Local Russian border guards do not tend to actively enter the territory on the Georgian-controlled side of the ABL.



A local resident of Ergneti in her now rebuilt house. Foto: Tamta Gokadze, Ergneti on 27. November 2021.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Lack of Proper Transport Links

All respondents agreed that the biggest challenge Ergneti is facing is the lack of public transport. As respondent no. 4 told us, the village would need a connection with Gori at least three times per day to fully overcome its isolation. Under current circumstances, residents often lose significant time solving simple administrative tasks in Gori.

“Sometimes, I leave at 10 in the morning and return at 6 in the evening even though I needed to spend only two hours in Gori,” said respondent no. 1, adding that due to no minibus working on weekends local youth has no access to culture. The problem with transport is further amplified by the lack of any shop, bakery or pharmacy in the settlement. Factual isolation from the rest of Georgia is one of the main reasons locals hesitate to return to the village.

“People want to return. This is their home. Many tried it. They came, and now what? No link to Gori, no shop, no bakery and no chance to buy medicine for children if they suddenly have a fever. So, after a couple of months, most of them left again,” said respondent no. 3.

All respondents agreed that proper transport link to the rest of Georgia would significantly help their community, persuading several families who left the village to return.

Tuition for Local Children

Respondent no. 4 also mentioned another problem. To support local communities, the Georgian government covers tuition fees for children from ABL communities who were accepted to universities. Under new regulations, valid for approximately three years, this benefit does not require residency in the settlement on the ABL but the attendance of a school on the ABL. Under this regulation, parents from Gori sign up their children at the local school in Ergneti to get free tuition at university. However, these children (who now, during the pandemic, learn mostly online) usually have a comparative advantage over local children.

The same respondent indicated that this reality is causing problems for the local community since there may be the need for more money for all students from schools in communities on the ABL in the future. A points system has been introduced and the government finances children from the ABL communities after reaching a certain level of points. Children from Gori studying at a local school in Ergneti have the advantage of private teachers which local parents can hardly afford.

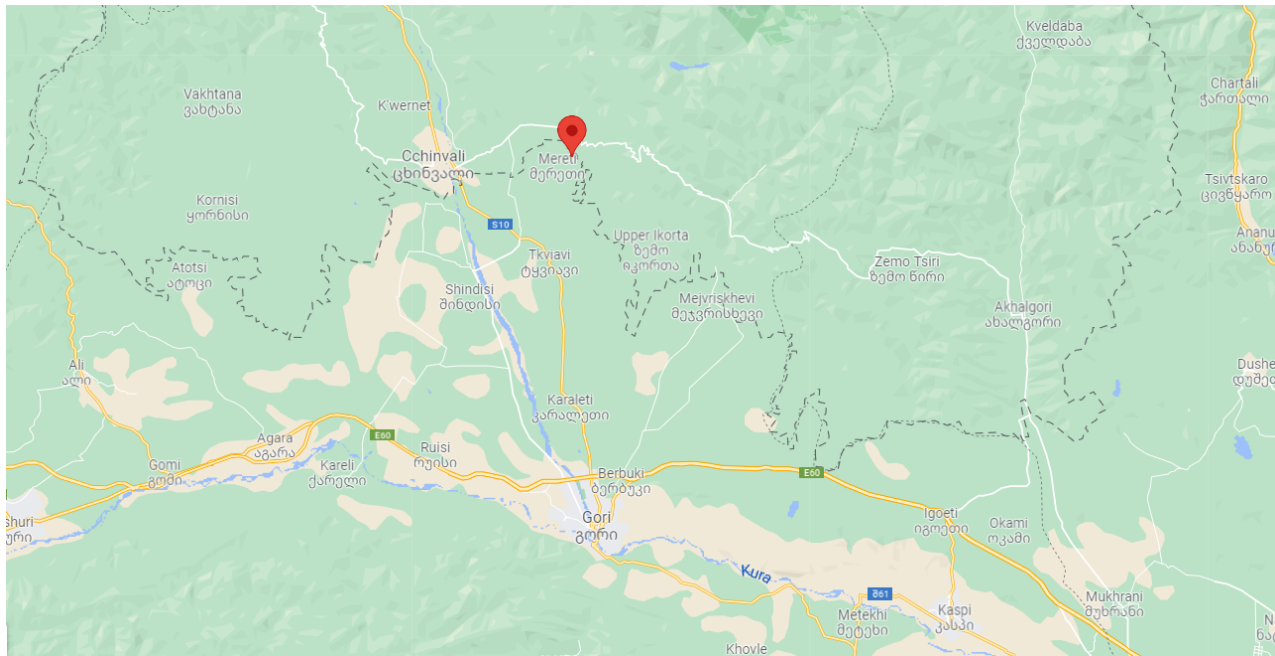
Mechanization

Another problem identified by all respondents is the lack of agricultural machinery ranging from tractors to rotators. As they claimed, all machinery items were stolen from the village during the 2008 war. Especially for the elderly, it is challenging to work on their plots without rotators.

Training and Education

Respondents no. 1, no. 2 and no. 3 also stressed that locals would need training on what and how to grow in greenhouses. As they claimed, several locals won grants for greenhouses but did not precisely know what to grow there. As a result, greenhouses are empty.

Gugutiantkari⁵



Basic Facts

Population: 228

Location: Gori municipality, East of Tskhinvali

Main problems: Lost orchards, pastures and forests, Lack of agricultural mechanisms, Absence of market/need for diversification,

Other problems: Insufficient access to healthcare.

Respondents:

Respondent no. 1 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 2 – Elderly man

Family A

Respondent no. 3 – Young man

Respondent no. 4 – Young woman

Family B

Respondent no. 5 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 6 – Elderly man

Description

The village of Gugutiantkari is located in a lowland area east of Tskhinvali, directly on the Georgian-Ossetian ABL. Compared to the area just south of Tskhinvali (villages of Zemo Nikozi

⁵ Field survey in Gugutiantkari on January 15, 2022.

and Ergneti), Gugutiatkari is located in a more densely populated region surrounded by a cluster of other villages such as Zaardiantkari, Koshka, Mereti and Arbo. The settlement was not severely damaged during the 2008 war but suffered from an artificial drought caused by de facto authorities in Tskhinvali for several years.

Local economy

Respondents from the village of Gugitiantkari mostly agreed that the lack of a market for local agricultural products traditionally sold in Russia is a prevailing problem. However, most of them welcome state subsidies to Georgian juice producers, who buy apples of second-class quality from locals. “Ten years ago, we used to collect our apples and throw them into the river because we had nowhere to sell them. Prices offered by juice producers did not even cover transport costs. Moreover, apples, or fruits in general – you need to pick them if you do not want diseases to spread in your orchard. With state subsidies to these companies, selling your production will not make you rich, but it at least makes economic sense,” said respondent no. 1.

On the other hand, apples of first-class are hard to sell for a reasonable price on markets in Gori or Tbilisi, agreed respondents. They claim that with the Russian border closed for them, they can orient only on local markets or agents who buy their products and sell them in Russia. Two of them, who actively work in their orchards (Respondents no. 2 and 3), agreed that they could not sell their products on the European market, with respondent no. 3 stressing that European agricultural production presents competition for them even in the local market of the Shida Kartli region.

Respondent no. 3 added, however, that owners of so-called intensive orchards do not face such problems and can even compete in EU markets with limited success. The same respondent, unlike the others, also claims that the situation with markets for local agricultural products improved, despite still being far from ideal, as compared to the recent past.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

All of the respondents agreed that Gugutiantkari is well-linked with Gori with minibuses leaving nearly every hour.

Water

As the local expert on drinking water, Gela Zoziashvili,⁶ said, problems with drinking water were solved approximately four years ago. Just recently, a new water tower was constructed in the settlement. All respondents appreciated that responsible agencies managed to solve drinking and irrigation water problems.

Gas

The settlement is fully gasified.

⁶ Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

The closest clinic is in the nearby village of Mereti (five-minute drive by car). While respondents no. 2 and no. 3 consider it close and sufficient, others (respondents no. 1 and no. 4) think that there should be at least a small clinic in the village as well to reflect the needs of elderly residents with no cars.

Education

Respondents no. 3 and no. 4 said that the nearest school and kindergarten are in the nearby village of Mereti with an accessible minibus for local pupils. There is no such transport to the kindergarten, but it is located close by and such a service is not needed.

Shops and Grocery Stores

All respondents claimed they have good access to nearby grocery stores, bakeries, and shops.

Culture

Respondents claimed that although there are few sports and cultural opportunities in the village, local youth can find them in the nearby region.

Security

Local respondents did not identify detentions or nearby fear zones as a significant problem due to the presence of Georgian posts on the edge of the village. In the past, however, several incidents have occurred in the village.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Access to Traditional Forest

Several respondents (no. 2, no. 3 and no. 6) agreed that although gasification helped their settlement immensely in comparison to the years following the 2008 war, it cannot fully compensate for the forest lost due to war. Unlike many other communities on the ABL, which used to exchange their agricultural surplus with de facto South Ossetia residents for their surplus of firewood, Gugutiantkari used to have its forest, providing it with cheap firewood. Although locals get annual support of GEL 200 for gas heating, some say (respondents no. 5 and no. 6) that it is not enough for villagers with bigger or damaged houses, and they still need to rely on firewood.

Respondent no. 5 added that as an invalid unable to care for his orchard, he is now burning his apple trees during the second half of the winter.

Respondent no. 2 considers gasification and state support helpful but adds that this cannot compensate for the lost forest. He said that the price of one Ural truck full of firewood from Gori is approximately GEL 1,000 which is too much for residents.

Access to Traditional Pastures

Respondent no. 1 stressed that many local villagers used traditionally to raise cows for milk, cheese and, to a lesser extent, meat. However, after the 2008 war, families could hardly raise more than two cows since they lost access to traditional pastures and needed to guard the cows carefully due to the proximity of the ABL.

Lack of Agricultural Machinery

Respondents no. 2 and no. 3 also mentioned the absence of agricultural machinery significantly hindering the development of the local economy. They both identified the purchase of tractors or rotators as the most prospective investment or donation for their community.

Job Opportunities in the EU

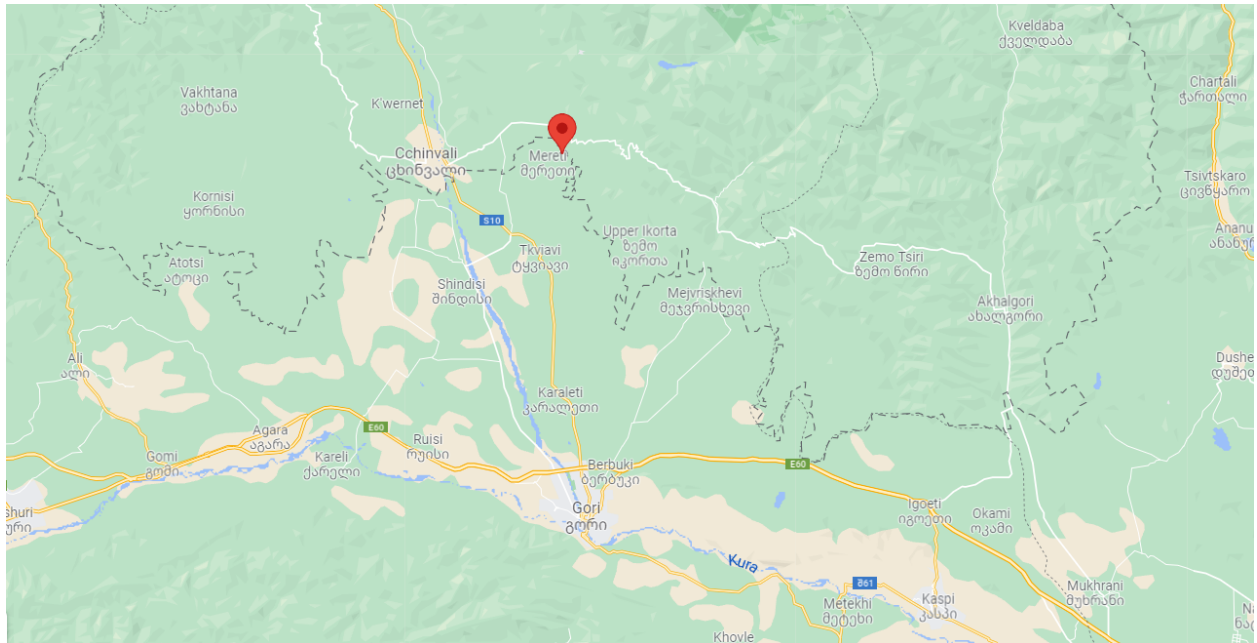
Two respondents (no. 2 and no. 3) knew locals seeking job opportunities in the EU. They claim that these people usually lack the necessary knowledge of situations and laws in the EU and local or global languages and often return earlier than they planned, indebted and with no savings.

Two local respondents (respondents no. 2 and no. 3) said that possible donors might invest in additional refrigerators, tractors, or rotators.

Two respondents (respondents no. 3 and no. 5) claimed that donors could focus on training locals (especially older people), teaching them how to search for microgrants and write such projects. Elderly people are especially not informed about such opportunities in many cases.

Two respondents (no. 1 and no. 4) said a small ambulatory directly in the village would be needed.

Zaardiantkari⁷



Basic Facts

Population: 117

Location: Gori municipality, east of Tskhinvali

Main problem: Damaged houses or infrastructure

Other Issues: Lack of agricultural machinery, absence of market/need for diversification, dangerous/vast fear zone, issues with drinking or irrigating water

Respondents

Family A

Respondent no. 1 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 2 – Elderly man

Family B

Respondent no. 3 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 4 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 5 – Elderly man

Family C

Respondent no. 6 – Elderly man

Respondent no. 7 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 8 – Middle-aged man

⁷ Field survey in Zaardiantkari on January 15, 2022.

Description

The village of Zaardiantkari is located in a lowland area east of Tskhinvali, directly on the Georgian-Ossetian ABL close to Gugutiantkari. As compared to the area just south of Tskhinvali (the villages of Zemo Nikozi and Ergneti), Zaardiantkari is located in a more densely populated region surrounded by a cluster of other villages such as Koshka, Mereti and Arbo – although a bit more isolated than nearby Gugutiantkari. The settlement was severely damaged during the 2008 war with three houses razed and two partially burned. All dwellings, however, were damaged as a result of a bombardment. The settlement was outside the control of the Georgian authorities and entirely deserted between 2008 and 2012. After their return, residents found their houses damaged and looted.

Local Economy

Families A and B responded that they are no longer involved in agricultural production. The reason is that during the four years when Zaardiantkari was depopulated and without irrigation water, their orchards dried out.

Family C is still involved in agricultural production to a limited degree. Members of this family claimed that selling their products on the local Georgian market barely covers their expenses. “But do we have another choice?,” said respondent no. 8.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

Respondents were satisfied with transport links to the rest of Georgia claiming that, despite the small size of the settlement, they do not feel isolated.

Water

Members of all three families are satisfied with the irrigation water, although it is a secondary issue for two of them no longer involved in agriculture. They are, however, unhappy with the drinking water which they describe as salty. Therefore, they prefer drinking water from the nearby source in the western part of the village.

As Mr. Zoziashvili explained,⁸ the drinking water supply system in Zaardiatkari is the same as in Gugutiantkari. However, locals in Zaardiantkari use drinking water sparingly (although it is for free) and therefore, its quality over time spent in the water tower decreases sometimes. Those responsible have repeatedly alerted locals to this fact in the past.

Gas

All respondents agree that the gasification of the village helped them enormously, especially considering that they cannot buy relatively cheap firewood from the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region anymore. Respondent no. 1 claimed that annual state support of GEL 200 for gas helps her cover approximately two months of heating. Members of family no. B said it covers them the whole heating season. Both families heat, if possible, only at night.

⁸ Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

The closest clinic is approximately one or two kilometers from the village. Local respondents were satisfied in this regard.

Education

All of the respondent families are composed mainly of elderly people who do not know the conditions of families with small children. Two families with minor-aged children refused to talk to us for fear of COVID-19.

Shops and Grocery Stores

There is no shop directly in the settlement, but one is relatively close to a neighboring village.

Culture

Respondents said that there is no culture available in the area. They, however, added that in comparison to other issues, this is not such a significant problem for them.

Security

Local respondents claim that there is a fear zone with active Russian border guards on the edge of the settlement. Respondent no. 2 himself was detained in the past while visiting his Ossetian friend close to the ABL. Several other respondents from family B claimed that they are afraid to go further away from their homes in the direction of the ABL.



Resident of Zaardiantkari stands in front of his damaged home. Foto: Tamta Gokadze, Zaardiantkari on 15. January 2022.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Damaged Houses

Respondents from all three families identified damaged roofs of their houses as the main challenge they faced.

Access to Traditional Pastures

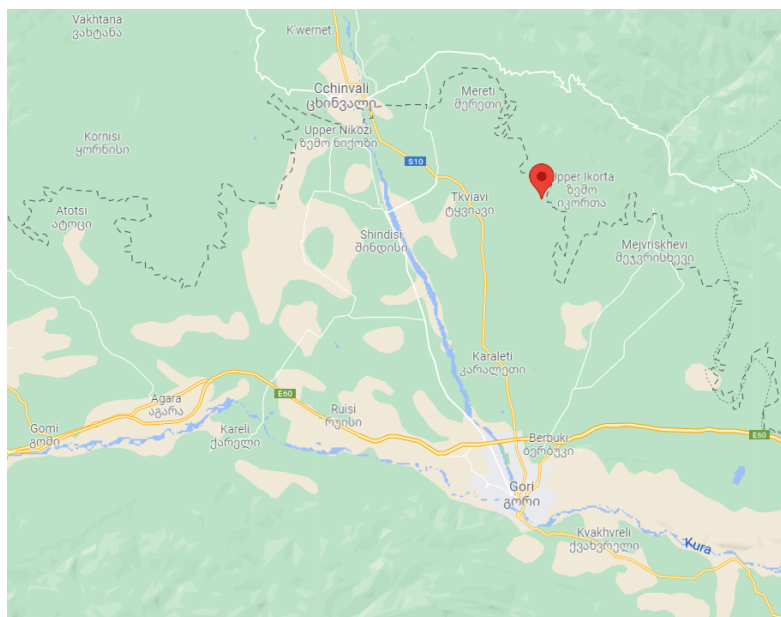
Members of family no. 1 claimed that the village lost its traditional pastures and, therefore, they could not afford to raise cattle anymore. Members of family no. 2 contended that not all pastures were lost but added that they could not afford to buy any cattle.

Lack of Agricultural Machinery

All three families said they lost everything valuable, including agricultural machinery, during and after the 2008 war. Therefore, they lack tractors and rotators. However, as they stated, they would prefer to get some cattle or poultry as a means of restarting the local economy considering most local orchards died out.

None of the respondents was aware of any microgrants for projects which might benefit them. However, all families would welcome the reconstruction of damaged roofs while families no. 2 and no. 3 also mentioned direct help in the form of cattle or poultry.

Plavi and Plavismani⁹



Basic facts

Population: 1604

Location: Gori municipality, southeast of Tskhinvali

Main problems:

Lost orchards, pastures and forests, absence of market/need for diversification

Other

problems:

Dangerous/vast fear zone, lack of culture and sports opportunities, issues with drinking or irrigating water, local roads

Respondents

Plavi

Respondent no 1. – Elderly man

Respondent no 2. – Middle-aged woman, local psychologist

Respondent no. 3 – Elderly man

Plavismani

Respondent no. 4 - Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 5 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 6 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 7 – Elderly man

Description

Plavi and Plavismani are two ABL communities in the Shida Kartli region southeast of Tskhinvali. Both villages, located on an essential Terepun channel supplying them with irrigation water from the Zoncar reservoir in the de facto South Ossetia, have well-developed agriculture. Settlements were not significantly damaged during the 2008 war. However, their economies suffered greatly due to the artificial drought caused by the decision of the South Ossetian de facto authorities to close the Terepun channel.

Local Economy

⁹ Field survey in Plavi and Plavismani on January 18, 2022.

Respondents from Plavi and Plavismani claimed that small farmers comprise the backbone of the local economy with plots from 0.5 to 1 hectare in size. Five of six respondents involved in agriculture claimed that before 2008, they primarily focused on the Russian market. They either sell their first-class production on local markets in Gori and Tbilisi or to agents reselling their harvest in Vladikavkaz (Russia). They offer second-class grade apples to local juice factories which the Georgian government subsidizes.

Respondent no. 1 said that he sells his first-class production on local markets for GEL 1 per kilogram which is better than several years ago but still much cheaper than on the Russian market.

Respondents no. 3, no. 4 and no. 5 agreed that selling even first-class grade apples on the local market is tough. “I was just chatting about it with neighbors here. Yesterday, I went to Tbilisi to sell my apples. I did not sell anything. I returned with my car full of apples. I only lost money on petrol. That is all,” said respondent no. 5.

Respondent no. 3 stressed that he would need a seasonal worker in his orchard to help collect all the harvest but it makes no economic sense with the current apple prices on the Georgian market. He said he could not afford additional expenses; therefore, a significant portion of his orchard is not worked on.

Respondent no. 4 added that to produce first-class grade apples, he needs fertilizer which is now much more expensive than it used to be one year ago. “Last week, I bought fertilizer for my orchard. It costs GEL 120 per package. Last year, it was GEL 70 and the year before, even less. I need three to four kilograms of fertilizer for one tree if I want a good quality harvest. Here are 200 – 250 apple trees on one hectare – do the math,” he said.

Regarding agents buying their products to sell them in Vladikavkaz, respondent no. 1 said that not only agents buy them but also Georgian truck drivers who often travel to Russia and have visas. All respondents involved in agricultural production agreed that these agents buy apples for the same price as the price on the market in Tbilisi. Respondent no. 3 stressed that these agents are interested only in the highest quality grade apples.

Respondent no. 4 said that local producers do not profit directly from agents who buy local apples and sell them in Russia since they pay the same prices on the market in Tbilisi. However, he claims that they benefit indirectly because, thanks to their activity, fewer apples are on the local market which leads to a slight increase in the prices.

All producers, except for respondent no. 3, consider state subsidies to local juice factories, buying their second-class grade apples, as practical or very effective. Respondent no. 1 claimed that with the price of GEL 0.22 per kilogram of second-class grade apples, they are in a much better situation than several years ago. “I sold eight tons of second-class grade apples to juice factories this year,” he said, adding that several years ago it was economically more reasonable for him to throw his harvest away than sell it to juice factories.

Respondent no. 7 claimed that he never relied on the Russian market. In recent years, he refocused from apples to raspberries which he can sell for GEL 5-8 per kilogram on the local market. He would need to invest in several greenhouses to increase his productivity and income.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

All respondents agreed that the transport link with Gori is good in both villages and reflects the needs of residents.

Gasification

All respondents assess the gasification of both villages as a very positive development.

Irrigation Water

All respondents are satisfied with an alternative system of irrigation the Georgian government created after the blockade of the Terepun channel. The price they pay for the water is also relatively cheap.

Drinking Water

Respondents from Plavi did not report any problems with the drinking water supply. Residents of Plavismani, on the other hand, said they only have access to drinking water every second day. The quality of drinking water is otherwise good due to them. As Mr. Zoziashvili explained,¹⁰ the bad water economy causes the problem with drinking water in Plavismani. He claimed that some locals probably use too much drinking water for other purposes.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

Local respondents were mainly satisfied with their access to healthcare. Respondent no. 2, however, believes that more attention should be paid to mental health in communities on the ABL where PTSD is widespread.

Education

Respondents no. 1 and 2, who have small children in their families, said that access to school and kindergarten is good in both communities.

Shops and Grocery Stores

Local respondents are satisfied with their access to shops and grocery stores.

¹⁰ Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

Culture

All respondents agreed that there are no cultural opportunities for locals, especially the youth. Respondent no. 2 identified this reality as a source of additional social problems in the given two communities.

Security

There were several cases of residents being detained by Russian border guards. Respondent no. 3 claimed that he does not feel safe in the proximity of the ABL. Several others agreed that the area in proximity to the ABL is dangerous and they avoid it.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Access to Orchards

Respondents no. 1 and no. 3 said that they lost part of their orchards following the 2008 war.

Access to Traditional Pastures

Respondents no. 5 and no. 6 said they lost access to some traditional pastures and could no longer raise cattle in any significant numbers.

Employers

Respondents also complained that there are no more significant employers or SMEs in these settlements and only limited opportunities for seasonal work for neighbors with larger land plots.

Job Opportunities in the EU

Respondents no. 2, no. 5 and no. 6 claimed that locals, especially the younger generation, have low chances of finding employment in the EU since they usually speak no foreign languages.

Small Clinic for Psychological Healthcare

Respondent no 2. said there is vast unemployment and depression in the village with a lot of violence and alcoholism in local families. Foreign donors should focus not only on women and youth but also on local men. In a strongly patriarchal society, they are the key to the progress of local societies. However, they often suffer from the most severe psychological problems. The local patriarchal society creates an ideal type of man who can provide for the whole wider family due to specific reasons linked with the conflict in a given region. It creates significant pressure on local men leading to depression, alcoholism and violence.

As a local psychologist, she would need a small room to work with locals from a wider area, especially children. Under the current circumstances, if the police come in the case of violence in the family, she is called to talk to the children. She, however, has no place where children would feel safe and unthreatened. She has often talked to them about where violence happened with parents around. In such cases, children are usually hesitant to speak.

Refrigerators

Respondent no. 1 praised the state program which allowed him to get a very cheap bank credit to purchase a refrigerator for 200 tons of apples. He considers it an excellent initiative which might also help other farmers in the area.

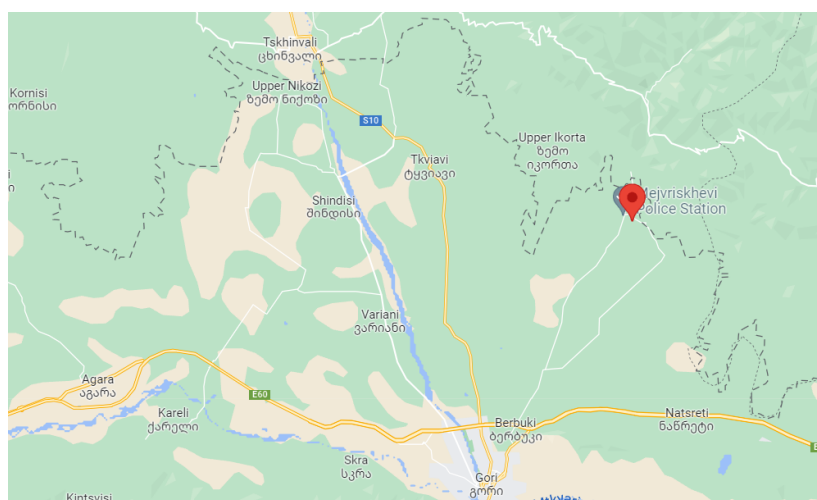
Diversification of Local Agricultural Production Based on Scientific Data and Best Practices

Additionally, respondent no. 2 believes both villages would need a laboratory analysis of the soil to identify which products could be effectively grown there. Right now, nearly everyone produces apples. This results in an overproduction of apples to a degree that the local market cannot absorb the harvest. Local communities need to diversify their agricultural production. To do so, they need to know what plants they can effectively grow and then they need training on how to grow them. When asked about this idea, respondents no. 5 and no. 6 said it sounds intriguing. "It would be interesting. However, we would first need to seed these alternative plants somewhere and see how it goes before we trust them and seed them ourselves. Strawberries might be attractive," claimed respondent no. 6.

Greenhouses

Respondent no. 7 believes that many local farmers will need greenhouses, especially those who want to diversify their agricultural production. In the best case, there should be a possibility to heat them with cow dung.

Mejvriskhevi, Adzvi and Jariasheni¹¹



Population: 3822

Location: Gori municipality, southeast of Tskhinvali

Main problems: Absence of market/need for diversification, lost orchards, pastures and forests; lack of agricultural machinery

Other problems: Bad access to the internet, isolation due to lack of transport, dangerous/vast fear zone, issues with drinking or irrigating water, bad local roads

¹¹ Field survey in Mejvriskhevi, Adzvi and Jariasheni on March 20, 2022.

Specific issue: Relatively successful reorientation from apples to tomatoes

Description

All three villages present a small cluster of settlements centered around the town of Mejvriskhevi. The cluster is situated on a lowland with fertile soil and a traditionally well-developed irrigation system based on the Terepun channel. This channel, however, runs from the territory under the control of the separatist de facto South Ossetia which occasionally still tends to block the water.

Respondents

Mejvriskhevi

Respondent no. 1 – Middle-aged man, small shop keeper

Respondent no. 2 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 3 – Elderly man

Respondent no. 4 – Elderly Man

Respondent no. 5 – Young man

Adzvi

Respondent no. 6 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 7 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 8 – Young woman

Jariasheni

Respondent no. 9 – Elderly man

Respondent no. 10 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 11 – Young man

Local Economy

Mejvriskhevi is a central village for a smaller cluster of settlements close to the ABL in the Gori municipality. This cluster includes mainly Adzvi and Jariasheni. It is a more significant settlement where the local economy is not solely agriculture-based. There are several shops and a few production facilities in the settlement.

As respondent no. 3 said, many locals are still dependent on their apple orchards. These, however, as he claimed, are often not economically profitable. The main reason is an oversaturation of the local Georgian market due to the loss of access for small producers to the Russian market. Another additional yet increasingly important factor is the rising prices of fertilizers. On the other hand, the situation with irrigation water has improved over the last years.

As respondent no. 4 added, the best apple prices used to be in Moscow. In the past, many residents of Mejvriskhevi rented huge trucks to sell their harvest in Russia. As he claimed, they were usually able to sell their crop in two or three days. Now they offer products in Gori, Tbilisi and Kakheti. Due to high apple customs, neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan do not present rentable markets for local production.

Adzvi is an interesting case since, unlike most communities in the area, residents successfully diversified their agricultural production and reoriented production from apples to tomatoes. Unlike apples, tomatoes can be quickly sold even in nearby Gori for a comparatively higher price. In recent years, dealers started to visit the settlement and buy local harvest tomatoes on the spot. Respondent no. 3 also added that many local farmers cut down old fruit trees and introduced new, more productive varieties. The village mostly has access to irrigation water from the Terepun channel.

Similarly, Jariasheni managed to partially refocus from apples to tomatoes. All local respondents agreed that the growing of tomatoes helped to restart the local economy.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

All respondents from Mejriskhevi, Adzvi and Jariasheni were satisfied with the transport. The minibus from Mejriskhevi to Gori leaves every hour. Minibus from Adzvi leaves three times per day to Gori and two times per day to Tbilisi. Respondents no. 6 and no. 7 consider these transport links to be satisfying. Respondent no. 8, on the other hand, claimed that young families with small children would need more minibuses to Gori. From Jariasheni, two minibuses leave for Gori and two for Tbilisi daily. All respondents agreed they do not feel isolated from the rest of the country. Moreover, local roads in the area were recently renovated.

Water

Drinking water in the area was of low quality due to a dirty reservoir. Respondent no. 2 claimed that some parts of Mejriskhevi never had access to proper drinking water. They rely on springs and well or buy the water. Additionally, respondents from Adzvi and Jariasheni said that drinking water is of poor quality. As Mr. Zoziashvili explained,¹² their agency constructed a second reservoir in spring 2022 and the problem should already be solved.

Gas

All villages have access to gas.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

The central settlement of Mejriskhevi has a medical center, pharmacy and a dental clinic. Adzvi and Jariasheni have small clinics open several days per week. In the case of need, they go to nearby Mejriskhevi. All respondents were satisfied with their access to healthcare.

¹² Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

Education

There are two schools in the settlement, one with nine grades and one with 12. One of them is currently under reconstruction. All respondents in Mejriskhevi claimed that local children have good access to education and leisure time activities. A good public transport link with Gori allows local youth to participate in the cultural life of the district city as well.

Additionally, Adzvi has a 12-grade school and a local kindergarten which cover the needs of local young families well as respondent no. 8 claimed. A similar situation is in Jariasheni which has its little shop and clinic open once per week. Respondents claimed that in case of any need, they visit nearby Mejriskhevi.

Shops and Grocery Stores

Respondents from all settlements claimed they had relatively good access to shops and grocery stores.

Culture

Middle-aged and older respondents were satisfied with existing transport links to Gori and Tbilisi. Some admitted that the given schedule might not fit young people and families who want better access to culture and sports.

Security

As respondents claimed, Mejriskhevi has not lost any of its lands. On the other hand, several residents were detained by the Russian border guards close to the ABL in the past. All these accidents happened, as they claimed, further away from the settlement in the nearby area. Mejriskhevi itself does not border with a fear zone.

Adzvi lost both orchards and traditional pastures. In Adzvi, where orchards and fields are close to the ABL, people get detained by the Russian border guards. As respondent no. 7 claimed, some of them are detained while working on their land plots.

Although locals are not being detained in Jariasheni, the settlement lost access to traditional pastures following the 2008 war.



Residents of Adzvi play games. Foto: Tmta Gokadze. In Adzvi on 20. March 2022.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Drinking Water

All respondents from Mejriskhevi agree that drinking water is one of the main problems in their community.

Lack of Agricultural Machinery

Respondents no. 3, no. 4, no. 5 and no. 6 all agreed that the village would need more agricultural machinery to increase the effectiveness of local agriculture. Respondents no. 3 and no. 4 believe that machine centers should be reopened in the area. At the same time, respondent no. 5 prefers grants for individual farmers who want to buy agricultural machinery and lease them to neighbors. Like residents from nearby Mejriskhevi, respondent no. 6 from Adzvi also believes that the local economy would benefit from machinery leasing centers.

Bad Internet Connection

Respondents from Jariasheni claimed that they were generally satisfied with the situation in the settlement. The only problem they identified was a lousy internet connection which complicated the access to education for the local youth, especially during the pandemic.

Training and Education

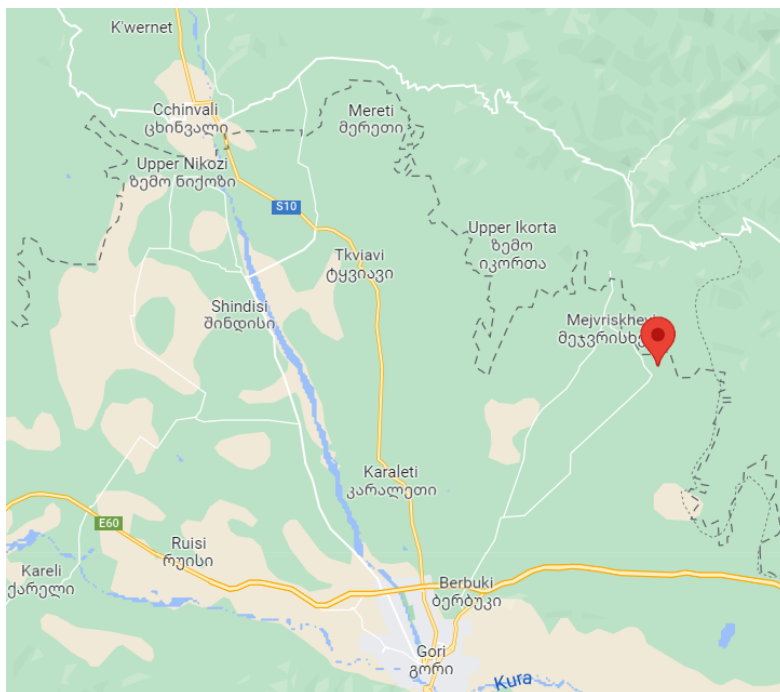
In Adzvi, respondent no. 8 claimed that plenty of valuable training is available for local residents. She believes that her community should continue the diversification of the local economy which has shown excellent results. A proper analysis of the local soil could make this process faster and more effective.

Respondent no. 8 believes that Adzvi could also benefit from more greenhouses for successful tomato production.

Bad Local Roads

Respondent no. 7 claimed that continuing the already built road closer to orchards would help locals with the existing poor access to their plots, especially during rainy seasons.

Kirbali and Bershueti¹³



Population: Kirbali:556

Population Bershueti:837

Location: Gori region, northeast of Gori

Main problems: Lost orchards, pastures, and forests; dangerous/vast fear zone

Other problems: Insufficient access to the internet, damaged houses or infrastructure, lack of culture and sports opportunities

Respondents

Kirbali

Respondent no. 1 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 2 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 3 – Young man

¹³ Field survey in Kirbali and Bershueti on March 21, 2022.

Family A

Respondent no. 4 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 5 – Elderly man

Bershueti

Respondent no. 6 – Middle-aged woman

Respondent no. 7 – Middle-aged woman

Respondent no. 8 – Young man

Description

Kirbali is a relatively large settlement located between fertile lowlands and wooded hills. It belongs to a broader cluster of settlements around Mejvriskhevi but it is slightly more geographically isolated than others. The line of the nearby forest represents the de facto border of a relatively dangerous fear zone. Bershueti is located somewhat more to the south. Its fertile soil and does not touch the ABL as directly as Kirbali.

Local Economy

The local economy of Kirbali has traditionally been based on apple growing. However, in recent years, locals managed to diversify their production. Now, many locals also grow plums and apricots, the latter being seemingly the most profitable in the local Georgian market. Despite early efforts to diversify local agricultural production, the problem of the Georgian market being oversaturated with apples remains a problem according to local respondents. On the other hand, the local economy was damaged by the proximity of the ABL to traditional pastures. As respondents no. 1 and no. 3 claimed, the situation is not critical but herders do get detained by the Russian border guards and families cannot keep as many heads of cattle as before the war. Some villagers lost as many as eight cows due to the proximity of the ABL. Respondent no. 4 said that many local women get seasonal work in nearby large-sized orchards. More than 20 men and six women from the village left for work in the EU. They are mostly satisfied and send money back to the town.

The local economy in Bershueti is based predominantly on orchards and growing apples. Development is hindered by limited access to irrigation water which used to be traditionally provided from the territory of the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

There is no direct transport link from Kirbali to Tbilisi but the minibus leaves four times a day from nearby Zeti. In Bershueti, all respondents were very satisfied with local transport. Minibuses leave the settlement every hour.

Water

Respondents in both settlements reported problems with drinking water at the time of our visit. According to local authorities,¹⁴ the problem was solved in the summer of 2022.

Gas

Both villages have access to gas and the GEL 200 subsidies. All respondents agree that gasification has helped them significantly in the context of lost forest access.

Drinking and Irrigation Water

Irrigation water in Bershueti is sufficient for local agriculture. Unlike in many other villages on the ABL, local orchards did not dry out after the 2008 war. Respondents from both settlements claimed the existence of some chronic problems with drinking water. As Mr. Zoziashvili explained,¹⁵ problems in both settlements were solved by constructing boreholes.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

As respondents claim, there is a clinic in both villages which meets their needs.

Education

Kirbali also has an eight-grade school with older children attending the school in nearby Zeti. They are transported by minibus free-of-charge. The village also has a local shop.

There is a 12-grade school and a kindergarten in Bershueti. The school was recently renovated.

Shops and Grocery Stores

Respondents from both settlements claimed they have good access to shops and grocery stores.

Culture

Children from Kirbali travel to nearby Zeti to participate in cultural and sports activities. There is a dance and singing group in a local school available for local children and youth in Bershueti.

Security

Kirbali de facto lost access to the nearby forest and its traditional pastures are covered by a fear zone where Russian border guards frequently operate. Locals also lost access to one church and the cemetery is close to a fear zone. All respondents claim that the activity of Russian border guards in the region is high and people are frequently detained.

¹⁴ Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

¹⁵ Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

Respondent no. 5 himself was detained and spent two months and eight days in jail. He claims the guards treated him well in detention. His wife is Ossetian and has family in the de facto South Ossetia. Relatives visited him frequently and, in the end, paid a fine for his release. Later, he was detained for a second time while herding cattle in the fear zone. He spent several hours on the post of the Russian border guard but was released later when he showed border guards that he had recently injured his hand and needed medical care.

Although Bershueti did not lose significant lands following the 2008 war, it has a very active fear zone which tends to widen. Several people were detained on the outskirts of the village. In recent months, Russian border guards increased their activity in proximity to the local church and the cemetery.



Woman from Kirbali in her home. Foto: Tamta Gokadze. Kirbali on 21. March 2022.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Dangerous Fear Zone

Besides problems stemming from the low prices of apples on the Georgian market, most locals from Kirbali are troubled by insecurity stemming from a large fear zone on the outskirts of the village and the high level of activity of the Russian border guards in the area.

Outflow of Youth

In Bershueti, locals claim that the outflow of local youth is the greatest danger for their community in the longer term.

Drinking Water

Regarding possible projects and investments, all respondents agree that inadequate access and low drinking water quality, especially in the summer, is the most acute problem. As the responsible authorities informed us, the problem in question has already been eliminated.

Damaged Historic Church

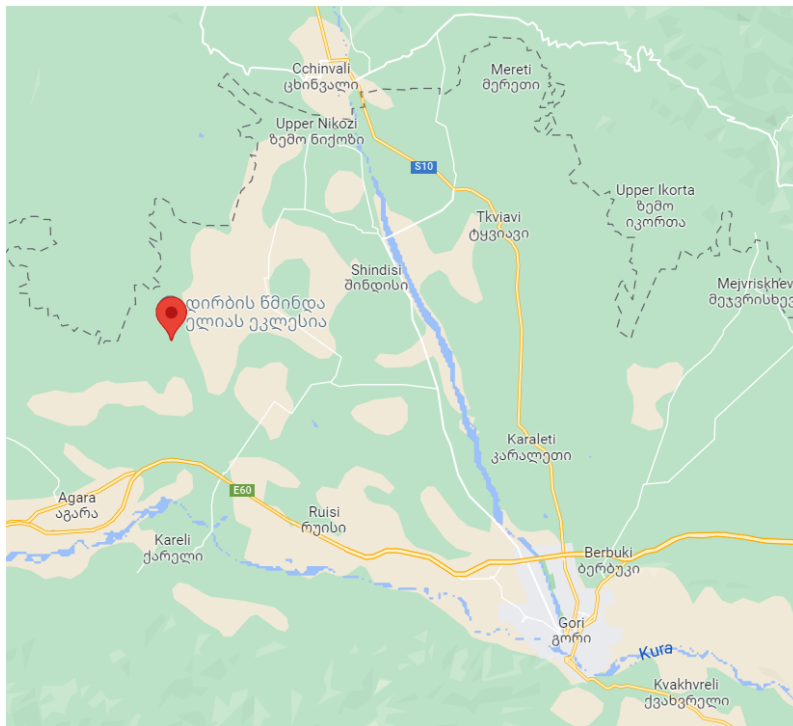
Respondents no. 2 and no. 3 also said that there is a historic church in the center of the settlement, damaged by an earthquake in the late 1980s. They would be happy if it were restored. Although Kirbali has two other churches, one is deep in the fear zone and the second one is from the late medieval period and also needs renovation.

Access to the Internet

Respondent no. 8 said the local youth would need better access to the internet. All respondents are concerned with the outflow of youth from the village. Projects should focus on this issue, creating more opportunities for leisure time and job opportunities for youngsters.

Kareli Region

Dirbi¹⁶



Population: 3028

Location: North of Kareli

Main problems: Absence of market/need for diversification, local roads

Other issues: Lack of culture and sports opportunities

Respondents

Respondent no. 1 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 2 – Middle-aged woman

Family A

Respondent no. 3 – Young man

Respondent no. 4 – Middle-aged woman

Description

Although Dirbi is located on the same axis as Dvani and Takhtisdziri, its nature is somewhat specific. The village is higher on the hill, traditionally lacking access to irrigation water. Although dependent on rainfall, it simultaneously has extraordinarily fertile soil.

Local Economy

Similarly to nearby Dvani and Takhtisdziri, the economy of Dirbi as well is mainly based on apple growing with locals focusing more on markets in Kutaisi and the Imereti region rather than in Tbilisi.

¹⁶ Field survey in Dirbi on March 21, 2022.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

Locals see the terrible condition of local roads in the village as a fundamental problem.

Water

Respondents from Dirbi claimed that their settlement has never had proper irrigation water due to its topographic position. On the other hand, all agree that the soil in the village is extraordinarily fertile and allows for a good harvest with sufficient rainfall. The town has access to good quality drinking water but only a couple of days during the week.

Gas

Dirbi is fully gasified.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

Dirbi has an clinic which works for several hours one day per week. Respondent no. 4 said that a small pharmacy would help the village.

Education

There is an elementary school and kindergarten in the settlement. Older children attend school in a nearby village where they are provided minibus transport free-of-charge. Respondents were generally satisfied in this respect.

Shops and Grocery Stores

There is a small shop in the village and bigger shops in nearby Kareli.

Culture

Locals claim that local youth barely have any sports and cultural opportunities.

Security

Dirbi has lost some orchards and pastures following the 2008 war due to borderization.



A local man stands in the mud near the centre of Dirbi. Foto: Tamta Gokadze, on 19. March 2022.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Lack of Markets for Local Production

Local respondents were mainly concerned with the low prices of apples on the local Georgian market in combination with the increasing costs of fertilizers.

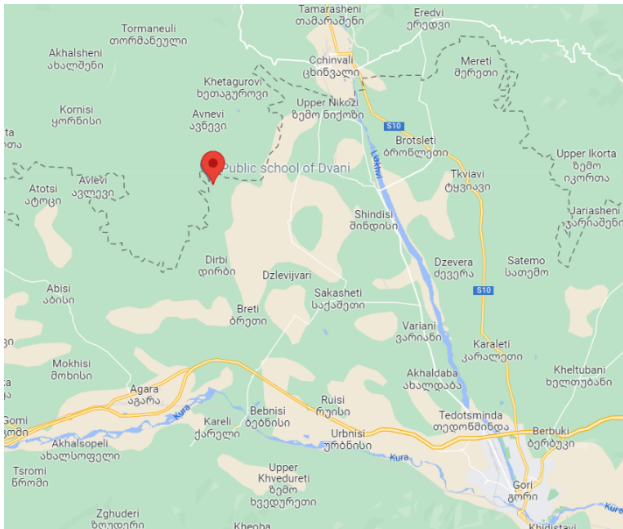
Absence of Paved Roads

Another matter of concern is the absence of adequately paved roads in the settlement. This reality often hinders access to orchards on the part of the locals. Additionally, local children cannot play and meet friends due to muddy roads.

As respondent no. 3 said, the bad road is the main problem for Dirbi, especially in spring and autumn. Only the main road is paved with asphalt and all other roads are muddy. “Look at these roads. They turn to streams and lakes twice a year. It is not just that we get stuck with our cars, but our children have nowhere to play and even cannot visit each other,” he said.

Respondents no. 1, no. 2 and no. 3 from Dirbi all agreed that the village would need better access to agricultural machinery and asphalt roads in order to develop. Under the current circumstances, they sometimes cannot reach their orchards due to muddy roads.

Dvani and Takhtisdziri¹⁷



Population Dvani: 1002
Population Takhtisdziri: 563

Location: North of Kareli

Main problems: Lost orchards, pastures and forests; absence of market/need for diversification

Other problems: Lack of culture and sports opportunities, lack of agricultural mechanisms, damaged houses and infrastructure

Description

Dvani and Takhtisdziri are located in Kareli municipality on the banks of the East Prone River. The topography of both settlements is rather specific. They were built in the border zone between the fertile plain and the mountainous area suitable for cattle breeding.

Respondents

Dvani

- Respondent no. 1 – Middle-aged man
- Respondent no. 2 – Middle-aged man
- Respondent no. 3 – Middle-aged woman

Takhtisdziri

- Family A – Two pensioners
- Respondent no. 5 – Elderly man
- Respondent no. 6. – Elderly woman
- Respondent no. 7 – Middle-aged man
- Respondent no. 8 – Elderly man
- Respondent no. 9 – Middle-aged woman
- Respondent no. 10 – Elderly man

¹⁷ Field survey in Dvani and Takhtisdziri on April 29, 2022.

Local Economy

Like the nearby Dirbi, both Dvani and Takhtisdziri have economies based on apple growing. Respondents from both settlements also agreed with respondents from Dirbi that the local Georgian market is oversaturated with apples. “After losing the Russian market, we had to refocus primarily on the market in Kutaisi which is more profitable than markets in Gori and Tbilisi. Nevertheless, in Russia, I could sell a truck of apples. In Kutaisi, I am happy if I sell 50 bags,” said respondent no. 5 from Takhtisdziri. Additionally, respondents no. 5 and no. 7 claimed that they could not find a proper replacement for the Russian market. “Dealers who buy local apples and then sell them in Russia come from time to time and buy part of our harvest. Although they offer the same price as we sell in Kutaisi, we do not have any expenses for gasoline, so it is more profitable in the end. On the other hand, they are only interested in highest quality apples,” said respondent no. 5. Respondent no. 7 explained that he is unaware of any attempts in Takhtisdziri to refocus on other production. He claimed that locals do not know what else they could effectively grow and usually do not have the capital for risky experiments. Respondent no. 5 added that state subsidies to local juice companies buying lesser-quality grade apples helped mitigate this problem.

In Takhtisdziri, respondents claimed they could no longer engage in traditional cattle herding due to lost pastures. One family can afford a maximum of two or three cows.

Additionally, the local economy in Dvani is traditionally based on apple growing and suffers a lot from a lack of market for their production according to the respondents. Respondent no. 1 also stressed that the Georgian market could not absorb so many apples.

Agents who buy apples for Russia buy only the best sort. Prices in juice companies have risen thanks to state subsidies but they still barely cover the costs, especially for villages located further from them. “You need to water the trees, give them fertilizers and herbicides. Then you need to pay people who will help you collect them and then you need to transport them to the juice factory. It all costs money,” said respondent no. 1.

As he claims, bigger local farmers pay GEL 8,000-9,000 a year just for herbicides. Additionally, fertilizer used to cost GEL 40 and now it costs GEL 80 for approximately 50 kg—the average set needs at least 20 such packages but ideally from 30 to 40. The respondent added that he needs 300 kg of fertilizers and an additional GEL 50-60 a day for one laborer who helps pick the apples.

He also said that local farmers mostly have old traditional sorts of apple trees. These, as they claim, have better-tasting fruits than new imported sorts of trees but are less productive and trees grow comparatively tall, making apple picking complicated. New imported sorts of apple trees have less tasty fruit but they are more productive, they do not grow tall and their apples look visually better. Therefore, several farmers in the area are experimenting with these new sorts. Additionally, local traditional sorts, like Grotski, Kekhura or Banani, are less resilient to diseases and require additional herbicide investments.

Respondent no. 4 added that although now irrigated, Dvani was without irrigation water for several years following the 2008 war. As a result, many trees dried up and the local economy was severely hit.

As respondent no. 2 reported, there is a big farm in Khvedureti which gives part-time employment to local women from the village. They get GEL 30 per day which helps their households significantly.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

Respondents from Dvani reported that the minibus to Tbilisi leaves twice a day from the village and another one leaves four times a day for Kareli. Respondents agreed that they have a good connection to the rest of Georgia. Residents of Takhtidziri were also satisfied with transport connections. One minibus leaves for Tbilisi and several others for Kareli. Both settlements are fully gasified.

Water

Local respondents in Dvani claimed that the settlement has access to irrigation water. However, the situation is far from ideal since they have to share irrigation channels with other nearby settlements. Before the 2008 war, the village used to be provided with irrigation water from the territory of the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region. All respondents agreed that they have access to good-quality drinking water.

As Mr. Zoziashvili explained,¹⁸ the drinking water system is based on wells which can be used for irrigating little gardens and greenhouses to a certain extent. The more the well water is used, the better is its quality.

In Takhtidziri, respondents no. 5 and no. 6 claimed that problems with irrigation water have been solved. Respondents no. 7 and no. 8, on the other hand, argued that there is not always enough irrigation water. However, they agreed that the situation had improved significantly as compared to the first years following the 2008 war. All respondents from Takhtidziri were satisfied with access to drinking water.

Gas

Both settlements are fully gasified.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

There are small clinic in both settlements. Respondents were satisfied with them.

Education

Children from both settlements have good access to schools and education.

Shops and Grocery Stores

Both communities have small shops covering their most basic needs.

¹⁸ Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

Culture

Local youth has access to some extra-curricular activities. However, several local respondents claimed that their access to sports and culture could be better.

Security

Respondents from Dvani reported that they did not lose orchards but lost some pastures, complicating cattle herding.



Residents of Takhtisdziri. Foto: Tamta Gokadze. Takhtisdziri on 19. March 2022.

Residents of Takhtisdziri said that they lost some orchards and vast pastures. Furthermore, current pastures are close to the ABL and local fear zone. As respondent no. 5 said, they reached an unwritten agreement with residents of the other side of the ABL regarding lost cattle. “In the past, we had to pay a fee for lost cattle to get them back. It used to be 2,000 rubles and then it rose to 5,000. Recently, an interesting thing happened. Approximately 20-25 heads of cattle from the other side came to the village. We sent them back to them. Since then, Ossetians also send our cattle back if they venture close to their settlements,” reported the respondent.

Regarding detentions of local residents by Russian border guards, respondents from both villages said there were some cases in the past but it is not a significant problem.

In the past, residents were afraid to go out after dark as wild animals from the nearby forests roamed the village streets. The construction of street lighting, however, solved this problem to a large extent.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Lack of Agricultural Machinery and Diversification

Most respondents in both settlements believe that the lack of agricultural mechanisms and the need for diversification of local agricultural production are the biggest obstacles to developing the local economy.

Respondent no. 3 said that he bought a new tractor with the co-financing help from the government. This purchase helped his farm immensely as he stated. Respondent no. 3 would like to buy several aggregates to lease his tractor to neighbors and get some extra income.

Additionally, respondents no. 1 and no. 4 agree that besides problems with irrigation water, the lack of agricultural machinery greatly hinders the village's development.

Training and Education

Respondent no. 3 said that before establishing his farm, he attended several trainings conducted by the Red Cross where they taught locals how to prepare grants. He considers such training very helpful and practical. Based on his experience, the respondent believes many young people would stay in the village if they had a similar small farm. As he claims, it can produce better income than the workplace in Tbilisi. Besides him, there are just two other official farmers in the relatively big settlement.

Respondent no. 3 believes that the lack of education and training is the main problem for the village. "There should be more training for farmers or stricter rules for grants," she said, adding that she knows several locals who got grants for greenhouses but they are empty because people do not understand how to make them function. The respondent also agrees that some soil analysis should be made to identify alternative crops for apples which are not profitable under current circumstances.

Damaged Bridge

Respondents no. 1 and no. 2 said that reconstructing the local bridge crossing the Prone River would be helpful.

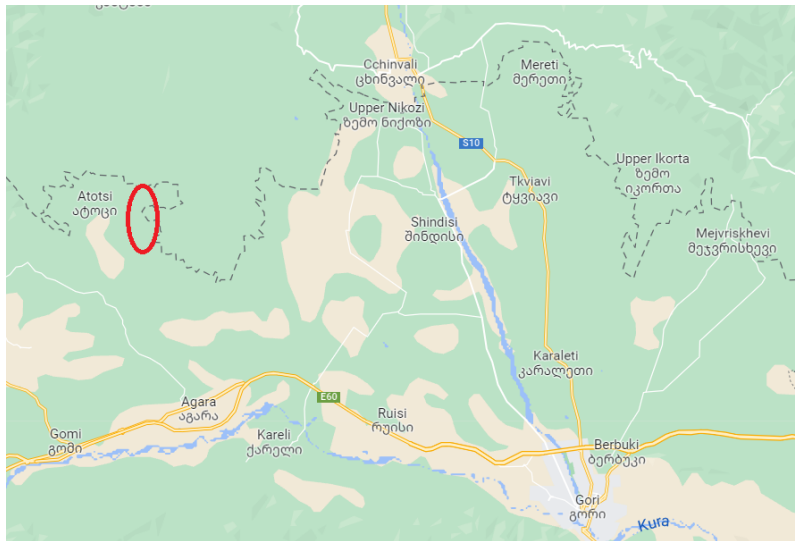
Cold Storage for Apples

More fridges to store apples is another possible project as mentioned by respondent no. 1. There are several in the village but more would be needed.

Agricultural Center

Regarding possible investments and projects, respondents no. 5, no. 7 and no. 8 think that Takhtisdziri lacks tractors and harvesters. They all said they need a center where they could rent agricultural machinery. Such centers used to be close by in the past and they helped them immensely as the respondents claimed. At the moment, the closest such center is between Khashuri and Kareli but it is relatively far away. "Just to bring a harvester here to Takhtisdziri costs GEL 250," claimed respondent no. 5. He said he agreed to lease a harvester from a private owner last year. However, he did not come in the end and the rye harvest rotted on the field.

Knolevi, Avlevi and Tseronisi¹⁹



Population Knolevi: 383

Population Avlevi: 481

Population Tseronisi: 585

Main problems: Lost orchards, pastures and forests; issues with drinking or irrigating water

Other problems: Lack of agricultural machinery, dangerous/vast fear zone

Respondents

Knolevi

Respondent no. 1 – Elderly man

Respondent no. 2 – aged woman – shop owner

Respondent no. 3 – Elderly man

Avlevi

Family A

Respondent no. 4 – Middle-aged man

¹⁹ Field survey in Knolevi, Avlevi and Tseronisi on April 28, 2022.

Respondent no. 5. – Middle-aged woman
Respondent no. 6 – Elderly woman

Family B

Respondent no. 7 – Elderly man
Respondent no. 8 – Young man
Respondent no. 9 – Middle-aged women
Respondent no. 10 – Elderly woman

Tseronisi

Respondent no. 11 – Middle-aged male shopkeeper
Respondent no. 12 – Middle-aged male local
Respondent no. 13 – Young woman – local teacher

Description

All three settlements are situated on one axis along the middle Prone River. Local nature is slightly hilly and wooded with fertile soil, especially in the river valley and allows for both agriculture and cattle herding.



Local shopkeeper from Knolevi. She is satisfied with the situation in the settlement and believes there is perspective on good life even on the ABL. Foto: Tamta Gokadze. Knolevi on 28. April 2022.

Local Economy

Residents of Knolevi traditionally used to grow apples. However, after the 2008 war, half of the settlement was left without access to irrigation water. “My orchard dried up and most of the trees died. This year, I decided to cut them all and replace my orchard with a vineyard. Here you can see the wood. I will use it for heating,” said respondent no. 1. Respondents from the settlement also added that following the war, they lost access to traditional pastures, mainly on the other side of the ABL. As a result, they cannot afford as many heads of cattle as before. Respondent no. 2, who lives in the part of the village with access to irrigation water, is generally happy about the economic situation of the settlement. She is an owner of a small shop and has a small garden with various fruits, vegetables and beans which mainly cover the needs of her family.

In nearby Avlevi, the situation is similar. Although the village never had access to irrigation water, half of it is irrigated from the nearby Prone River. The rest is not irrigated. As respondents from Family A said, they can grow some apples but traditionally rely primarily on corn and beans under the current situation. Neither family A nor B knew any larger farmer in the village. Most families produce a harvest which partially covers their needs but has hardly anything extra for sale. As respondent no. 7 claimed, the situation in Avlevi is far from ideal but it is similar to most Georgian villages.

Tseronisi used to be irrigated in the past. Unlike many other settlements on the ABL, it has not lost access to irrigation water due to the 2008 war but rather suffers from a crumbling infrastructure. According to respondents no. 11 and no. 12, Tseronisi also traditionally relied on apple orchards, but several locals managed to successfully reorient production to tomatoes which are more profitable in the local market.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

Most respondents from all three settlements were satisfied with the transport links. As they claimed, one minibus leaves daily for every regional city and Tbilisi. Only respondent no. 13 believes that this is not sufficient for the youth from the three villages despite suiting the needs of older people. She believes that the given situation complicates their access to sports and culture.

Water

These communities are just partially irrigated but there is good access to drinking water.

Gas

These communities are all fully gasified.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

There are small clinics in each village. Local respondents were satisfied with this situation.

Education

Respondents from all three settlements were mostly satisfied with access to schools and kindergartens. As family A from Avlevi told us, local children do not have such opportunities as their peers in cities, but the situation is over all not too bad. Their children attend Georgian folk dances and wrestling classes, and they have a small football stadium. The state is also building a new kindergarten in the village.

Respondent no. 13 from Tseronisi mentioned that there are several disadvantaged children in the village and children from poorer families who could get a better education in nearby Kareli but cannot do so because of the absence of proper transport links.

Shops and Grocery Stores

Respondents from all three communities claimed they have good access to shops and groceries in their villages and nearby Kareli.

Culture

Public transport hinders the access of the local youth to culture and sports, although it does meet the needs of adults.

Security

Respondents from Knolevi claimed that their community did not lose orchards but lost traditional pastures. Additionally, some of their current pastures are close to the established fear zone. As respondent no. 1 said, local shepherds often get detained by Russian border guards. Residents of Avlevi told us that they also lost some orchards and vast pastures, limiting opportunities for cattle herding. Respondents no. 11 and no. 12 said that there is a similar situation in Tseronisi.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Lack of Agricultural Machinery

The lack of agricultural machinery was the most voiced problem in all three communities. Respondent no. 1 said that he had to move his plan for the replacement of the apple orchard with a vineyard for one year because he could not manage to find an available tractor to prepare the soil.

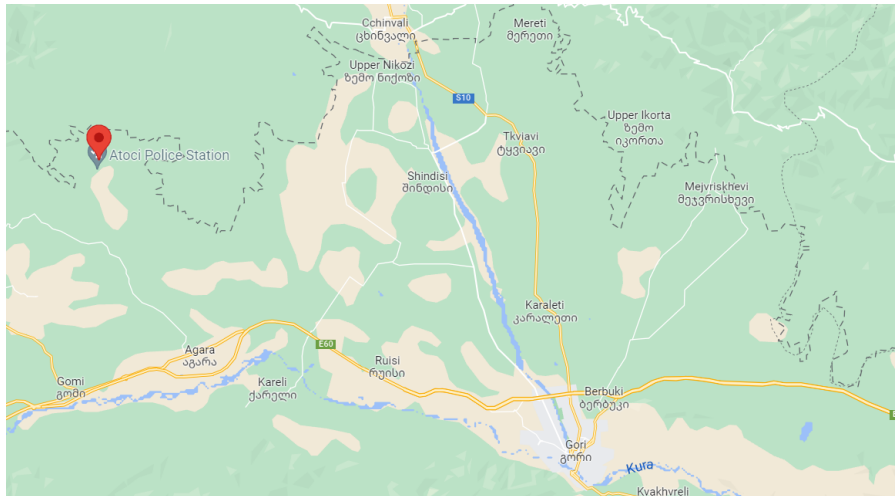
Absence of Irrigation Water

Respondents of Knolevi and Tseronisi also mostly agreed that the absence of irrigation water is the biggest obstacle to developing local economies.

A specific problem was mentioned by residents of Avlevi who claim that a drainage system is needed. Under the current conditions, local streets tend to turn into streams during times of rainfall.

Regarding smaller initiatives, several respondents, especially respondent no. 2, mentioned that the development of greenhouses has helped their communities.

Atotsi²⁰



Population: 311

Main problem: Absence of market/need for diversification, lack of agricultural machinery

Respondents

Respondent no. 1 Elderly man

Respondent no. 2 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 3 – Middle-aged women

Respondent no. 4 – Elderly man

Respondent no. 5 – Middle-aged woman shopkeeper

Respondent no. 6 – Young woman

Description

Atotsi is located in a hilly part of Kaspi municipality close to the Georgian-South Ossetian ABL. It serves as a central settlement for a cluster of villages, including Koda and Chvrinisi and also to Knolevi, Avlevi and Tseronisi to a lesser degree.

Local Economy

Due to the hilly character of the surrounding nature, the local economy has traditionally been based on cattle herding rather than orchards. Although there are no big employers of farms close to the settlement, all respondents agreed that the village has enough pastures to sustain more immense herds. Respondent no. 1 said they generally prefer breeds for milk and cheese than breeds for meat. Besides herds of cattle, residents of Atotsi also grow wheat and beans.

²⁰ Field survey in Atotsi on April 29, 2022.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

The village has a new road and a minibus leaves once per day to every relevant city in the Shida Kartli region and Tbilisi. All respondents were satisfied with the transport.

Irrigation and Drinking Water

Atotsi has access to drinking water which, as all respondents agreed, is of good quality. Respondent no. 3 further said that the village does not have access to drinking water all day. "We have drinking water for approximately three hours in the morning and in the evening," she said. Despite that, respondents were generally satisfied with the situation.

As for the irrigation water, only the village's lower part has access. The upper part of the settlement has never been irrigated. Respondent no. 4, however, stressed that it is not such a significant problem for Atotsi since the local economy is based on cattle herding rather than farming.

As Mr. Zoziashvili explained,²¹ the water supply has always been a problem in the case of Atotsi due to its specific geographical position. Despite that, the agency managed to create an efficient system of wells. However, locals also use this water to water their gardens which causes occasional supply outages.

Gas

The village is fully gasified. All respondents agree that gasification helped them significantly.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

Atotsi has an ambulatory. All respondents were satisfied with it. Respondent no. 3 said the local doctor is an excellent specialist.

Education

The village has a modern and renovated school with a big playground. All respondents were satisfied with it.

Shops and Grocery Stores

The settlement has several shops covering the basic needs of its residents.

Culture

Respondents agreed that local pupils could attend various extra-curricular activities in the local school.

²¹ Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

Security

Lost Land

Most respondents claimed that Atotsi did not lose any land. Respondent no. 4 said that the upper side of the village lost some but it was not a significant blow to the local economy.

Detentions and Fear Zones

Locals did not report any detentions by Russian border guards or significant fear zones.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Lack of Agricultural Machinery

Locals said that there are some tractors and rotators in the village. Respondents no. 1 and no. 2 agreed that more would help but the situation is not critical since the community relies more on pastures than on orchards and fields.

Training and Education

Regarding information on project opportunities, respondents no. 1 and no. 2 claimed that people need to be more informed. On the other hand, respondents no. 4 and no. 5 said that there is enough information on project opportunities and plenty of training, especially those conducted by the Red Cross.

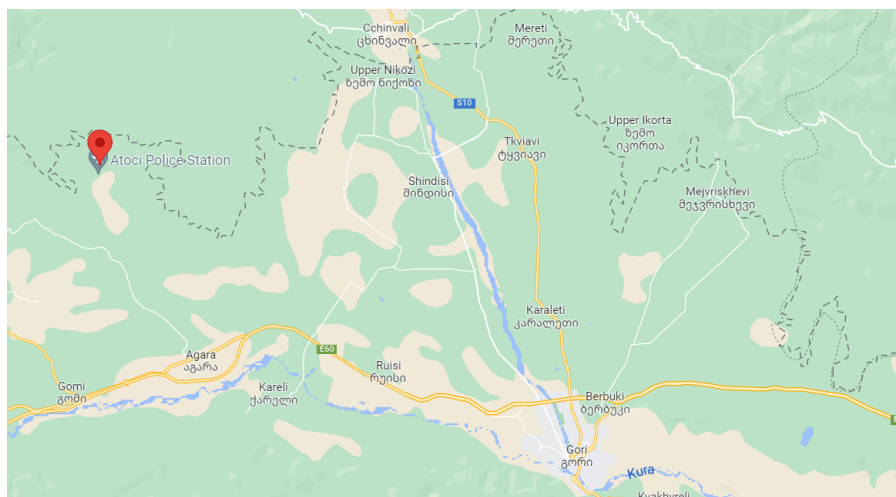
Watermill

Regarding alternatives for future development, respondents no. 1 and no. 2 claimed that the settlement has just an old watermill. Since the local community has good wheat productivity, a new, more modern mill would help the local economy.

Diversification of Production

Respondents no. 5 and no. 6, on the other hand, believe that the village could benefit from a diversification of production. According to respondent no. 5, cherries, walnuts and plums are excellent alternatives. Both women also stressed that greenhouses might stimulate local development, mainly if focused on growing roses.

Chvrinisi²²



Population: 188

Main problems: Lost orchards, pastures and forests; lack of agricultural machinery, isolation due to lack of transport, dangerous/vast fear zone, issues with drinking or irrigating water

Other Problems: Lack of culture and sports opportunities, absence of shop/groceries/bakery, insufficient access to the internet

Respondents

Family A

Respondent no. 1 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 2 – Middle-aged man (son of respondent no. 1)

Respondent no. 3 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 4 – Elderly woman

Family B

R5 – Middle-aged woman

R6 – Middle-aged man

Description

Chvrinisi is a small, relatively isolated community facing many challenges from a lack of pastures and plots to problems with irrigation water and no public transport links to the outside world. Problems of this community are even more amplified by the fact that Chvrinisi is not officially considered a community in the conflict zone despite its proximity to the ABL.

²² Field survey in Chvrinisi on April 29, 2022.

Local Economy

All respondents agree that the local economy of Chvrinisi is in a dire state. The settlement used traditionally focus on cattle herding but it lost access to most pastures following the 2008 war. Due to the lack of irrigation water and scarce sources of drinking water, there are few alternatives for a reorientation of the local economy or its diversification. As respondents no. 5 and no. 6 stressed, the village did not have enough soil and pastures even prior to the 2008 war.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

Isolation from the rest of the country presents a significant obstacle to residents. There is no minibus connection with the village. Locals have to rely entirely on their private transport.



Family from Chvrinisi, one of the most negatively affected settlements on the ABL. Foto: Tamta Gokadze. Chvrinisi on 29. April 2022.

Drinking and Irrigation Water

All respondents said that the village has no access to irrigation water with the government's recently implemented drinking water system. There are several wells in the settlement. However, they tend to dry out in summer. Respondent no. 6 claimed that the village used to have access to irrigation water from the territory of the de facto South Ossetia.

As Mr. Zoziashvili explained,²³ Chvrinisi is not officially a settlement in the conflict zone; therefore, it is not prioritized at the moment. As a result, existing problems with drinking and irrigation water are the primary responsibility of the local self-government.

Gas

The village is fully gasified. All respondents agree that gasification and state support of GEL 200 per year for gas helped them significantly, especially since they lost access to their traditional forest.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

A small clinic in the village is visited by the doctor once a week. Respondent no. 1 said that the doctor is a good expert, but she has health problems and, therefore, did not visit Chvrinisi for extended periods. Generally, locals are satisfied with the situation.

Education

There is no school or kindergarten in the village where only a handful of children live. Local youth attend the school in Atotsi. Respondents indicate that the local youth was significantly disadvantaged during the pandemic due to poor internet coverage.

Shops and Grocery Stores

There is no shop in the village.

Culture

The settlement has no access to culture or sport.

Security

Chvrinisi has lost its traditional pastures while the rest are close to the fear zone. Respondent no. 3 claims that he was detained by Russian border guards while herding his cattle.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Lack of Agricultural Machinery

Respondent no. 5 believes that machinery is the most pressing of the problems and is the one most easily solvable in Chvrinisi.

Greenhouses

Locals are divided on the idea of greenhouses. Respondents no. 1 and no. 2 claimed that they would make economic sense even if watered by drinking water. Respondent no. 3, on the other hand, believes that such a practice might lead to a lack of drinking water or an increase in its price.

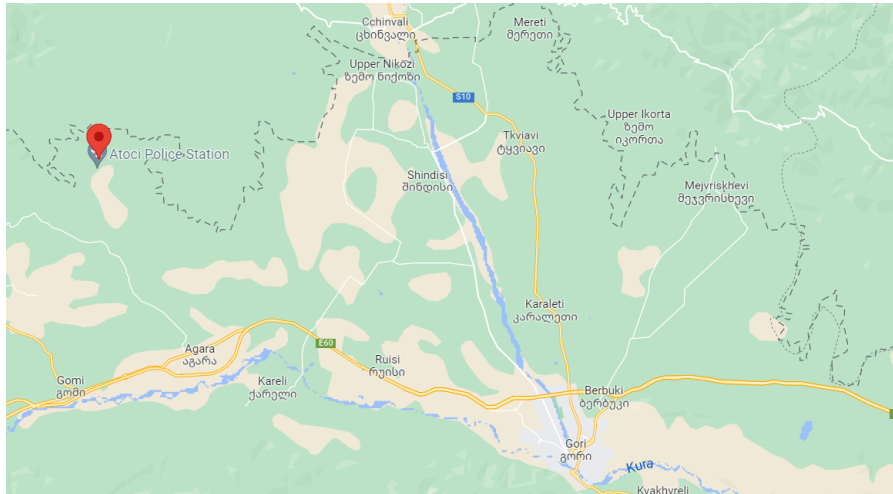
²³ Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

Alternative Animals

Respondent no. 2 believes that pigs might help the local economy. He stressed that, unlike cows, they do not need pastures and can be fed by corn grown in the village.

Family B members said they got chickens as a form of development help from some NGO. However, the chickens were not of a local breed and did not survive the winter.

Koda²⁴



Population: 221

Main problem: Lost orchards, pastures and forests

Other problems: Insufficient access to the internet

Other notes: Partial reorientation to sheep

Respondents

Family A

Respondent no. 1 – Middle-aged woman

Respondent no. 2 – Young woman

Respondent no. 3 – Young woman

Family B

Respondent no. 4 – Young man

Respondent no. 5 – A middle-aged woman (aged 52 years)

Respondent no. 6 – Middle-aged woman

²⁴ Field survey in Koda on April 29, 2022.

Description

Koda is a small settlement in a hilly part of the Kareli region close to the Georgian-South Ossetian ABL. Its most characteristic feature is relative geographical isolation from the rest of Georgia-controlled territories.

Local Economy

Like most settlements in this particular area, Koda used to have big herds of cattle before the 2008 war. The loss of traditional pastures crippled the local economy. Since then, many locals have managed to reorient from cows to sheep which do not need such vast fields. As a result, several families can raise enough sheep to earn extra income by selling lamb, including both respondent families A and B. Farm crops locals grow mostly just beans and corn.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

Local respondents claim they have good transport links to the rest of Georgia. Respondent no. 1 said that there are three minibuses a day leaving from the village, including to Tbilisi.

Water

Koda did traditionally not have access to both irrigation and central drinking water. In 2020, the Georgian government built infrastructure to provide locals with drinking water. At the time of our visit, the locals were happy with the quality of the water.

Gas

The village was gasified, and residents benefit from the GEL 200 yearly allowance for gas from the government.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

Like most settlements on the ABL, Koda has its small clinic. All respondents agree that it is sufficient for the needs of such a small community.

Education

Since there are not many young people left in the settlement, there is no school or kindergarten in Koda. Local youngsters attend the school near Abano where they are transported by free minibus. A problem is the poor internet coverage. During the pandemic, local children and youth could often not attend classes due to the poor internet coverage. Only mobile internet was available to them, but this was too expensive for many.

Shops and Grocery Stores

There is a small shop in the village.

Culture

There is a small football stadium for the youth in the village.

Security

The settlement has lost its traditional pastures. Detentions by the Russian border guard are not a significant problem. However, several years ago, a local teacher was severely beaten by unknown assailants on the outskirts of the settlement. Since then, the police have been patrolling the village and similar incidents have not occurred since.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Partial Reorientation to Sheep

Approximately ten years ago, locals were provided with government help in the form of either sheep or turkeys. Respondent families A and B got each five heads of sheep. Both families managed to keep and even increase their flocks. They provide them with food as well as additional financial resources. Both families agree that under the current circumstances, sheep are a great alternative to cattle. According to respondent no. 1, some families chose turkeys instead. It is also a good alternative. However, some neighbors did not have cages and wolves ate their poultry.

Respondents no., 1 and no. 2 do not believe pigs could be an alternative since they need too much food.

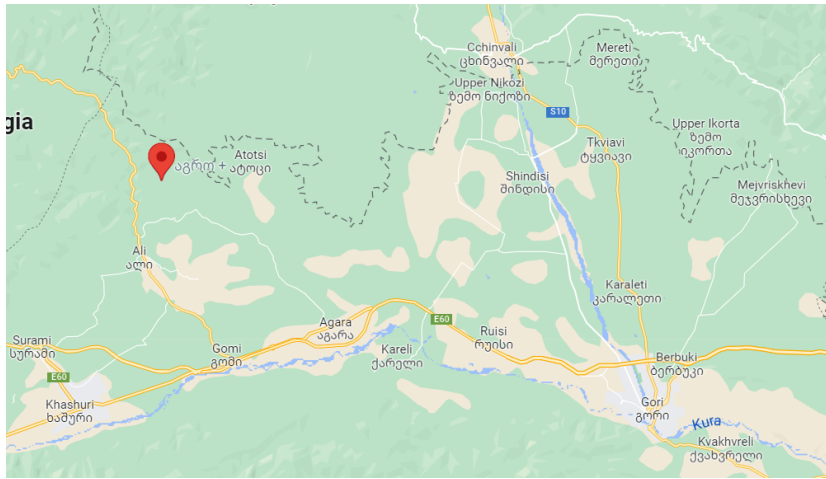
Respondents no. 4 and no. 5 stress that they even produce cheese from their sheep but selling it with a reasonable profit is hard. Both claim that locals would be able to produce and sell cheese if they could organize transport to Tbilisi, make agreements with some market chains and make some professional trademarking.

Better Environment for Local Youth

Respondents no. 3 and no. 6, young girls and middle-aged women and a mother of two small children, both think that the village needs a playground and a mall square for local youth to meet. Better internet connection is equally needed for the local youth.

Khashuri Region

Chorchana²⁵



Population: 80

Main problems: Lost orchards, pastures and forests; lack of agricultural machinery, dangerous/vast fear zone

Other problems: Absence of shop/groceries/bakery, issues with drinking or irrigating water

Respondents

Respondent no. 1 – Middle-aged man

Family A

Respondent no. 2 Elderly Woman

Respondent no. 3 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 4 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 5 – Elderly woman

Description

Chorchana is a village located on the edge of the eponymous Chorchana forest.

In recent years, the forest has become an epicenter of tensions between Georgia and the de facto leadership of South Ossetia. As a result, the community which traditionally lived from the riches of the Chorchana forest found itself on the border of a vast and ever-changing fear zone.

²⁵ Field survey in Chorchana on April 30, 2022.

Local Economy

Respondents claim that the village is half-empty for the greater part of the year. Most residents return in spring to gather jonjoli which is abundant in the area. Some gather it in the nearby forest but some locals have vast jonjoli gardens. Despite its abundance, jonjoli cannot at the moment play a role as an economic base for the future development of the village. As respondent no. 1 stressed, the problem is the low price of jonjoli on the local market. It is not worth hiring any part-time workers to gather it. For sales to be profitable, their wages could be at most be GEL 7 per day. “Nobody will work for such a small amount of money,” she stressed. The economy of the local community was crippled by the spread of the fear zone to its traditional pastures as well as the militarization of the nearby Chorchana forest. The absence of irrigation water further hinders the development of local agriculture.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

A new local road was recently built in the village which local respondents say helped them immensely. Respondent no. 1 said that thanks to the new road, several families decided to return to Chorchana. The minibus to Tbilisi leaves in the morning three times a week. As respondent no. 4 explained, the minibus always leaves in the morning, but it does not always return in the evening. Locals should contact the driver by phone and tell him in advance that they will depart from Tbilisi to Chorchana. Minibuses depart from a nearby village for selected cities and Tbilisi every day.

Water

There is no irrigation water or centrally provided drinking water in the village. Most respondents claim that this has always been an issue in the town, although respondent no. 2 said there used to be drinking water in Chorchana during Soviet times. Today, several wells in the settlement provide drinking water to locals. All requested villagers agree that the lack of irrigation water is a significant obstacle to the development of the local economy.

Mr. Zoziashvili claimed²⁶ that Chorchana is a problem that can be solved only by wells as in Atotsi and Koda. Responsible state organizations are working on this problem, but it is technically challenging.

Gas

The village is gasified. All respondents agree that access to gas helped them greatly.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

The village has a clinic which is open on Friday.

²⁶ Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

Education

There is no kindergarten or school in the village. A free minibus is available for local children who study in the nearby town. However, all respondents agree that not many children and young people are left in Chorchana. Therefore, the current situation is satisfactory for them.

Shops and Grocery Stores

There is no shop in the settlement. As respondent no. 5 said, “mobile shops“ visit the village several times a month. However, extra fuel expenses make them more expensive than standard shops in nearby villages.

Sport and Culture

There is a new playground in the village. Most young people and children come to the town in spring and summer.

Security

Chorchana did not lose, as the locals said, its traditional pastures but herding is dangerous due to the increased activities of Russian border guards. This has translated into a significant number of detentions of locals by Russian forces – especially shepherds. Furthermore, the settlement lost its traditional forest which is crucial for the local economy.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Irrigation Water

The absence of irrigation water was mentioned as one of the biggest obstacles to the development of the settlement after it lost access to the traditional forest.

Positive Impact of Paved Road

Respondents no. 1 and no. 5 stressed the importance of a newly built road for improvement of the situation in the village. Additionally, all the locals agree that gasification has improved their situation considerably.

Alternative to Cattle

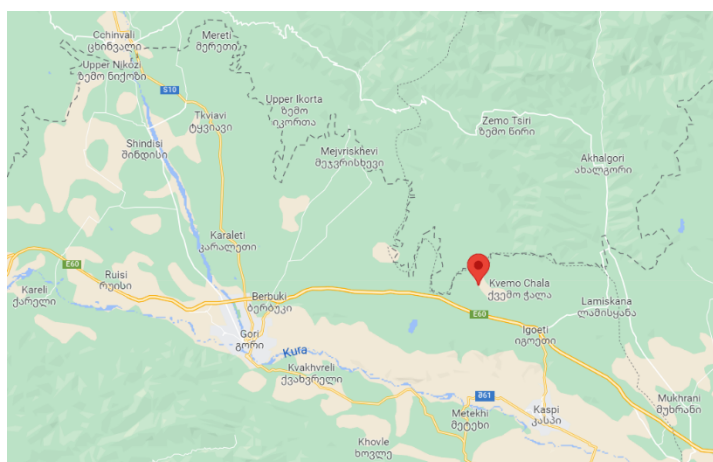
Regarding the future development of the local economy, all respondents stress the importance of finding an alternative to cattle which requires relatively vast pastures. Based on their previous experience, respondents no. 1, no. 3, no. 4 and no. 5 said that sheep and goats are suitable alternatives. Respondent no. 3 explained that sheep are better for older people since they are calmer than goats which tend to go in the direction of the ABL. On the other hand, goats can also find food on the edges of the local forests in winter. The respondent added that in the case of Chorchana, swine also makes economic sense. In addition to the food they provide to farmers, they can find underground mushrooms in local meadows.

Lack of Agricultural Machinery

Respondents no. 1 and no. 2 believe that the settlement would profit from better access to agricultural machinery. There is reportedly only one old tractor in the whole village. Both respondents also agree that access to centrally provided drinking water might stimulate the development of greenhouses in the community.

Kaspi Region

Kodistskaro, Karapila and Zadiantkari²⁷



Population Kodistskharo: 312

Population Karapila: 109

Population Zadiantkari: 61

Main problems: Lost access to irrigation water, lack of agricultural machinery

Other problems: Isolation due to lack of transport, lost orchards, pastures and forests; issues with drinking or irrigating water

Other notes: The positive impact of paved roads

Respondents

Karapila

Respondent no. 1. – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 2. – Young man

Respondent no. 3 – Middle-aged man

²⁷ Field survey in Kodistskharo, Kaparpila and Zadiantkari on May 20, 2022.

Zadiantkari

Respondent no. 4 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 5 – Elderly man

Respondent no. 6 - Young woman

Kodistskaro

Respondent no. 7 – Middle-aged women

Respondent no. 8 – Elderly woman – owner of only local shop created with the help of USAid

Respondent no. 9 – Middle-aged woman

Description

Kodistskaro is a central settlement for several villages, including Karafila, Zadiantkari and Saribari. All communities are in a slightly hilly part of the Kaspi region and are ethnically mixed: Georgian-Ossetian.

Local Economy

Before the 2008 war, the local economy in all villages was based primarily on agriculture with a vast variety of fruits and vegetables. After most towns lost access to irrigation water following the conflict, with Zadiantkari losing it earlier, locals had to reorient to cattle herding. Respondents no. 1 and no. 2 from Karafila consider reorientation to cattle as semi-successful. "Thanks to cattle, we can provide our families with milk, cheese and, to some extent, meat. We can also sell some products in Kaspi and Tbilisi to earn extra money. However, we would need more pastures to allow us to keep bigger herds. With our pastures, herding is still less profitable than our orchards used to be. Nevertheless, it is better than nothing," said respondent no. 1. Respondent no. 2 from the same village added that some neighbors closer to a natural source of water constructed greenhouses and grew raspberries which can be sold for a relatively reasonable price in Tbilisi.

Respondents no. 4 and no. 5 from Zadiantkari also claimed that their village used to be agriculturally very productive in the past when they were adequately irrigated. Over the years, however, the irrigation system was neglected, and the settlement was left without irrigation water.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

The residents from these three villages could have been more satisfied with transport links to other parts of Georgia. As they said, only one minibus per week is leaving for Tbilisi via Kaspi. As a result, respondent no. 6, who sells cheese and butter in the capital, said locals who sell their products in Tbilisi have shared a private taxi. Several respondents (no. 1, no. 2, no. 6 and no. 7) agreed that this lack of proper transport is one factor hindering their villages' development.



Empty playground in Karapila. Foto: Tamta Gokadze. Karapila on 20. May 2022.

Water

All respondents from Kodistskaro, Karafila and Zadiantkari agreed they are provided with good quality drinking water.

As Mr. Zoziashvili said,²⁸ the water system is also based on wells. The project was relatively expensive and complicated, but it helped to solve the problem. The wells are so deep that they are not affected by the weather and are not at risk of pollution.

On the other hand, all three communities agree that local economies suffer significantly from the lack of irrigation water.

Unlike in the case of other settlements, their irrigation system was not provided from the territory of the Tskhinvali region but from the south. Local respondents said that it is now out of order due to years of neglect.

Gas

All communities are fully gasified.

²⁸ Interview with Gela Zoziashvili on May 25, 2022.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

There is an ambulatory in the central government. All respondents were satisfied with their access to healthcare.

Education

Respondents from Kodistskaro said the central village renovated a school and a kindergarten. Additionally, respondents from other nearby settlements are satisfied with the quality of educational opportunities in the area. Respondent no. 1 said that his daughter is studying for free at a university in Tbilisi. On the other hand, locals are thankful for this opportunity but, on the other hand, they claim that not many youngsters are left in the area. Even those without a degree left the village in search of a stable job and better income.

Shops and Grocery Stores

A new shop opened thanks to a grant in the central settlement. All respondents claimed that it helped them immensely.

Sport and Culture

There are several playgrounds in the area and opportunities for extra-curricular classes in the local school.

Security

Respondents from Karapila claim that their community lost some of their traditional pastures due to the 2008 war. As respondent no 2. claimed, this limited their ability to reorient from agriculture to cattle herding.

In general, respondents from all three settlements agreed that although there were some detentions of residents by the Russian border guards, it was not as systematic an issue as in the case of some villages. Respondent no. 7 said her husband was detained once after crossing the ABL while searching for a lost cow. He had to pay an equivalent of GEL 100 and was released.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Training and Education

All respondents from Kodistskaro and respondent no. 6 from Zadiantkari were aware of training and grant opportunities provided by the government and various NGOs. Respondent no. 8 said that she attended several trainings focused on project writing and preparation of business plans. Later, she got a grant from USAid and opened a shop in the center of Kodistkharo. Respondents no. 7 and no. 9 and respondent no. 3 said the shop significantly helped their communities. It saves them not only time but also money. They all agreed that a local bakery would benefit Kodistskaro and neighboring settlements.

Lack of Irrigation Water

Most respondents (respondents nos. 1-5) claimed that the lack of irrigation water is the greatest obstacle to the development of the local economy and the main reason young people leave the region. They claimed that a combination of developing cattle herding, and irrigated gardens could improve this trend.

Lack of Agricultural Machinery

The second most cited issue (respondents no. 1, no. 2, no. 4 and no. 6) was the lack of agricultural machinery. Middle-aged and older respondents (no. 1 and no. 4) said that a machinery center offering a lease of various agricultural mechanisms is the best solution to this problem. On the other hand, younger respondents believe there are more practical solutions than this. They prefer grants for agricultural machinery, especially under increasing fuel prices. "I am not saying machinery centers are a bad thing, but you cannot have one next to each village. I, for example, want to buy a tractor with the government's help and then rent it to my neighbor. Such an approach will earn money from local small farmers instead of big businessmen or state and it will also be cheaper for other residents of the settlement since they will not have to pay extra money for fuel. Tractors will be in the same village of the neighboring village instead of a renting center, often located 40 or more kilometers away," said respondent no. 6.

Reorientation to Other Farm Animals

All working-age respondents claimed they do not suffer from such a lack of pastures to consider reorienting from cattle to sheep or goats. Respondents no. 1, no. 2 and no. 6 all said that cattle are more productive and while sheep and goats can graze together, they cannot graze with cattle. They agree that the most effective way to improve the local economy is a combination of cattle herding with agriculture supported by a proper irrigation system.

Impact of the New Road

Respondents no. 1, no. 2 and no. 4 from Kapafila said that the government recently built a new asphalt road in the settlement. They claimed that this infrastructural project persuaded several families not to leave the village. Respondent no. 6 from Zadiantkari also said that half of the residents left the village after it lost access to irrigation water. On the other hand, she stressed that many are willing to return once the situation improves. "Since the new road was constructed, two families returned. Also, one family returned after drinking water started to be centrally provided. Many would like to live in this village once these problems are solved," she said.

Kaspi/Dusheti Region

Tvaurebi and Odzisi²⁹



Population Tvaurebi: 140

Population Odzisi: 581

Main problems: Absence of market/need for diversification

Other Issues: Absence of shop/groceries/bakery

Respondents

Tvaurebi

Respondent no. 1 – Elderly man

Respondent no. 2 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 3 – Elderly man

Odzisi

Respondent no. 4 – Elderly man

Respondent no. 5 – Young man

Respondent no. 6 – Middle-aged woman

Respondent no. 7 – Young man

Respondent no. 8 – Young man

²⁹ Field survey in Tvaurebi and Odzisi on May 26, 2022.

Description

Tvaurebi and Odzisi are two communities divided by the valley of river Ksani in the Kareli region. The surrounding nature is well suited for both orchards and cattle.

Local Economy

Unlike most agricultural villages on the ABL, the economy of Tvaurebi is based on apricots with apples playing a secondary role. As respondent no. 1 said, he sells apricots in Tbilisi for GEL 3 per kilogram. Respondent no. 3 agreed that although apricots are more profitable than apples, profit in the local Georgian market is still low, especially considering the rising prices of herbicides and fertilizers. All agreed that they could sell their production much easier and for much higher prices on the Russian market. Respondent no. 2 claimed that selling apricots to agents who resell them in Russia is the easiest and most profitable possibility. All respondents agreed that they are unaware of how they could sell their products in the EU, especially considering that they are small producers.

Additionally, Tvaurebi has good access to pastures for cattle. In general, all respondents considered the local economy relatively effective and unhindered by artificial obstacles, especially as compared to other settlements on the ABL.

Respondents from Odzisi claimed that the economy of their settlement is mainly focused on apples and cattle with the growing role of pig breeding.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

Respondents from both settlements were generally satisfied with the transport links to Tbilisi. They claimed that the situation is similar to other rural areas of Georgia and that they do not feel particularly isolated.

Water

Both villages have good access to drinking water and access to irrigation water. Respondents in Tvaurebi were, in general, satisfied with both. Residents of Odzisi claimed that their access to irrigation water is limited due to clogged irrigation channels but claimed this problem is not systematic and probably will be easily solved.

Gas

Both communities are fully gasified.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

Both communities have small clinics which, as they claim, meet their needs.

Education

As respondents claimed, there are few children in Tvaurebi. Those who live there study in the nearby village of Lamiskana. They are provided a free minibus. In Odzisi, there is both a kindergarten and a school. Respondents from both settlements were, in general, satisfied with the educational opportunities for their children.

Shops and Grocery Stores

Tvaurebi, unlike Odzisi, lacks a shop. Locals need to go shopping for basic groceries in nearby Lamiskana. Respondents from Odzisi claimed they had good access to essential services.

Sport and Culture

Pupils from both settlements have access to dance and sports classes.

Security

Respondents from both communities claimed that they do not feel particularly unsafe due to the proximity of the ABL. Especially in Tvaurebi, locals said there were no incidents of people being detained by Russian border guards. Residents of Odzisi also claimed that the situation is relatively stable, especially in comparison to some other settlements on the ABL.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Lack of Shops

In Tvaurebi, respondents were generally satisfied with the settlement's development, especially after the construction of a new drinking water system. On the other hand, they all agreed that such a small settlement does not need a separate house for wedding celebrations and burial feasts. Respondent no. 2 would like to buy the unused building for weddings and make a mill and shop there instead. He claimed that as a holder of a Russian passport, he could buy flour, oil and other products in Russia, where they are cheaper, and sell them to locals, not only from Tvaurebi but also from a wider area. Other respondents agreed that the settlement would benefit from a shop and a bakery. Additionally, respondent no. 2 believes that a small fruit cannery could increase the region's economic output.

Bioproduction and EU Market

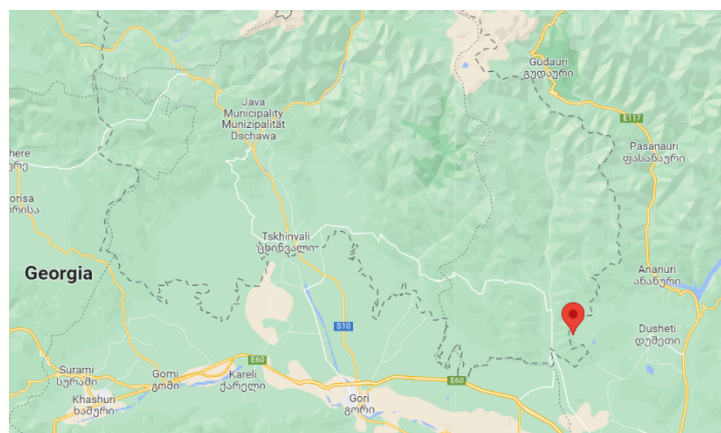
In Odzisi, younger respondents believe that the settlement could benefit from reorientation on bioproduction and would welcome some training on this issue. Additionally, as respondents no. 7 and no. 8 said, they would need some assistance with trademarking and transporting their production to Tbilisi in order to increase profit from their small farms. This would especially be the case if they reoriented to bioproduction. They also added that traditional Georgian types of apples rot faster than newly imported ones, which are often less tasty, and, therefore, they will need to have freezers for their harvest.

Better Effective Barn Construction

Respondent no. 7 also believes that many locals would benefit from the knowledge of building better and cheaper barns. Traditional barns are rather expensive for many.

Dusheti Region

Gremi Valley³⁰



Population Karkushaani: 78

Population Akhali Burghuli: 55

Population Dzveli Burghuli: 32

Main problems: Rabid wolves, isolation, dangerous/vast fear zone, absence of gasification, absence of shop/groceries/bakery, lost orchards, pastures and forests

Problems: Lack of culture and sports opportunities, insufficient access to healthcare, local roads

Respondents

Respondent no. 1 – Elderly woman (Karkushaani)

Respondent no. 2 – Elderly woman (Akhali Burghuli)

Family A

Respondent no. 3 – Young man (Akhali Burghuli)

Respondent no. 4 – Young woman (Akhali Burghuli)

Respondent no. 5 – Young man (Akhali Burghuli)

Respondent no. 6 – Middle-aged man (Dzveli Burghuli)

³⁰ Field survey in the Gremi Valley on September 3, 2022.

Description

The Gremi valley is an isolated area in the eastern part of the ABL in Dusheti municipality. It has a primarily hilly and forested character with cattle herding as the primary source of income for residents. There are three central communities nearby of the ABL in the area – Karkushaani, Akhali Burghuli and Dzveli Burghuli.

Local Economy

There is no significant employer in the valley or a broader area. As respondent no. 1 said, there are six families left in Karkushaani. All members of the community are unemployed. Some residents recently got a seasonal job from the local administration to cut and clean branches hanging over the road leading to the settlement.

The local economy of the whole valley is based on cattle herding with the additional growing of beans and emerging beekeeping. Respondent no. 1 herself has several cows and produces cheese which she sells in nearby Dusheti. Borderization and loss of traditional pastures hit villages in the area unequally with Karkushaani suffering more than Akhali and Dzveli Burghuli.

All respondents claimed that cattle herding in the area might be profitable if more developed. Especially members of family A and respondent no. 5 agree that cattle herding has potential in the area despite the proximity of the ABL. Both are small farmers with their own herds. Family no. 1 just recently became involved in herding. Respondent no. 5, on the other hand, has already been engaged in this business for several years. He not only produces cheese but also raises cattle for meat. This respondent claimed that this business activity provides him with a good standard of living.

Some residents also started to experiment with beekeeping.



Young farmer from the Gremi Valley. Foto: Tamta Gokadze. On 3. September 2022.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

All three communities are relatively isolated due to the absence of paved roads. The given problem is more severe in Dzveli and Akhali Burghuli. All respondents from these communities claimed that they are often entirely cut from the rest of the country due to bad weather. However, locals are happy with the newly built road connecting the valley with the local administrative center of Dusheti.

The only transport to Dusheti and Tbilisi leaves from the central village of Mikeliani twice a week. This settlement is relatively close to Karkushaani but far away from Akhali and Dzveli Burghuli. This makes these two communities practically cut off from the rest of Georgia from the point of view of public transport. Locals have to rely on their cars or the help of neighbors.

Water

The valley has never been irrigated with local respondents agreeing it is unnecessary. Drinking water is of good quality.

Gas

The valley has yet to be gasified. Locals receive from the government a yearly allowance of GEL 200 for firewood. Respondents claim that it helps but it hardly covers their needs, especially since winters tend to be cold and long in the area.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

Residents of Karkushaani have a small clinic but their doctor refuses to visit it due to the bad condition of the road leading to this community. Respondent no. 1, as well as respondents no. 2 and no. 5, consider healthcare in the valley to be insufficient. Residents of Dzveli and Akhali Burghuli also said that they do not have good access to healthcare mainly due to the bad condition of local roads.

Education

There is a school in Mikeliani with transport provided to children from local communities. The school offers extra-curricular activities such as national dance, sports and singing. Respondents were generally satisfied in this respect.

Shops and Grocery Stores

There are no shops in these communities. The closest shop is in the central settlement which is relatively distant from Akhali and Dzveli Burghuli.

Sport and Culture

Respondent no. 2 said that there is not much youth left in the area with local youngsters mostly struggling with alcoholism. All settlements have a good internet connection but cannot afford it daily. This fact caused a significant problem for local pupils during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Security

Due to all respondents, Russian border guards do not often penetrate the territory under the de facto Georgian control but they are actively detaining locals moving close to the ABL. One respondent told us that due to the dire economic situation of her family, Russian border guards allowed her to graze her herds on the ABL without detaining her. Due to the proximity of the ABL, residents often lose cattle, suffering additional economic losses.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Rabid Wolves and Jackals

One of the main problems of local communities is packs of often rabid wolves. Several years ago, respondent no. 1 was severely attacked and mauled by a wolf while grazing cows. She barely survived the attack. Approximately ten years ago, a wolf killed an 11-year old boy from Karkushaani. According to family no. 1 and respondent no. 5, not only wolves but also jackals are a problem in the area.

Absence of Gas

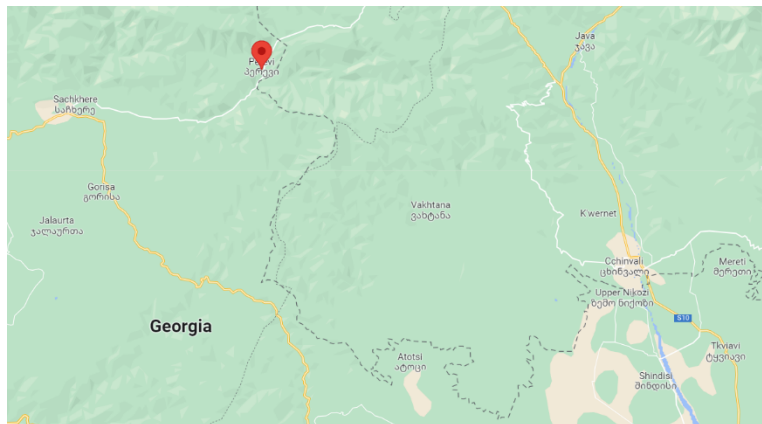
All respondents agreed that gasification would help local communities the most. But respondent no. 5 doubts that such a project will be realized due to the valley's isolation.

Training and Education

Respondents no. 2, no. 3 and no. 4 claimed that they are unaware of any training being conducted in the valley and do not have information about grant opportunities and state support. Respondents from family no. 1 said that they would be interested in such opportunities and having more information.

Sachkhere Region

Jria and Perevi³¹



Population Perevi: 564

Main problems: Lost orchards, pastures and forests

Other problems: Dangerous/vast fear zone, **swine fever**, lack of culture and sports opportunities

Other notes: Relatively many young people live in the settlement. Especially in spring and summer months.

Description

Both settlements are cramped between wooded mountains with very limited access to agricultural soil. Natural beauties make this region adept for the development of agrotourism.

³¹ Field survey in Jria and Perevi on May 28, 2022.

Respondents

Jria

Respondent no. 1 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 2 – Young man

Perevi

Respondent no. 3 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 4 – Middle-aged woman

Respondent no. 5 – Middle-aged man, shopkeeper

Respondent no. 6 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 7 – Young man

Respondent no. 8 – Young man

Respondent no. 9 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 10 – Young man

Local Economy

The local economy of both communities was traditionally based on cattle herding with agriculture playing just an additional role. As respondents no. 1 and no. 2 said, locals mainly produce corn and barley on their small land plots.

Both communities' lost access to some of their traditional pastures for cattle following the 2008 war. Although cattle herding became more complicated, locals, especially from Perevi, now take cows to distant pastures further to the northwest.

Residents of Jria also try to reorient to pig breeding. However, the local population of pigs is regularly decimated by swine fever. Under these circumstances, respondent no. 1 created an artificial pond. Some locals believe that limited access to soil, ponds and fish breeding might be a key to the development of the local economy.

Respondents from Perevi claimed that to diversify the local economy, they started with beekeeping and the other herding of goats. For now, the results are mixed. The local population of bees was decimated by pesticides against stink bugs several years ago.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

Three minibuses leave from Perevi via Jria daily to Sachkhere with two continuing to Tbilisi. Respondents no. 7 and no. 8 said such a schedule suits even local youth. All respondents claimed that despite geographical isolation, they feel well connected with the rest of the country. All respondents also agreed that infrastructure improved significantly in recent years in both settlements. They appreciate the new road.

Water

All respondents agree that settlements have good access to drinking water. Due to the limited role of agriculture and the hilly topography, villages have never been irrigated.

Gas

Both settlements are fully gasified. Locals claimed it helped them immensely.

*Families and Healthcare***Healthcare**

Both settlements have a clinic.

Education

Respondents from both villages were satisfied with the educational opportunities in their communities. There is a four-grade school in Jria and a 12-grade school in Perevi. After four years of studies, children from Jria are provided free transport to nearby Perevi. Perevi also has a kindergarten.

Shops and Grocery Stores

There are five shops in Perevi and one ambulance. Because the given village is relatively big, the clinic works every day. Several respondents no. 1, no. 2, no. 3 and no. 5 claimed that both settlements lack a bakery. As a result, especially with the rising oil prices, bread is more expensive than it might be if produced locally.

Culture

Unlike most settlements on the ABL, many children and young people live in Perevi. Many youngsters work in other cities but return in spring and summer. Local schools provide several extra-curricular classes. There is also a big new football pitch in Perevi.

Security

Both settlements lost access to traditional pastures. Residents of Jria said that detentions by Russian border guards do not occur anymore. As respondent no. 1 said, the arrest decrease resulted from the fence being illegally installed by the Russian forces. Respondents from Perevi, on the other hand, said that detentions still occur, and they do not always feel safe on some segments of the ABL.

*Main Challenges and Options for Development***Diversification of the Local Economy**

Respondents no. 1, no. 2, no. 4, no. 5 and no. 6 would prefer projects focused on the diversification of the local economy. This might include swine breeding, fishponds and beekeeping. However, at this moment, they face specific obstacles in each area. They need to solve the problem of swine disease and need more know-how regarding fishing ponds and beekeeping.

Bakery

Respondents nos. 4-7 believe that a small bakery would benefit the community. It could provide bread which would be cheaper and fresher. Other bakery products like khachapuri and lobiani could also be baked and sold.



Local shop in Perevi. Photo: Tamta Gokadze, Perevi on 28. May 2022.

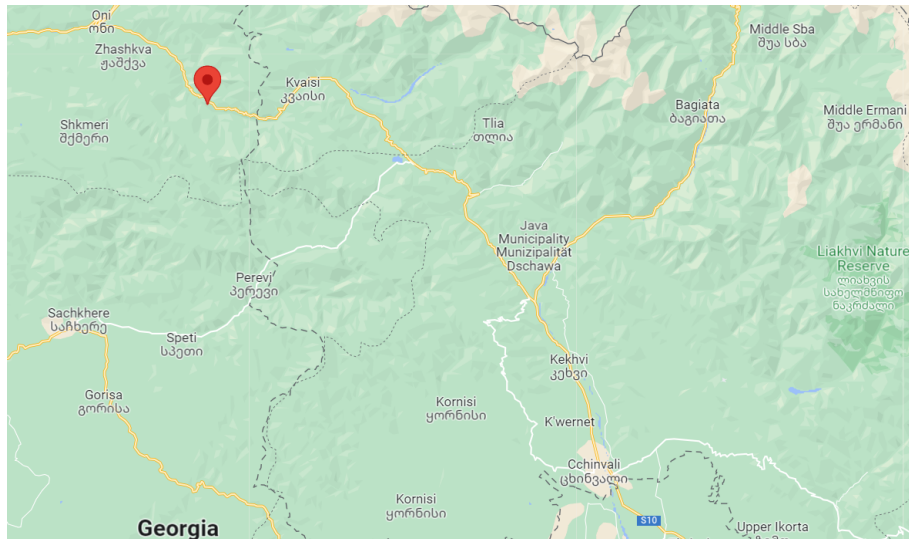
Children and Youth

Respondents nos. 7-10 believe that smaller projects could focus on local children and youth, considering how numerous they are, especially in comparison to most ABL communities.

They said a little summer club with a grill and electricity for youth from Perevi and Jria could be built at one popular local spot next to the river. They said that many youngsters want to live in the village but need more fun and perspective of a more effective local economy. Others who work in cities want to return for spring and summer. Both claimed that such a spot with fresh fish, a nearby healing spring and four historic churches might turn Perevi into a small agrotouristic spot, further stimulating the local economy. Respondent no. 9 said that another alternative could be a small, covered sports hall.

Oni Municipality

Iri³²



Population: 75

Identified problems: Isolation due to lack of transport, consequences of an earthquake, absence of shop/groceries/bakery, absence of gasification

Other problems: Lack of culture and sports opportunities, insufficient access to healthcare

Other notes: Settlement has a famous industrial past and potential for the future

Respondents

Respondent no. 1 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 2 – Middle-aged man

Respondent no. 3 – Middle-aged woman

Respondent no. 4 – Older woman

Description

With the baryte processing factory, Iri used to be a significant center of industry in the region. In addition to the historic village, there were hostels for workers, including a large recreation area with a culture house, sports fields and an indoor swimming pool. Altogether, nearly 500 families lived in the area at that time. However, in 1991, the settlement found itself at the epicenter of a strong earthquake which flattened the factory and all its infrastructure, killing three. There could have been many more victims but the earthquake occurred during a break when most people were outside. As a result, Iri shrunk to the form of a small settlement among the ruins where only a few families continue to live today. Nearby settlements of Batra and Lesora, which used to provide material for the factory, lie entirely abandoned. Only eight families stay in the settlements during

³² Field survey in Iri on August 7, 2022.

the winter and several others return for spring and summer. There are four children left in the village. Altogether, 7,000 people lived in the surrounding area before the earthquake. Now, less than 3,000 live there.

Local Economy

All respondents stressed that the local economy collapsed after the 1991 earthquake. The respondents agreed that local soil is not suitable for agriculture. Additionally, in parallel with the outflow of residents, traditional pastures are overgrown by forests. Therefore, even if someone wanted to have a large herd of cattle, there is insufficient pastures. Additionally, tourism only develops a little in this particular area of Racha.

Respondents no. 1, no. 2 and no. 3 claimed that only beekeeping holds some prospect for partial development of the local economy. Several locals produce honey and sell it in bigger cities.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

A new asphalt road is being constructed in the village which should be finished in 2022. Locals believe it will improve their situation to some degree since, under the current conditions, Iri is often cut off from the rest of Georgia due to bad weather conditions.

Water

The community has access to high-quality drinking water. Due to the character of local nature, there is no need for irrigation water according to the locals.

Gas

The settlement, as well as the whole surrounding area, does not have access to gas. Locals are receiving a GEL 200 allowance for firewood. Winter, however, is long in the area and it does not cover their expenses, especially since wood is more expensive than gas.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

They have a small clinic in the settlement with a doctor visiting weekly.

Education

There is no school or kindergarten in Iri since only about four children live in the community year-round.

Shops and Grocery Stores

The lack of a shop in the village presents a significant problem, especially during the winter when it is often isolated due to high snowfall.

Culture

The village has good internet access but no sports or cultural opportunities for local children and youth.

Security

There are no posts or other Georgian security presence in the area. Locals cited political reasons not to acknowledge ABL as a border as the main reason. However, this argument does not hold since Georgia does have posts and security presence in other regions close to the ABL.

Locals said that Russian border guards have not been detaining people in the area, but they do not venture in the direction of the ABL as they have no reason to do so.

Due to a wide fear zone, locals lost access to some forests, where they used to cut wood for winter.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Reconstruction of Factory

Respondents no. 1 and no. 2 do not see any future for the village under the current circumstances. They believe only the factory's reconstruction can revive the town and the surrounding area. Projects have to aim at a region as a whole. Focusing only on the settlement would not be rentable in their opinion. The factory could be renewed and rentable since there are baryte deposits directly in this area according to respondents.

Transport

Respondent no. 3 believes that lack of transport is the biggest issue of the settlement under the current circumstances. The settlement is very isolated as a result. She also added that access to gas would help significantly.

Tsedisi, Kvedi³³



Population Tsedisi: 163

Population Kvedi: 142

Main problems: Isolation due to lack of transport, absence of gasification, dangerous/vast fear zone

Other problems: Lack of culture and sports opportunities, absence of shop/groceries/bakery, insufficient access to healthcare

Other notes: Successful cooperative in Kvedi

Respondents

Tsedisi

Respondent no. 1 – Young man – mayor of the village

Respondent no. 2 – Young woman

Respondent no. 3 – Elderly man

Respondent no. 4 – Elderly woman

Kvedi

Respondent no. 5 – Elderly woman

Respondent no. 6 – Middle-aged woman

Respondent no. 7 – Middle-aged woman

Respondent no. 8 – Middle-aged man – director of local agricultural cooperative

Description

Tsedisi and Kvedi were founded as pastoral communities further from the main roads and communications. As a result, both villages are isolated and linked to the rest of the region only by

³³ Field survey in Tsedisi and Kvedi on August 8, 2022.

narrow muddy roads. There are basically no young people left in both towns. Compared to other nearby villages, Tsedisi did not manage to create an agricultural cooperative and revive its cattle shepherding. A local businessman received a grant for a cattle ranch but locals say he embezzled the grant money. For nearly two years, only the framework of the building has been standing at the edge of the village.

Approximately 20 to 21 families live in Tsedisi all year round. Earlier, 200 families used to live all year round in the settlement. In Kvedi, there are 25 families left. Earlier, 150 families used to live in the community.



Young girl from Kvedi. Foto: Tamta Gokadze. Kvedi on 7. August 2022.

Local Economy

In years of economic depression characterized by the significant outflow of young people, traditional shepherding disappeared in Tsedisi with local pastures overgrowing with forest.

A local cooperative was established in Kedi five years ago which led to a partial revival of the local economy. This community has enough pastures but not enough people. Additionally, the local community and the cooperative need better access to veterinary. The closest one is in Oni.

A cooperative was established after the government conducted training and lectures dealing with legislative and practical aspects of cooperatives and explaining all their advantages and the scope of government support. Local residents are very satisfied with the cooperative and how it works.

After several years, it is growing and developing despite many obstacles such as the proximity to the ABL and low-quality roads. In the beginning, five farmers were united in the cooperative and then later, three cooperatives from the area joined to make one larger one.

The local cooperative sells its products, including meat, cheese, milk and quark in the whole region.

Transport and Infrastructure

Transport

Both settlements are highly isolated from the rest of Georgia due to the absence of regular minibuses and the poor road infrastructure. “I don’t go anywhere. The whole year around, I am sitting here. I do not have means or possibility to go anywhere else,” said respondent no. 3.

A minibus comes to Kvedi twice a month, costing GEL 10 one way to Oni. As local respondents claimed, the settlement is effectively isolated from the rest of the country and residents must rely on their cars. Despite that, the village is relatively cut off in inclement weather due to the bad condition of the road.

Water

Tsedisi has good access to drinking water and no irrigation water. The village has yet to be gasified and locals have to heat with firewood. Most residents have their small forests.

As respondents no. 5 and no. 7 said, Kvedi has good quality drinking water but it does not run every day which is causing additional problems for locals.

Gas

These communities still need to be gasified. Locals are receiving a GEL 200 allowance for firewood from the government.

Families and Healthcare

Healthcare

Tsedisi has a small clinic. Unlike nearly all other settlements on the ABL, Kvedi does not have a clinic with a visiting doctor. In combination with bad roads and relative isolation, this creates a possibly dangerous situation for inhabitants with a more severe illness or in case of some more serious injury.

Education

There is a building of a former school in Tsedisi but it does not work since there are nearly no children left in the settlement.

Shops and Grocery Stores

Tsedisi does not have a shop. A mobile shop comes to the village weekly, covering their basic needs. An identical situation is in Kvedi.

Sport and Culture

Due to the relative isolation, respondents in both villages claimed they had no access to sports or culture.

Security

There were no detentions of residents in Tsedisi. On several occasions, locals lost cattle which ventured on the other side of the ABL. There is a fear zone in the forest close to the ABL. Nevertheless, in general, they do not feel in danger. Locals only fear for their cattle. In general, they have not seen Russian border guards crossing close to the village.

However, local forests were rented to Davit Khidasheli for 49 years. He wanted to create a vast hunting ranch. Locals are afraid that they will lose access to their traditional forests.

Respondent no 5. from Kvedi claimed that she had recently seen a group of men armed with automatic rifles, probably Ossetians, on the edge of the village. Most local respondents claim they do not feel safe due to the absence of Georgian security personnel in the area. Locals claim that that is a vast fear zone east of the village which they visit only occasionally.

Russian border guards do not detain residents on the de facto territory of Georgia but due to the proximity of the ABL, locals sometimes lose their cattle.

Main Challenges and Options for Development

Lack of Transport

In Tsedisi, all respondents identified the lack of transport and a good road as the main problem of the village. The settlement would also need canalization and drainage. Even tourism cannot develop in the village if there is no proper canalization.

Unused Pool

There is an old unused pool near the former school in the village. The pool has been left abandoned since 1991. Its renovation would not be very expensive, yet it could improve the situation of the local youth who return for spring and summer. It could also help tourism. Such a pool would also be helpful in case of a fire in the village which is otherwise very isolated. The reconstruction of the pool and surrounding area should cost approximately GEL 30,000.

Internet for Youth

Local children in Kvedi got paid mobile internet by the TV station Rustavi 2 during the pandemic and this helped them continue their education under strict anti-pandemic measures. In the modern era, most information is on the internet rather than in traditional libraries. A project

which would finance mobile internet to youth on the ABL and isolated settlements could significantly improve the situation of youth from such areas and increase their chances in the future.

Support for Local Cooperative

Respondent no. 8 from Kvedi said that their cooperation would need a packing machine for their products, such as cheese or quark, due to bad road communication. With a packing machine, they would be able to start to sell their products to local market chains. The cost of such a machine is approximately GEL 10,000. There was recently a government grant for such a machine but they got the information too late. They would need better access to information on various grant opportunities or training where they would learn how to search for such information.

II. Categorization and Character of Identified Problems

Analysis of the Main Problems of ABL Communities

Problems by Number of Respondents

Ranking	Problem	No. of Respondents	No. of Settlements	No. of Points
1	Lost orchards, pastures and forests	35 respondents	16 villages	51
2	Absence of market/need for diversification	35 respondents	13 villages	48
3	Lack of agricultural machinery	32 respondents	15 villages	47
4	Lack of culture and sports opportunities	32 respondents	14 villages	46
5	Dangerous/vast fear zone	32 respondents	13 villages	45
6	Isolation due to lack of transport	31 respondents	10 villages	41
7	Issues with drinking or irrigating water	25 respondents	9 villages	34
8	Absence of shop/groceries/bakery	18 respondents	9 villages	27
9	Absence of gasification	18 respondents	6 villages	24
10	Insufficient access to healthcare	15 respondents	7 villages	22
11	Local roads	13 respondents	8 villages	21
12	Insufficient access to the internet	14 respondents	5 villages	19
13	Damaged houses or infrastructure	11 respondents	3 villages	14

Problems by Settlements

1. Lost orchards, pastures and forests (16)
Gugutiantkari, Plavi, Plavismani, Adzvi, Jariasheni, Kirbali, Bershueti, Dvani, Takhtisdziri, Knolevi, Avlevi, Chvrinisi, Koda, Chorchana, Karapila, Karkushaani.
2. Lack of agricultural machinery (15)
Ergneti, Gugutiantkari, Zaardiantkari, Mejriskhevi, Adzvi, Dvani, Takhtisdziri, Knolevi, Avlevi, Tseronisi, Atotsi, Chvrinisi, Chorchana, Karapila, Zadiantkari.
3. Lack of culture and sports opportunities (14)
Plavi, Plavismani, Adzvi, Dirbi, Dvani, Takhtisdziri, Tseronisi, Chvrinisi, Dzveli Burghuli, Akhali Burghuli, Perevi, Iri, Tsedisi, Kvedi.
4. Dangerous/vast fear zone (13)
Zaardiantkari, Plavi, Plavismani, Kirbali, Bershueti, Knolevi, Adzvi, Chvrinisi, Chorchana, Karkushaani, Jria, Perevi, Kvedi.
5. Absence of market/need for diversification (13)
Zemo Nikozi, Ergneti, Gugutiantkari, Zaardiantkari, Plavi, Plavismani, Mejriskhevi, Kirbali, Dirbi, Dvani, Takhtisdziri, Atotsi, Tvaurebi.
6. Isolation due to lack of transport (10)
Ergneti, Chvrinisi, Kodistskaro, Karapila, Zadiantkari, Dzveli Burghuli, Akhali Burghuli, Iri, Tsedisi, Kvedi.
7. Absence of shop/groceries/bakery (9)
Ergneti, Chvrinisi, Chorchana, Tvaurebi, Dzveli Burghuli, Akhali Burghuli, Iri, Tsedisi, Kvedi.
8. Issues with drinking or irrigating water (9/15)³⁴
Zaardiantkari, Plavismani, Mejriskhevi, Adzvi, Jariasheni, Kirbali, Bershueti, Knolevi, Tseronisi, Chvrinisi, Chorchana, Zadiantkari, Kodistskaro, Karapila, Kvedi.
9. Local roads (8)
Adzvi, Plavismani, Dirbi, Karkushaani, Akhali Burghuli, Dzveli Burghuli, Kvedi, Tsedisi.
10. Insufficient access to healthcare (7)
Ergneti, Gugutiantkari, Karkushaani, Dzveli Burghuli, Akhali Burghuli, Iri, Kvedi.
11. Absence of gasification (6)
Karkushaani, Dzveli Burghuli, Akhali Burghuli, Iri, Tsedisi, Kvedi.

³⁴ Settlements in italics mean that the specific problem was mentioned but respondents claimed that it is minor in comparison to the situation after the 2008 war.

12. Insufficient access to the internet (5)
Jariasheni, Bershueti, Chvrinisi, Koda, Kvedi.

10. Damaged houses of infrastructure (3)
Zaardiantkari, Kirbali, Dvani.

Problems by Overall Score

During the field research, the respondents repeatedly pointed out with varying intensity the 13 most frequent obstacles to the development of their communities.

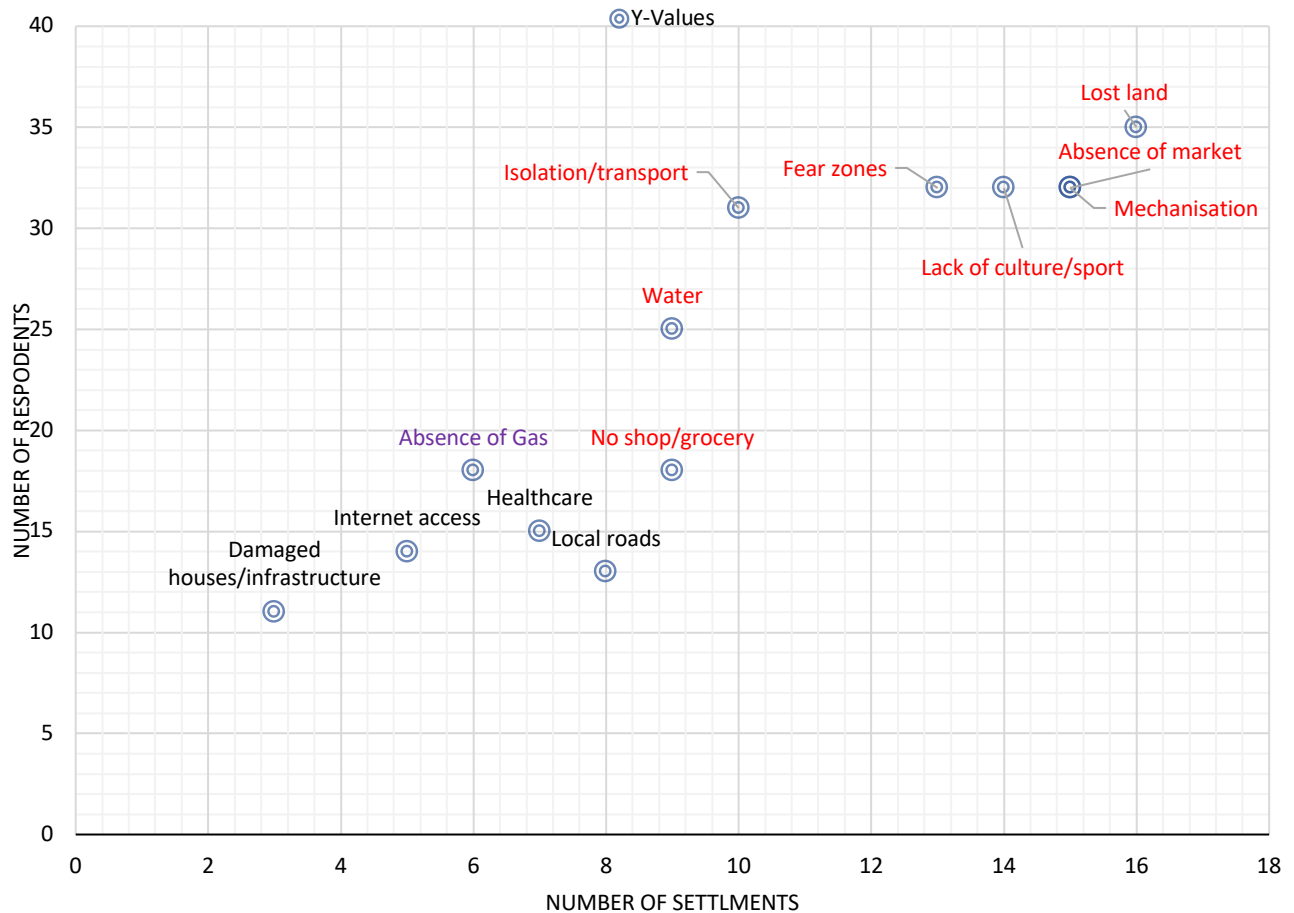
We analyzed the overall impact of individual problems on two levels. The first of them is the total number of respondents they affect. The second is the number of communities they affect. The given approach allows us to divide identified problems into three main groups.

First are issues that score high on both levels (issues identified by most respondents in many settlements). These can be described as *general problems* characteristic of most of the ABL communities. The solution to these problems requires a strategic approach. (Right upper corner of the Y Values chart – problems in red color)

The second group of problems are obstacles that were identified in a small number of villages but by a fairly large number of respondents. These will be called *specific urgent problems*. Unlike the first group, these problems do not have a universal character. However, their negative impact on development is exceptionally high in the communities where they occur. (Left upper corner of the Y Values chart – problems in violet color)

The third group of issues are problems identified either by a relatively small number of respondents or in a relatively small number of settlements. These will be called *local problems*. Still, these issues were repeatedly voiced by respondents and, therefore, should not be overlooked as insignificant. On the local level of a specific community, they can even be the biggest obstacle to their development. (Lower right and left corner – problems in black color)

Y-Values



General Problems

A. Lost Orchards, Pastures and Forests

Overall score: 51 (35 respondents in 16 settlements)

The problem of lost orchards, pastures and forests got the highest general score from all. Residents identified this issue with similar intensity along the entire length of the ABL. It affects individual villages to varying degrees. In the districts of Gori and Kaspi, the villages usually lost access to some orchards or forests. In the Dusheti, Kareli, Sachkhere and Oni districts, communities lost mostly traditional pastures and forests. Some towns partially compensated for the loss of traditional pastures for livestock by reorientation to sheep or pigs. Such a reorientation, however, usually only partially compensates for the loss of pastures for cattle. At the same time, it is only possible in some villages due to specific factors. To a great degree, the loss of traditional

forests has partially been addressed by the gasification program, although it remains especially painful in settlements without gas.

B. Absence of Market/Need for Diversification

Overall score: 52 (35 respondents in 17 settlements)

In general, respondents from all categories agreed on the lack of markets for local production was the main obstacle to the development of the given communities. Nevertheless, we observed several trends. This problem was most often mentioned by men engaged in agriculture. From a regional point of view, it was most often repeated in the districts of Kaspi and Gori where the local economy is mainly based on apple cultivation. In regions of Kareli, Khashuri, Sachkhere, Oni and Dusheti, where the local economy is greatly based also on cattle herding, the absence of markets for local production was mentioned less by local respondents. Additionally, in settlements in the Gori and Kaspi municipalities, where the local population managed to diversify local agricultural production and reorient to other cultivars, this problem was less prominent.

C. Lack of Agricultural Machinery

Overall score: 47 (32 respondents in 15 settlements)

Like the lack of markets, men working in agriculture often voiced this problem. The main difference is that the lack of agricultural machinery was frequently mentioned by the respondents across all the municipalities visited. In terms of a possible solution, the respondents repeatedly suggested two approaches. Elderly and middle-aged farmers mainly proposed the renewal and expansion of the network of state-subsidized leasing centers where they could borrow equipment according to their own needs for a fee. On the other hand, young farmers mostly rejected leasing centers. They preferred state loans and credit benefits to purchase agricultural equipment which they could rent to other farmers in their village and its immediate surroundings.

D. Lack of Culture and Sports Opportunities

Overall score: 46 (32 respondents in 14 settlements)

This problem got a high general score because most respondents admitted that there are not enough such opportunities in their communities. However, it should be added that most respondents who highlighted this problem called it secondary as compared to other issues. The exceptions are young respondents, respondents with small children and respondents working with youth.

E. Dangerous/Vast Fear Zone

Overall score: 45 (32 respondents in 13 settlements)

Extensive fear zones are mostly perceived as a security threat to the local population. However, their negative economic impacts should not be overlooked. Fear zones often cover economically significant land for affected communities. Fear zones often cover economically important land for affected communities. While in flat areas they have an extremely negative impact on individual owners of specific orchards, in mountainous regions, where they occupy pastures and cripple

forests, they can cripple the economies of entire villages. In this respect, they are similar to the problem of lost orchards, pastures and forests.

F. Isolation Due to the Lack of Public Transport

Overall score: 41 (31 respondents in 10 settlements)

The absence of proper means of transport was primarily mentioned in two cases. Either in settlements which lack an appropriate link of transport with the rest of the country or by respondents who do not consider existing links sufficient. The second group was represented mainly by young people or young families with small children or people working with young people. They primarily argued that existing links fit the needs of older people rather than youth who would like to participate in sports and cultural activities. As such, the problem of the absence of culture and sports is, in many cases, tightly knitted with the issue of insufficient public transport links.

G. Issues with Drinking or Irrigating Water

Overall score: 34 (25 respondents in 9 settlements)

Immediately after the end of the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, many communities, especially in the Gori district, found themselves without a traditional source of irrigation water. In the first years after the war, it was the most urgent problem, devastatingly impacting local economies, especially in the villages devoted to apple cultivation.

This situation led the Georgian government to implement a program to build alternative irrigation systems. Fourteen years later, it can be called a success. The given fact is also confirmed by most respondents who described water supply in their village as a problem. In most cases, they agreed that the current shortcomings are negligible compared to the situation ten years ago. Additionally, several issues identified by the respondents have meanwhile been solved.

In general, the relatively high score of this problem is not a consequence of its neglect on the part of the responsible authorities but, rather it is due to the extreme importance of the efficient drinking and irrigation water supply for the studied communities.

H. Absence of Shop/Groceries/Bakery

Overall score: 27 (18 respondents in 9 settlements)

This problem can have two forms – moderate or severe. In its moderate form, it causes discomfort for locals who lack shops or groceries but can relatively easily access some in nearby settlements thanks to proper transport links. However, in isolated villages, the absence of shops often represents a fundamental problem for local residents due to insufficient public transport. This situation is partly compensated by mobile shops which are more expensive. Like the absence of sports and culture, this problem is also often aggravated by insufficient transport links.

Specific Urgent Problems

A. Absence of Gasification

Overall score: 24 (17 respondents in 8 villages)

The absence of gasification scored a lower number of points overall than problems with water supply as it occurred in only a small number of communities. However, where there was no gasification, all respondents considered this a serious problem.

In general, the absence of gasification can be considered the most significant issue in settlements where it was recorded.

Local Problems

A. Insufficient Access to Healthcare

Overall score: 22 (15 respondents in 7 villages)

The issue of insufficient access to healthcare is an excellent example of a local problem. In the vast majority of settlements, respondents were either satisfied or even very satisfied with the access to healthcare with its core being small local clinics and good transport access to hospitals in district towns.

The problem with access to health care often overlaps with the issue of poor transport connections (In Ergneti, Dzveli Burghuli, Akhali Burghuli, Iri, Tsedisi and Kvedi). Interviews with local respondents indicate that it is not just a correlation but causation. Expanding public transport in key villages can thus improve the population's access to shops, sports and culture, and health care.

B. Local Roads

Overall score: 21 (13 respondents in 8 villages)

The problem of low-quality local roads has a twofold character. In the villages of the Gori and Kareli districts, it is primarily unpaved roads inside these settlements. This fact mainly results in poor access of farmers to their orchards in the spring during the rainy season. In this respect, the worst situation is in Dirbi where only the center of the village has an asphalt road.

On the other hand, the villages of the Dusheti and Oni regions are often linked to regional centers by unpaved roads. As a result, they are often practically cut off from the rest of the world during the rainy season as well as in winter.

At the same time, interviews with respondents show that in at least two villages (Chorchana and Zadiantkari), the construction of an asphalt road positively impacted local demography. Several families who had left given settlements decided to return afterwards.

C. Insufficient Access to the Internet

Overall score: 19 (14 respondents in 5 villages)

This problem tends to have two leading causes. Either there is poor internet signal coverage, as in the case of Jariasheni, or there are the financial limits of local families with school-age children who cannot afford it.

Regardless of their cause, limited access to the internet had a significantly negative impact, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when it complicated access to education for parts of the local youth. The problem persists even after the pandemic in more isolated villages such as Kvedi or Chvrinisi.

Poor Internet access was added to the questionnaire only later during the research (we asked this question in 27 out of 34 settlements) and so its overall score was likely slightly distorted by this fact. This issue, therefore, deserves further research, especially concerning the limits of education and personal development of local youth in the target communities.

D. Damaged Houses or Infrastructure

Overall score: 14 (11 respondents in 3 villages)

With most houses still damaged by war, Zaardiatkari is the most affected settlement by this issue and deserves the most attention from donors. All respondents from this community identified damage to their houses as the top problem hindering them from returning to a normal pre-war way of life.

Other Relevant Findings

Opportunities in the EU

The questionnaire also included a question regarding experience with work in the EU and experience with exporting products to the European market. However, most of the available respondents could not answer these questions relevantly. Residents of the target villages who had experience working in the EU were mainly located in the EU or Tbilisi. Therefore, the information obtained was only indirect.

The same was the case with the experience of importing products to EU markets. The majority of respondents in the target communities were small and medium-sized farmers who did not have the means to export to the European market nor any relevant experience with it.

Nevertheless, the available responses indicate that both spheres require increased attention. Many Georgians often need more information about work in the EU. They become victims either of fraudsters or a lack of information about the rules and specifics of work in individual member states of the Union.

Given that a large part of the region has yet to get rid of its dependence on the Russian market regarding agricultural production exports, it is necessary to look for effective ways to enable a wider group of local producers to benefit from the so-called European market.

SMEs

Regardless of the municipality, respondents very often mentioned the need to create SMEs near their communities. The companies in question should be focused on processing local agricultural production. Therefore, this aspect also deserves more attention.

Refrigerators and Subsidies for Juice Factories

Many respondents expressed satisfaction with the two-state programs to support the local economy. The first is support for loading large cooling boxes for storing part of the apple harvest. Refrigerators help the respondents slightly mitigate the effects of oversaturation of the local market. They do not need to sell all the crops cheaply soon after harvest when there is a surplus on the market. Thanks to refrigerators, they can wait until later months when fewer apples are on the market and sold at a higher price.

Most respondents from apple-growing communities also praised the state's juice factory subsidy program. The businesses in question are subsidized to buy lower-quality grade apples from local producers at higher prices. While eight years ago, many farmers were throwing these apples into the river, now they can make a small profit from them.

Shortcomings of Chosen Methods

In addition to the advantages, each research design has its disadvantages. This is necessary for making a correct interpretation of research results.

Changes Made in the Questionnaire During the Survey Research

The questionnaire was adapted several times during the research while one question related to access to the internet was added to it later. This fact slightly distorted the ratio of the total scores that the individual problems achieved. Nevertheless, the strategy in question corresponded to the exploratory research needs, aiming to capture the most extensive possible spectrum of relevant issues.

Absence of a Problem Severity Scale

Since we anticipated changes to the questionnaire at the beginning of the research, we only asked the respondents to identify individual problems without assigning them the value of their severity on the scale. Such an approach with a rigorous questionnaire would allow for more precise results.

Nevertheless, during data collection, we asked respondents which problems are more severe than others with results reflected in the study. Nonetheless, we were not able to create a precise scale.

Role of Central Settlements

In the course of the research, in addition to communities directly on the ABL and communities strongly affected by its creation, we also gradually focused on larger villages which represent the nearest center for the cluster of communities on the ABL. These often play a more critical role for the target communities than the often distant regional centers. Therefore, this category of villages deserves more attention in future research.

III. Wider Context of Selected Problems

Agriculture and Local Economy

Introduction

Economy/agriculture-linked problems clearly dominate our list of main issues hindering the development of target communities as identified by respondents. Lost orchards, pastures and forests, the absence of a market/need for diversification and the lack of agricultural machinery were identified in 24 settlements. Despite many ongoing problems, our research also revealed a considerable potential for improving the current situation.

State Support for Local Agriculture

Communities on the ABL can benefit from the state programs that are implemented on a national scale. For example, 13,954 agro cards and 9,821 arable cards were distributed to farmers in the municipalities of Gori, Kaspi and Kareli in 2014 within the framework of the spring work promotion program for small farmers. Agro cards were used to purchase goods needed for agricultural activities.

Within the framework of the state Implementation of the Future program, the government financed 152 hectares of soil in the villages near the dividing line in 2015-2018 and cultivated 38 perennial intensive-type modern gardens.

In 2017, the Georgian government, handed over the means for combating Asian parasana free-of-charge to the de facto Abkhazian authorities. In 2020, it provided additional means to this end valued at GEL 600,000.³⁵

Additionally, the state enterprise Melioration of Georgia undertook rehabilitation work in the Shida Kartli region. For example, there was the construction of a self-flowing and stationary pumping station for the irrigation of the villages of Mereti, Gugutiaantkari, Zardiaantkari and Koshka, adjacent to the dividing line in the municipality of Gori, at the cost of GEL 1,693,631 with 185 hectares of rural agricultural land being provided with water.

In 2019, the Georgian side launched the Step Towards a Better Future state program which is based on the reconciliation policy of Georgia and aims to narrow the dividing line with de facto regimes in its separatist regions. It seeks to encourage, facilitate and expand trade relations by creating new opportunities across the dividing line. One of the directions of this initiative is to develop agricultural markets along the ABL. Its primary purpose will be to facilitate access to the market for people living in de facto Abkhazia and the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region

³⁵ State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia, 2020 Sufficiency Report (2020 წლის სკვპიანობის ანგარიში), https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/Files/2020_wlis_angarishi.pdf, p.

and thus encourage more benefits. The beneficiaries of the call will mainly be small traders and producers.³⁶

Step Towards a Better Future also involves the creation of business incubators which will help the population living in the occupied territories and those living near the dividing line to find partners, create business plans and generate new ideas. Providing information about local and foreign markets and finding financial resources are also a part of the activities.³⁷

Within the framework of the above-mentioned initiative, the Peace Fund was launched in 2020 and the US Agency provided technical assistance for international development. The Peace Fund financed 14 Georgian-Abkhazian and 11 Georgian-Ossetian business projects in 2020-2021.³⁸ The funding source is the state budget and international donor organizations.

Tradition of Diversification of Production in Target Areas

Russia remains the key destination for Georgian apples which are the economic backbone of most target settlements. More than 98% of exports went to Russia in the 2021-2022 season. Golden Delicious and Fuji apples are the key exported varieties. However, due to obstacles caused by tense diplomatic relations between Tbilisi and Moscow, small producers cannot export directly to Russia as they did before 2008. Export prices that the importers pay to farmers range from GEL 1.20 to 1.80/kg (\$0.40-0.60).³⁹ Coupled with the inability of local producers to expand on the European market, this fact causes inflation of prices of apples on the local market. According to local respondents and experts, a certain degree of reorientation from apples to other crops is necessary in this situation.

Despite the persistent overdependence of many target communities on apple growing, there is a tradition of diversification in the target region. In the area of Mejvriskhevi – Akhalbani, for example, locals traditionally focus on growing tomatoes and corn. Residents of a wider area already know they should visit this area if they want to buy these crops. Moreover, residents of these villages, especially Adzvi, were the first to experiment with new sorts of tomatoes. These require more labor but are tastier and provide a bigger harvest than traditional sorts. Implementing new sorts further helped the local economy of this settlement, making it comparatively more prosperous than most communities on the ABL. Similarly, Kirbali, Zerti and Kheltubani traditionally focus on growing garlic which is of huge quantity and good quality in the area.

As Mr. Lomsadze stressed,⁴⁰ there are several zones on the ABL from which each is suitable for the production of different crops. However, it is crucial to find their niche. If many small

³⁶ Office of the Minister of State for Reconciliation and Civil Equality, A Step Towards a Better Future - Trade Promotion Along the Dividing Lines, Tbilisi, 2018, https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Concept_GE_7dd46c38.pdf, p.

³⁷ Ibid., p.

³⁸ Office of the Minister of State for Reconciliation and Civil Equality, Annual Vision and Strategy 2021-2030, Source: <https://garibashvili.ge/files/ShowFiles?id=72ed6f43-744c-4d62-8ca0-a4b5e1fe7b00>, p.

³⁹ East Fruit, Georgian Apple Exports are Showing Good Results, Source: [https://east-fruit.com/en/news/georgian-apple-exports-are-showing-good-results/#:~:text=Russia%20remains%20the%20key%20destination,kg%20\(%240.40%2D0.60\)](https://east-fruit.com/en/news/georgian-apple-exports-are-showing-good-results/#:~:text=Russia%20remains%20the%20key%20destination,kg%20(%240.40%2D0.60).).

⁴⁰ Interview with Mamuka Lomsadze in Gori on June 20, 2022.

producers start to diversify and, ultimately, end up producing similar crops, they will become competitors and the price of products will fall. This predictable problem, however, can be solved by further specializing in specific sorts of crops as they did in Adzvi.

Diversification of Apple Production

Despite the first attempts at diversification, apples continue to be the main agricultural product of most of the studied communities. However, their producers are also increasingly trying to experiment with new varieties.

Kekhura and Banani are traditional, popular apple varieties in the Shida Kartli region. The advantage of the Kekhura variety is that even with standard storage in the cellar, it lasts almost the whole winter. The banana variety is also quite popular but it spoils very quickly. However, the most popular type in the region is Golden Delicious. This variety usually occupies up to 50 per cent of the area of local orchards.



Despite the need for diversification, apples are still of exceptional importance to local residents. Foto: Tamta Gokadze. Dvani on 19. March 2022.

The apple scab is the biggest problem for the health of local apples with Kekhura and Banani having weak resistance to it. Local farmers, therefore, experiment with new varieties with a higher degree of resistance. These, however, are not as tasty as the traditional varieties.

Many small producers also experiment with sorts of apples that grow on fences, called M-9. This variety as well has its advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage of this variety can be considered the high initial cost of planting it. One-hectare costs \$50,000 if protection against hail is included. On the other hand, these varieties provide a bigger harvest and it is easier to take care of them.

Limits of Diversification from Cattle to Sheep

Several respondents stated that partial reorientation from cattle breeding to sheep breeding helped their household economy. However, this is not a systematic solution to the cattle breeding crisis in communities that lost access to traditional pastures after the 2008 war or due to extensive fear zones.



Men from the village of Perevi are about to take their cattle to the distant pastures in the Racha region. After the 2008 war, they lost access to the nearby pastures they had used for generations. Foto: Tamta Gokadze, on 28. May 2022.

As Mr. Lomsadze pointed out,⁴¹ large-scale sheep breeding is not allowed on the entire territory of Georgia but only in high mountain areas. Sheep damage pastures to a much greater extent than cows. Thus, sheep can represent only an additional source of livelihood at the level of individual families in the target communities. As Mr. Lomsadze pointed out, large-scale sheep breeding is not allowed on the entire territory of Georgia but only in high mountain areas since sheep damage

⁴¹ Ibid.

pastures to a much greater extent than cattle. Thus, sheep can represent only an additional source of livelihood at the level of individual families in the target communities.

Limits of Greenhouses

Respondents from all municipalities relatively often expressed the wish to establish greenhouses on their land.

However, in terms of competitiveness, greenhouses have minimal potential in the Shida Kartli region. They cannot compete effectively with greenhouses in the western part of Georgia where they do not need much heating during the winter. However, they are not without their value; they can help smaller producers who want to grow strawberries or roses. Nevertheless, it is not a solution for big farmers and producers.

Based on current estimates, Georgia only needs 40 more hectares of greenhouses to reach its current needs. In Tskhaltubo, the bureau for developing rural areas is now constructing 30 hectares of greenhouses.⁴²

Unused Potential of Agricultural Cooperatives

The Georgian authorities are offering several cooperative support programs. As Mr. Lomsadze⁴³ stated, cooperatives are one of the possibilities to increase the productivity of Georgian rural communities, including settlements near the ABL.

An example can be the support of beekeeping cooperatives. The state finances cooperatives with 70 per cent of the costs if the cooperative buys at least 60 beehives. The fives are funded but not the bees.

There is also a scheme for supporting honey processing plants. To ask for state support, at least 35 cooperatives, each having at least 30 hives, must join and put forth the request. The state fully reimburses 80 per cent of the investment and the remaining 20 per cent must be paid by the cooperative within eight years.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Interview with Mamuka Lomsadze in Gori on October 23, 2021.



Members of the agricultural cooperative in Kvedi. The establishment of a cooperative significantly increased the productivity of this otherwise very isolated community. Foto: Takta Gokadze, Kvedi on 8. June 2022.

However, according to Mr. Lomsadze, mentality remains the main obstacle to the development of cooperatives. Residents do not trust cooperatives and usually cannot agree on who will be in the management. Therefore, they hesitate to establish cooperatives, despite the favorable state programs of support.

Intensive Orchards

Intensive orchards have 2,800 to 3,000 trees per hectare, mainly used for growing apples, pears and cherries. Intensive cherry orchards, however, have an average of only 2,000 trees per hectare. Planting one hectare of an intensive orchard, even with a net against hail, costs approximately EUR 50,000 in Europe while this amount is somewhat lower in Georgia.

Seedlings bought in the EU have an average yield of 50 to 60 tons per hectare. According to Mr. Lomsadze,⁴⁴ anti-hail nets are a necessity in the case of the Shida Kartli region. The local government gives a subsidy for them as well as a support for insurance against damage caused by hail. The maintenance of intensive orchards after their planting is similar to that of traditional orchards.

⁴⁴ Interview with Mamuka Lomsadze in Gori on June 20, 2022.

Between 2014 and 2021, 1,500 hectares of intensive orchards were planted in the Shida Kartli region. Intensive horticulture is a suitable alternative, especially for communities on the ABL, which mostly have relatively small plots of land.⁴⁵

Conclusion

It is necessary to focus on two levels in terms of the effectiveness of the local economy of the communities on the ABL. The first is to mitigate the negative impacts of the 2008 war in terms of the ABL, fear zones and/or complicated access to the Russian market. The second is to increase the efficiency of local agriculture.

The consequences of the war are, in general, different in lowland regions with orchards and different in more mountainous regions with economies based on herding.

Lowland regions are more affected by the loss of the Russian market for small producers and the oversaturation of the Georgian market with apples than with borderization and fear zones. These usually affect individual producers (although in a very severe and tragic way) rather than whole communities. Diversification of local agricultural production appears to be the most effective way to respond to the needs of this type of community.

On the other hand, high-altitude communities engaged in cattle breeding generally do not suffer as much from the difficult access to the Russian market. Instead, their traditional economy is crippled by the loss of traditional pastures or forests caused by the ABL and the spread of fear zones. In their case, however, the reorientation from livestock to other animals is more limited. The possibilities of diversification of these communities, therefore, require individual analyses.

From the point of view of the overall increase in the efficiency of the economy of the target regions, we can identify two promising strategies - the support of the further development of cooperatives and intensive horticulture.

Security Issues (Fear Zones and Kidnappings)

Introduction

Although the "dangerous/vast fear zone" problem ranked fifth in the total number of points, it is separated by only three points from the second problem which is "absence of market/need for diversification." Therefore, it is one of the top problems of communities on the ABL.

Moreover, "lost orchards, pastures and forests," which is the most mentioned problem, is not only caused by the ABL but also by fear zones in many cases. Their emergence has deprived many

⁴⁵ Ibid.

communities on the ABL of orchards, pastures and forests far from the ABL, further crippling their local economies.

At the same time, arrests along the ABL and in fear zones create additional psychological and financial pressure on residents. Therefore, even 14 years after the end of the war, the lack of security remains one of the most significant obstacles to the revival of target communities.



Local shepherd from Kirbali who was several times detained by the Russian border guard on nearby pasture. Foto: Tamta Gokadze. Kirbali on 21. March 2022.

State Security Policy

According to Georgia's State Security Agency, the main challenge to state security is the existence of the occupied territories and the presence of foreign military forces on the ground. A large number of Russian military contingents in the territories of the occupied Abkhazia and the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region, the modern heavy armament and the presence of offensive military equipment represent an existential threat to the Georgian state.⁴⁶

Since August 1, 2015, the State Security Service of Georgia is the leading organization during Incidents Prevention and Respond Mechanism (IPRM) format meetings.⁴⁷ The IPRM format is used to prevent and respond to incidents along the occupation line and inside occupied territory.

⁴⁶ State Security Service of Georgia, Report of the State Security Service of Georgia, 01.08.2015-31.12.2015, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

From August 1 to December 31, 2015, four IPRM meetings were held in the direction of the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region (village Ergneti).⁴⁸ A hot line was established under the IPRM which enables 24-hours contact between the State Security Service, the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), the occupation forces of the Russian Federation and representatives of the de facto governments of occupied territories. The hot line enables the prevention and the solution of incidents along the occupation line. From August 1 to December 31, 2015, the hot line was used 572 times.⁴⁹ In 2016, it was used 1,591 times.⁵⁰ In 2017, it was activated 1,645 times.⁵¹ There was a rapid rise in activities in 2018 with the hot line having been used 2,181 times.⁵² It was used 2,836 times in 2020, 1,736 times in the direction of the occupied Tskhinvali region and 1,100 times in the direction of the occupied Abkhazia.⁵³

Illegal Detentions

De facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region

The main challenge to Georgia's security is illegal detentions carried out by Russian forces along the occupation line for illegally crossing the so-called border.

During the 2009-2015 period, 701 people were illegally arrested in the direction of the Tskhinvali region.⁵⁴ From August 1 to December 31, 2015, 69 individuals were illegally detained in this area.⁵⁵ In 2016, 134 people were detained.⁵⁶ In 2017, 126 individuals were imprisoned by Russian forces.⁵⁷ In 2018 – 100 incidents occurred. In 2020, Georgia identified 64 cases of illegal detention. In 2021, 70 people on the occupation line in the direction of the Tskhinvali region (one minors, 59 men and ten women) were arrested.⁵⁸

Abkhazia

During the 2009-2015 period, 1,416 people were illegally arrested in the direction of Abkhazia.⁵⁹ In most cases, these illegally detained persons were residents of the occupied Gali region. In 2016,

⁴⁸ Ibid., p

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁰ Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2016-31.12.2016, p. 5.

⁵¹ Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2017-31.12.2017, p. 6.

⁵² Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2018-31.12.2018, p. 7.

⁵³ Report of the State Security Service of Georgia, p. 10.

2020

⁵⁴ IDFI, Georgian Citizens Detained by Russian Occupation Forces (2009-2015), <https://idfi.ge/ge/georgian-citizens-detained-by-russian-occupational-armed-forces-in-2009-2015>, p.

⁵⁵ State Security Service of Georgia, Report of the State Security Service of Georgia, 01.08.2015-31.12.2015, p. 5.

⁵⁶ State Security Service of Georgia, Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2016-31.12.2016, p. 5.

⁵⁷ State Security Service of Georgia, Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2017-31.12.2017, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Public Defender of Georgia, Public Defender's 2021 Report, <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2022040413242699860.pdf>, p. 147.

⁵⁹ IDFI, Georgian Citizens Detained by Russian Occupation Forces (2009-2015), <https://idfi.ge/ge/georgian-citizens-detained-by-russian-occupational-armed-forces-in-2009-2015>

the State Security Service of Georgia listed 193 illegal detentions in the direction of the occupied Abkhazia.⁶⁰ In 2017, there were 52 illegal detentions.⁶¹ In 2018, there were 28 facts of illegal detention.⁶² In 2020, there were 13 cases.⁶³ In 2021, ten persons were illegally detained.⁶⁴

Illegal “Borderization” as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare

The illegal borderization process first started in 2009 but as experts note, it took a systematic and organized character form in 2013. The method of borderization involves the installation of barbed wire, fences, barriers and trenches along the line of occupation. In the occupied Tskhinvali region, the occupation line is 350 kilometers long and 145 kilometers long in the direction of Abkhazia.⁶⁵

The fences built during “borderization” are not an obstacle from a military point of view and cannot have a deterrent effect. It seems that their main goal is to separate the Georgian and Ossetian communities and cause instability in Georgian society by seizing more of the territory controlled by Georgia.

The Georgian authorities believe that the occupation and the militarization of the territories of the de facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali and Abkhazia is an existential threat to Georgia. Additionally, creeping occupation represents the elements of the Russian hybrid war in Georgia but the issue is not securitized. Therefore, the existence of any specific measures against encroaching occupation is not in question. The reason for this is that there is a great deal of disproportion between the political, military and economic strength of Russia and Georgia. Georgia has no real leverage to put pressure on Russia. Taking specific measures may lead to an armed conflict with Russia.

Therefore, the Georgian side is trying to act only through negotiations with Russia, with the support of international organizations, both on the facts of the abduction of its citizens and the

⁶⁰ State Security Service of Georgia, Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2016-31.12.2016, p. 5.

⁶¹ State Security Service of Georgia, Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2017-31.12.2017, p. 5.

⁶² State Security Service of Georgia, Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2018-31.12.2018, p. 5.

⁶³ State Security Service of Georgia, Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01. 2020-31.12.2020, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Interpressnews.ge, “The Head of the Security Service - in 2021, 11 illegal arrests were recorded in the direction of Abkhazia and 70 in the direction of Tskhinvali - I want to assure their families that all citizens of Georgia will be released“ (სუს-ის უფროსი - 2021 წელს აფხაზეთის მიმართულებით 11 და ცხინვალის მიმართულებით 70 უკანონო დაკავება დაფიქსირდა - მსურს დავარწმუნო მათი ოჯახები, რომ საქართველოს ყველა მოქალაქე გათავისუფლდება)“, 9. September 2022, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/725627-sus-is-uprosi-2021-cels-apxazetis-mimartulebit-11-da-cxinvalis-mimartulebit-70-ukanono-dakaveba-dapiksirda-msurs-davarcmunno-mati-ojaxebi-rom-sakartvelos-qvela-mokalake-gatavisupldeba/>

⁶⁵ Netgazeti.ge, “Borderization in Georgia“ (ბორდერიზაცია საქართველოში), September 20, 2022, Source: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/242817/>

seizure of additional territories. Although abducted people are usually released, the continuous process of borderization significantly damages legitimacy and image of the Georgian state. This, in principle, represents the goal of Russia's hybrid war - attack the state institutions and instill disappointment in the population of Georgia.

Fear Zones^{66 67}

Definition

Fear zone is a term used to describe areas located on the side of the administrative boundary line (ABL) that Georgian authorities should control but which locals do not enter because of the fear of being detained by Russian border guards.

Mechanism for Creating and Widening Fear Zones

At first, a fear zone is psychological, created by the locals themselves who hesitate to come too close to the ABL in areas with a low presence of Georgian security forces and/or increased activity of Russian border guards. However, such a psychological zone usually slowly turns dangerous under such circumstances. This is caused by the fact that Russian border guards often tend to enter such zones and detain locals despite being on the Georgian side of the ABL.

Very often, the above-described mechanism repeats itself, widening the fear zone even further. Once locals get arrested at some specific point, no matter how deep in the de facto Georgian territory, other locals will not approach that place anymore for the fear of being arrested. Meanwhile, the Russian border guards start to behave in such an *established fear zone* as if it were a territory controlled by the de facto Tskhinvali authorities. Thus, the border of the fear zone moves once again. In several cases, Russian border guards have annexed such established fear zones by creating physical obstacles such as fences. Such fear zones are called *annexed fear zones*.

Topographical Characteristics of Fear Zones

The fear zones appear in remote, sparsely populated areas as well as in densely populated regions with a large number of villages. Borders of fear zones often tend to follow a set of topographical rules. Such borders of a fear zone may be defined by a river (as in the case of Perevi) or the edge of a wide forest (as in the case of Chorchana or Kirbali) with some others following roads (area close to the Skhvilov fortress). Especially in the Shida Kartli region, most of the fields that remained under the control of Georgia after the 2008 war but have been encroached more deeply on the territory under the de facto control of the Tskhinvali authorities, have turned into fear zones in recent years. Especially in sparsely populated areas of the Racha region, borders of fear zones follow specific hills. In such cases, the boundaries are often blurred.

⁶⁶ Interview with NGO De-occupation Movement on October 13, 2021.

⁶⁷ Interview with NGO De-occupation Movement on July 15, 2022.



Resident of Zaardiantkari, who was detained by Russian border guards near to his home. Foto: Tamta Gokadze, Zaardiantkari on 15. January 2022.

Sometimes residents are afraid to enter the mountains and so the border follows the foothills. In other cases, especially if the hill is near the village, locals enter it but do not cross over to its other side. This type of fear zone then follows the backside of the mountain.

Implications for Local Communities

Fear zones and their widening can negatively influence the local population in several ways. The first and most apparent is linked to abductions. These lead to additional financial burdens for families of detained people who have to pay fines and often spend several weeks without their family's provider. The fear of abductions in areas where this phenomenon is frequent has also a negative psychological impact on local communities.



Residents of Kirbali celebrate Easter on local cemetery. Due to the spread of the fear zone, which is reaching the outskirts of the cemetery, they have to be guarded by the local police. Foto: Tamta Gokadze. Kirbali on April 24, 2022.

Although fear zones often cover hilly and wooded areas with limited economic importance, many times they also cover orchards, fields or pastures which are very important in terms of money-making activities, thus further crippling the local economies of ABL communities beyond the direct damage caused by the borderization following the 2008 war.

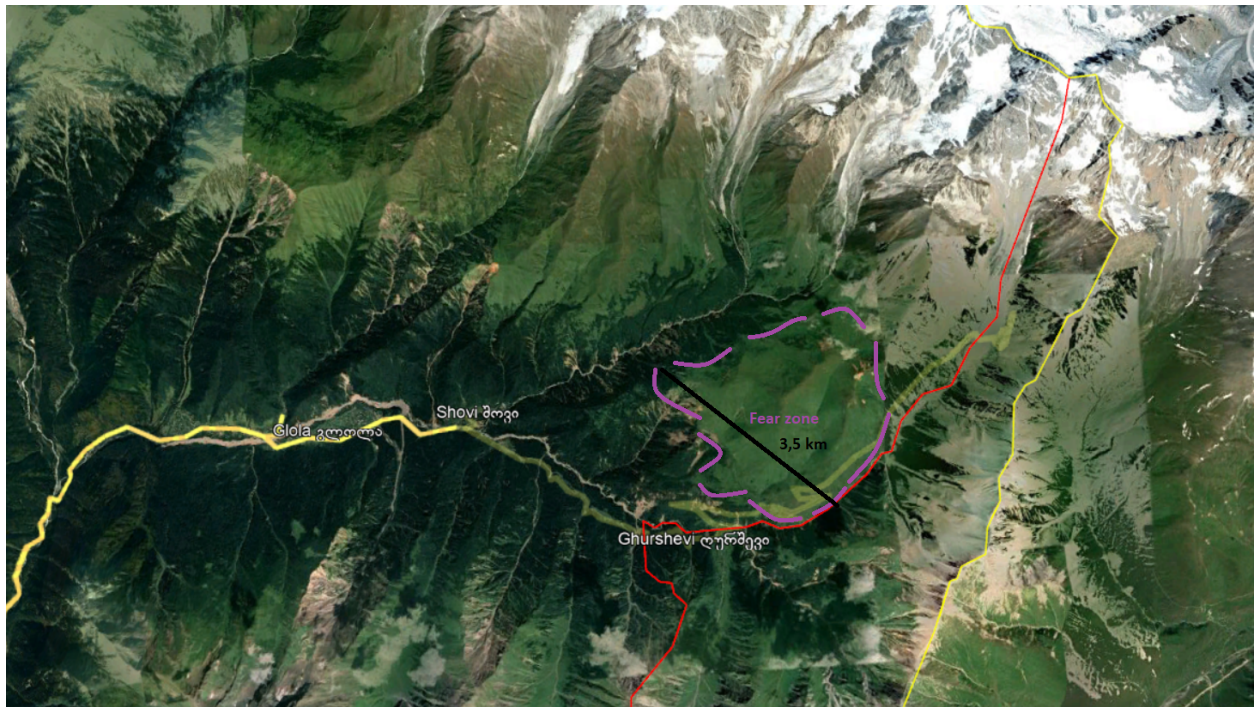
Documented Fear Zones

Oni Municipality

Mamisoni Pass

Residents confirmed that Russian border guards took control of the Mamisoni Pass in 2010, effectively controlling it on behalf of the de facto authorities in Tskhinvali.

Russian forces control the pass from the premises of the former meteorological station. In its turn, the Georgian border guard moved further downhill and established a presence probably next to the bridge west of the village of Ghurshevi. As a result, several local families from the village of Gola lost access to their traditional pastures under the Mamisoni Pass.



Map no. 1: Fear Zone Next to Mamisoni Pass

Axis Kvedi-Iri

Local residents of Iri said that they do not feel particularly afraid to walk in the direction of the ABL but they rarely venture in this direction because they have no reason to do so. There is no Georgian border presence on the ABL on the road between Kvaisi with the Russian military base and Iri.

Locals argue that Georgian security presence on the ABL close to Iri would legalize the ABL as a border. This argument, however, does not hold since Georgian police are present on the ABL in other regions of Georgia.

The absence of Georgian security presence in the area creates a specific situation and a specific type of zone as compared to other areas on the ABL. Between Iri and the ABL, we can identify a 2.5-km-deep fear zone which locals are afraid to enter. However, the absence of Georgian security forces in this vital communication creates another specific and deeper zone which we can describe as a sort of “blind zone.” It is a zone close to the ABL where locals are not afraid to go but do not venture in for various reasons. In combination with the absence of any Georgian security presence, it creates a zone which is not monitored or “seen” by the state.

Towards the settlement of Skhanari further north, the reaches of the fear zone are even more profound. In a settlement which has lost access to the adjacent forest as a result of the fear zone, Skhanari is threatened with complete depopulation soon given that only one or two families have stayed.

Residents of Tsedisi claim that people are not being detained in the area by the Russian border guards, although they are afraid to venture deeper into the forest east of the settlement. On several occasions, residents lost their cattle after it crossed the ABL.

An elderly woman in Kvedi claimed that she recently saw a group of men armed with automatic rifles on the outskirts of the village. She said they did not look like members of the Russian border guards but rather some Ossetian militia.

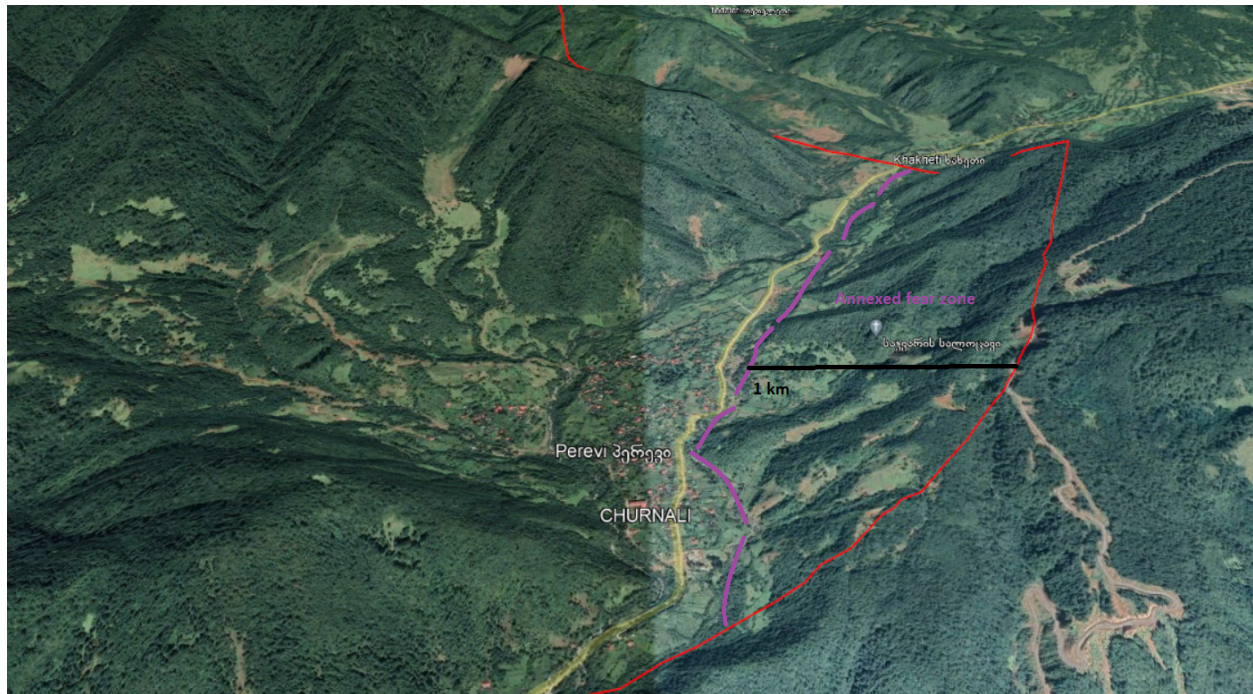


Map no. 2: Fear Zone Between Iri and Kvedi

Sachkhere Municipality

Perevi

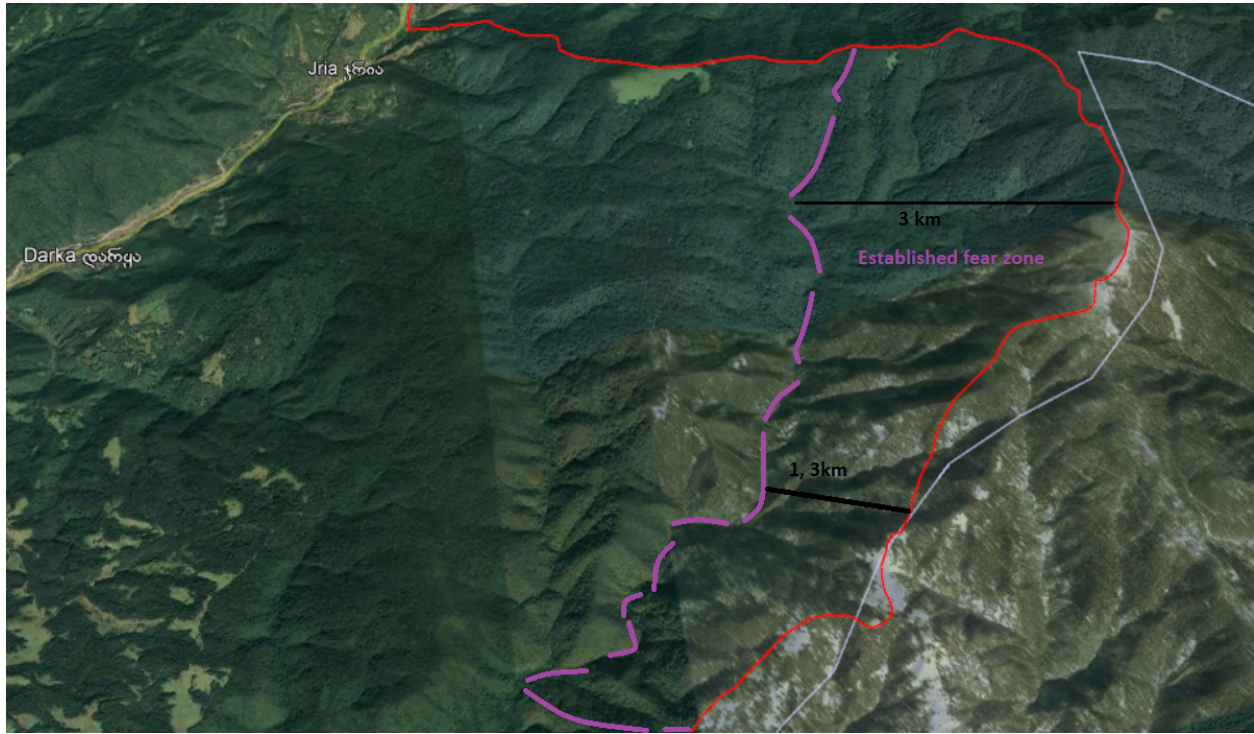
Near the village of Perevi, Russian forces managed to effectively annex a long-term fear zone running along the Ghebura River to the extent that they built a fence on its borders. They also occupied several houses adjacent to the village in question. This step significantly worsened the security situation in the whole town.



Map no. 3: Annexed Fear Zone Next to Perevi

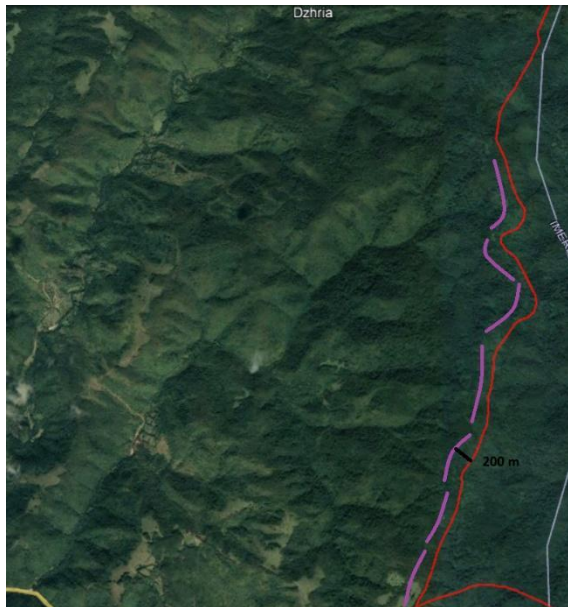
Jria Forest

Russian forces now control an extensive fear zone of approximately 22 square kilometers. The new actual ABL now runs through the Dzirula River. Despite the current considerable size of the zone in question, Russian border guards conducted a raid about three years ago in which the inhabitants of several houses were kidnapped west of the river. As a result, the whole area became depopulated and the fear zone now stretches beyond the Dzirula River.



Map no. 4: Established Fear Zone in Jria Forest

Chonto Valley

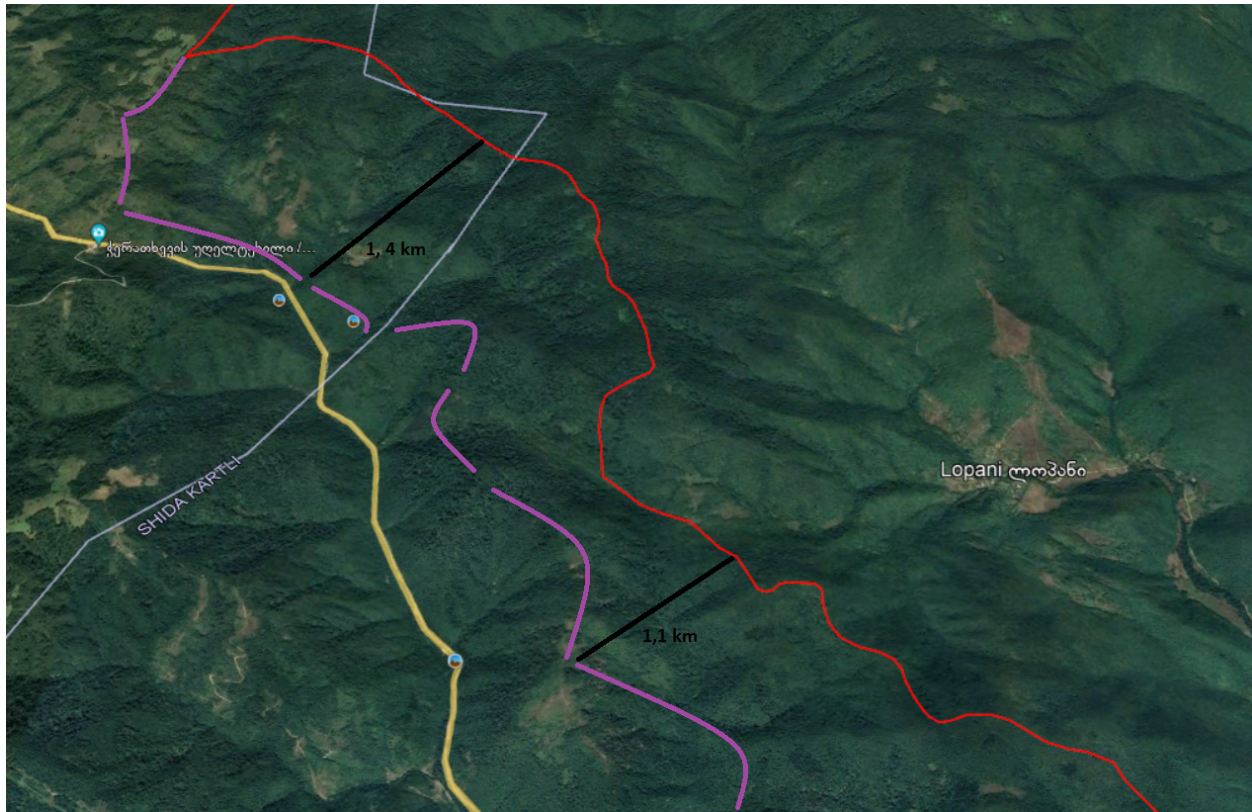


Map no. 5: Fear Zone Close to the Chonto Valley

Along the ABL in the area of the Chonto Valley, fear zones do not extend deep into de facto Georgian territory. This is caused mainly by the absence of settlements close to the area of the ABL. Based on earlier incidents and testimonies of residents of the region, it can be assumed that the fear zone, created by activities of Russian border guards, extends approximately 200 meters into the de facto Georgian territory.

Gomi-Sachkhere Road

A vast forest north of the Gomi-Sachkhere road was turned into a fear zone in recent years. Two factors led to its creation. The first is the fact that a given area is just sparsely populated. Second is the activity of Russian border guards in the area which resulted in several abductions of Georgian citizens in the past.

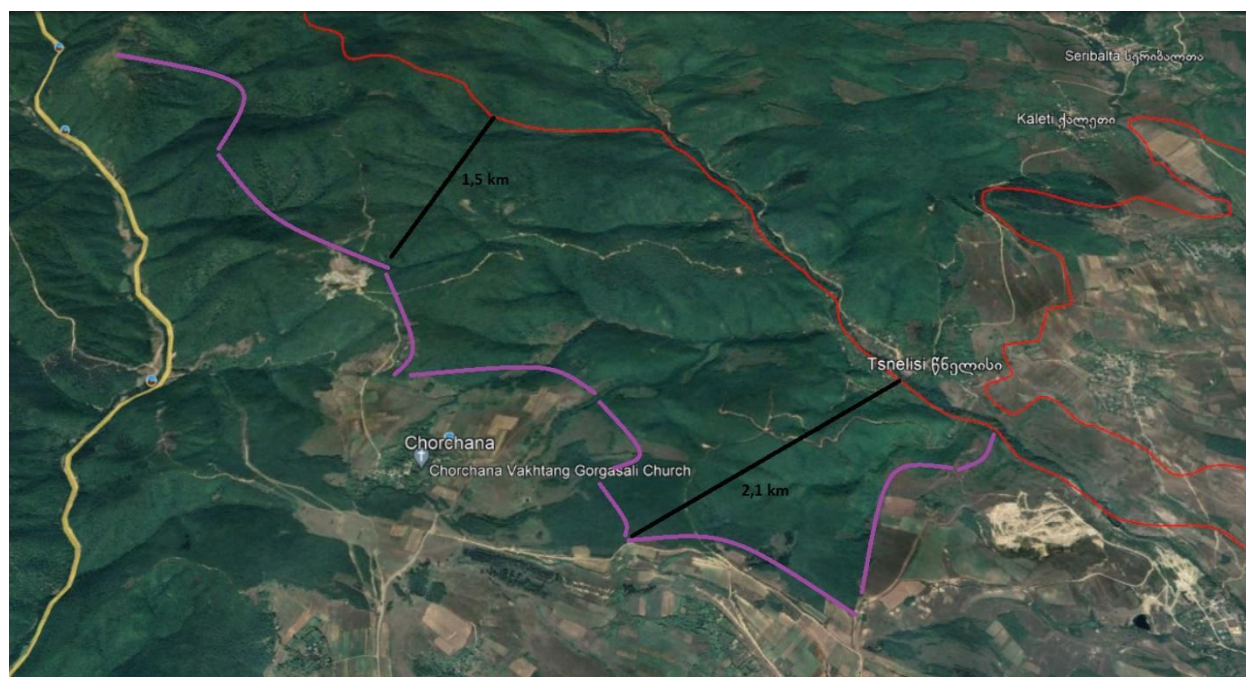


Map no. 6: Fear Zone Close to the Gomi-Sachkhere Road

Khashuri Municipality

Chorchana Forest

Most problematic from the security point of view are Chorchana and Tsaghvli - two villages connected by road. Russian expansion in the region started in the Tsaghvli forest. The main local Russian base is now near Tsaghvli, deep on the Georgian side of the ABL. Russians made a road in the woods and several posts in 2019, adding military infrastructure and slowly annexing the whole area. This development negatively affects the settlements of Chorchana, Tsaghvli and Titvinistskharo. The appearance of a vast fear zone covering the entire Tsaghvli and Chorchana forest had a devastating impact on the village of Chorchana. Having no access to irrigation water due to specific local conditions, the economy of this community has traditionally been based on the Chorchana forest.



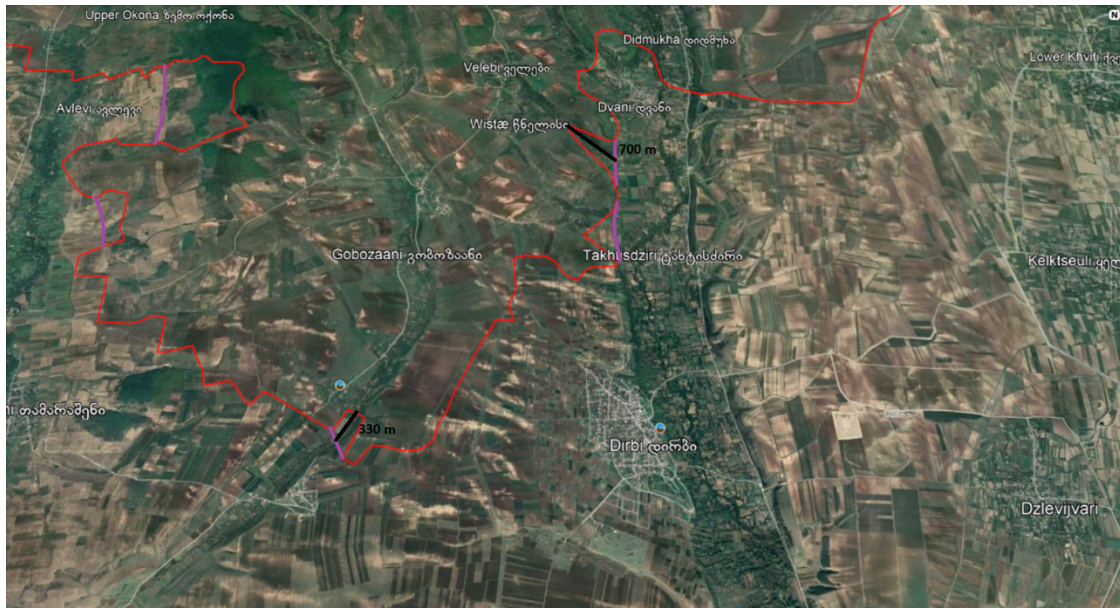
Map no. 7: Fear Zone Covering the Chorchana Forest

Kareli Municipality

Due to the relatively high population density in the vicinity of Atotsi and Dirbi villages, the local fear zones do not extend deep into Georgian territory - only a few dozen or hundreds of meters in length. However, it is often agricultural land and pastures and so the impact on local communities is considerable.



Map no. 8: Fear Zones Close to the Village of Atotsi



Map no. 9: Fear Zones Close to Settlements of Dirbi, Takhtisdziri and Dvani

Gori Municipality

In the agricultural Gori municipality, the area close to the ABL is densely populated. As a result, local fear zones are not as deep as they are in the Racha or Sachkhere regions. On the other hand, local fear zones often touch the last houses in local villages. Therefore, these communities often suffer the most from abductions by Russian border guards as well as by negative economic consequences of fear zones.

Zemo Nikozi

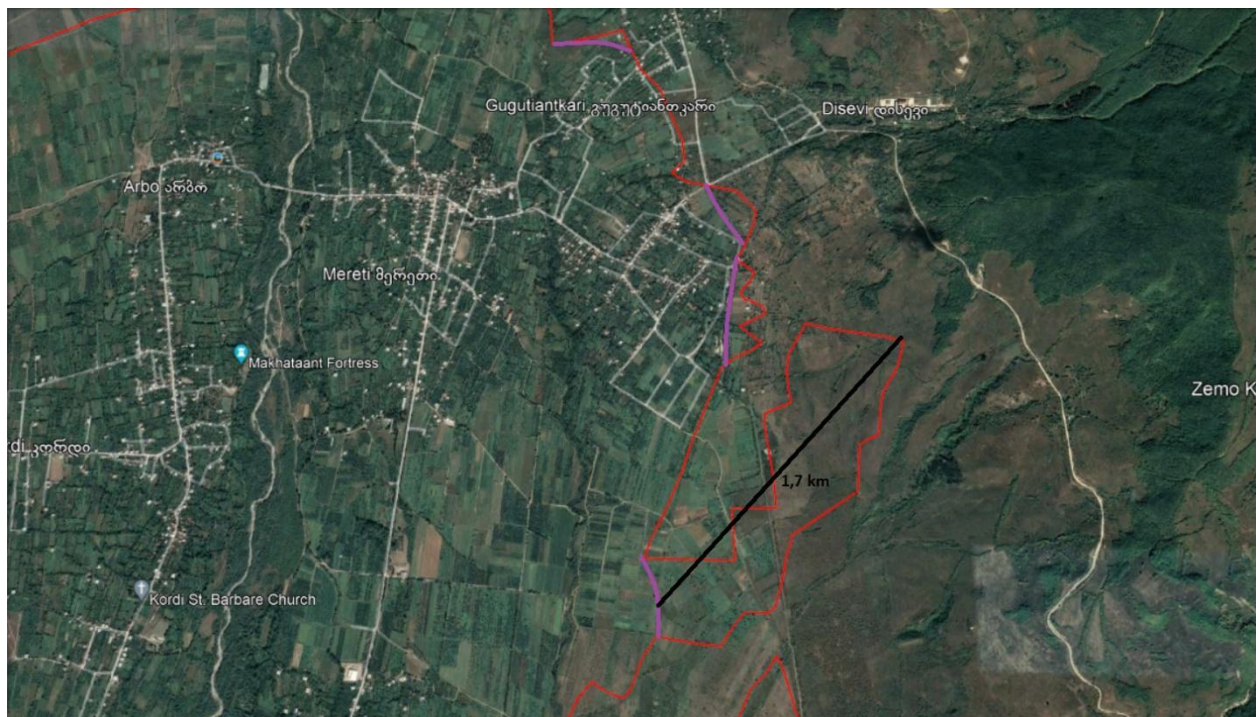
Zemo Nikozi is a relatively big and economically prosperous settlement close to Tskhinvali. There is a 2.3-km-deep fear zone covering several fields on its north-west edges.



Map no. 10: Fear Zone in Zemo Nikozi

Gugutiantkari and Zaardiantkari

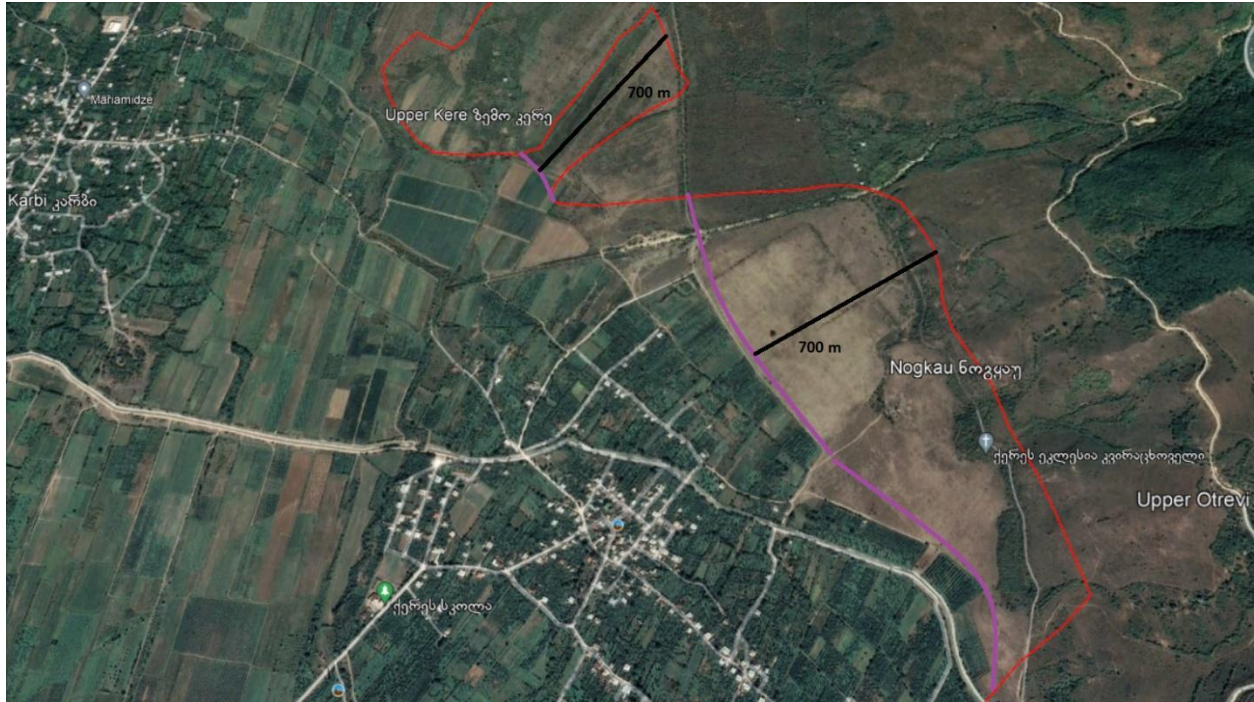
Although fear zones near both settlements are not very deep, they are problematic. Especially in Zaardiantkari, which was depopulated to a considerable degree, it caused a relatively high degree of detentions of local residents. Another deep fear zone is located to the southeast of both settlements.



Map no. 11: Fear Zones close to Settlements of Gugutiantkari and Zaardiantkari

Kere

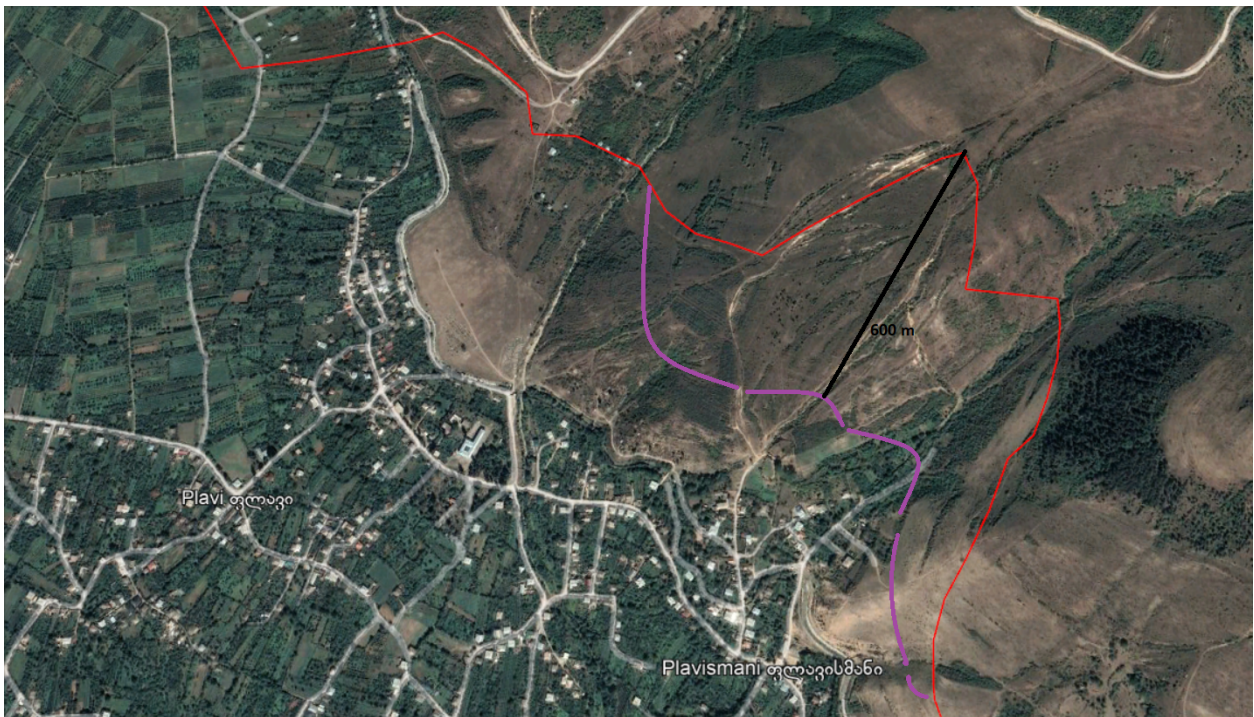
There are two fear zones on the edges of Kere, both approximately 700 meters deep. One of them covers the local church with an old cemetery.



Map no. 12: Fear Zones Close to Kere

Plavi and Plavismani

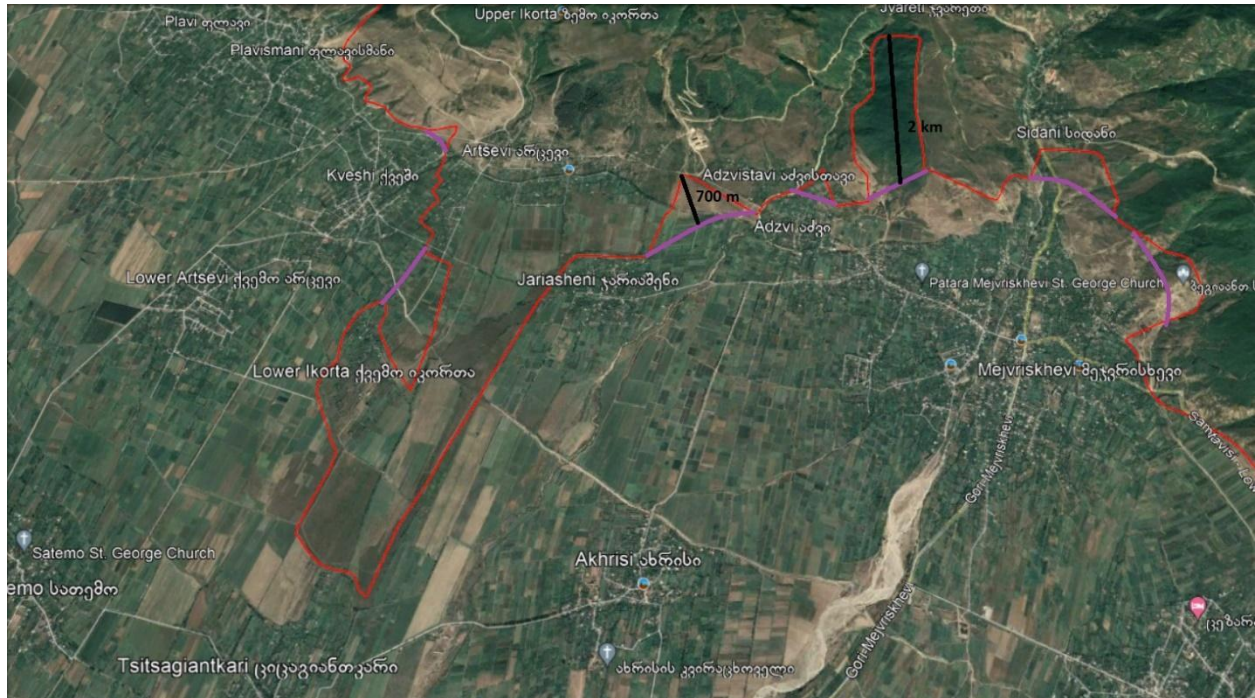
In the case of these two villages, the fear zone covers a whole nearby hill. In the past several people were abducted in this area.



Map no. 13: Fear Zone Close to Villages of Plavi and Plavismani

Area of Mejvriskhevi

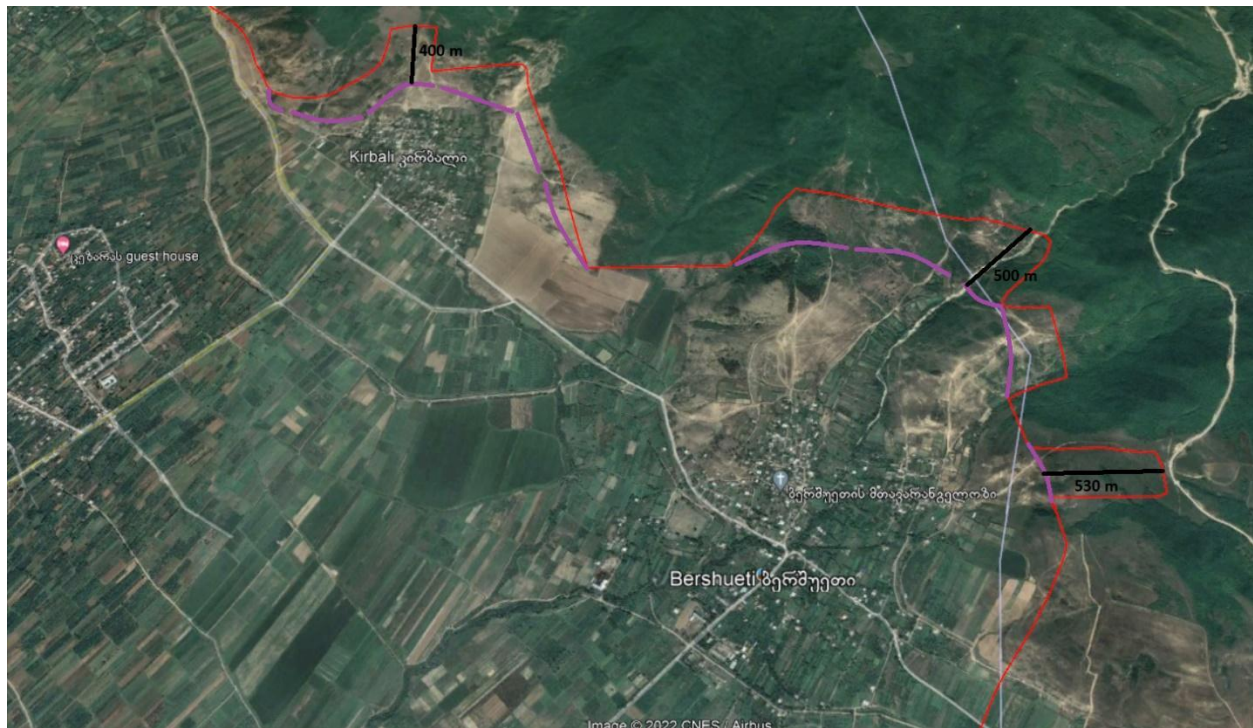
In the area of Mejvriskhevi, which also includes the settlements of Adzvi and Jariasheni, there are several fear zones. These include an approximately 2-km-deep fear zone covering a nearby forest and a fear zone covering one of the local temples.



Map no. 14: Fear Zones in the Area of Mejvriskhevi

Area of Kirbali and Bershueti

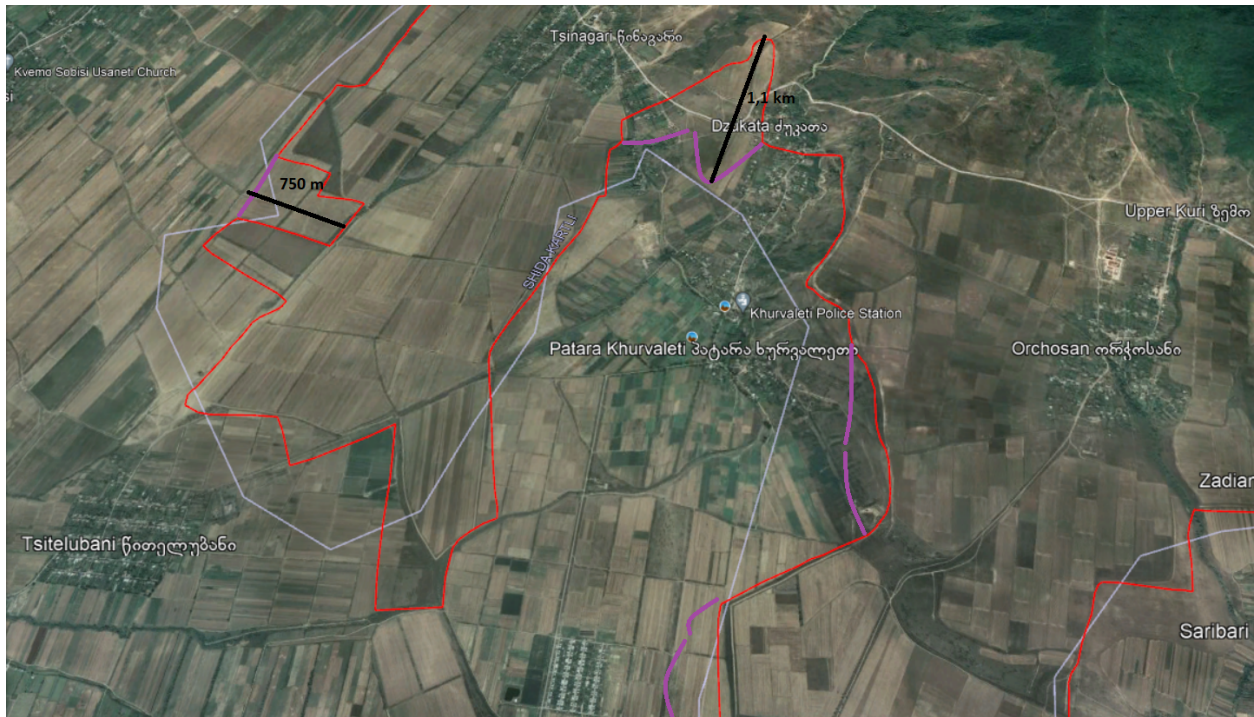
The village of Kirbali is one of the most affected by the nearby fear zones. Due to its presence, the given community has many detentions. It also lost access to a traditional forest, temple and pastures. In recent years, Russian border guards have increased their activities also on the edges of a local cemetery. Due to this fact, a celebration of Easter in the cemetery is not possible without the presence of Georgian police anymore. In nearby Bershueti, the fear zone does not have such a negative impact on the local community. Several respondents claimed, however, that the fear zone reached their temple in the last two years and they no longer feel safe while attending it.



Map no. 15: Fear Zones in the Area of Kirbali and Bershueti

Patara Khurvaleti

The area of this settlement is surrounded by the ABL from three sides. Moreover, one of the local fear zones, located north of the settlement, cut off several houses from the rest of the territory under Georgian control.



Map no. 16: Fear Zones around Patara Khurvaleti

Kaspi Municipality

Forests Around Skhvilo Fortress

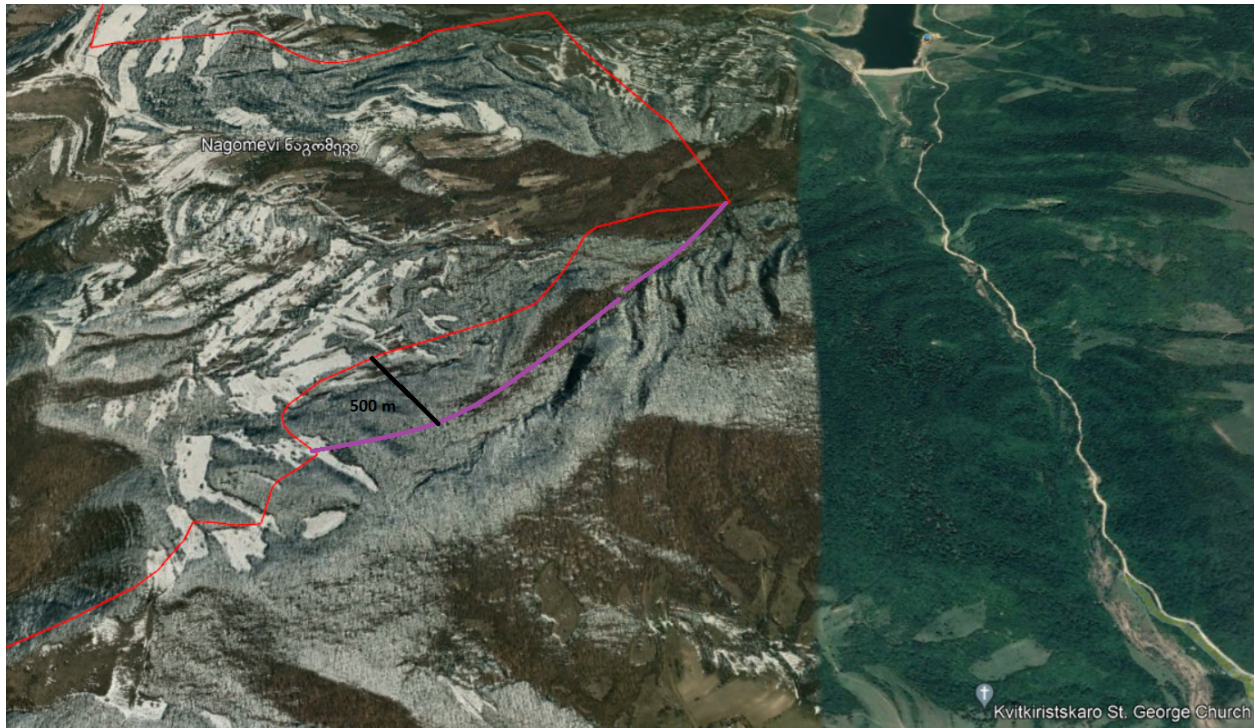
These fear zone reaches from 300 to 900 meters into the territory under Georgian control and cover primarily forested areas. Several people were abducted by Russian border guards in this area in recent years.



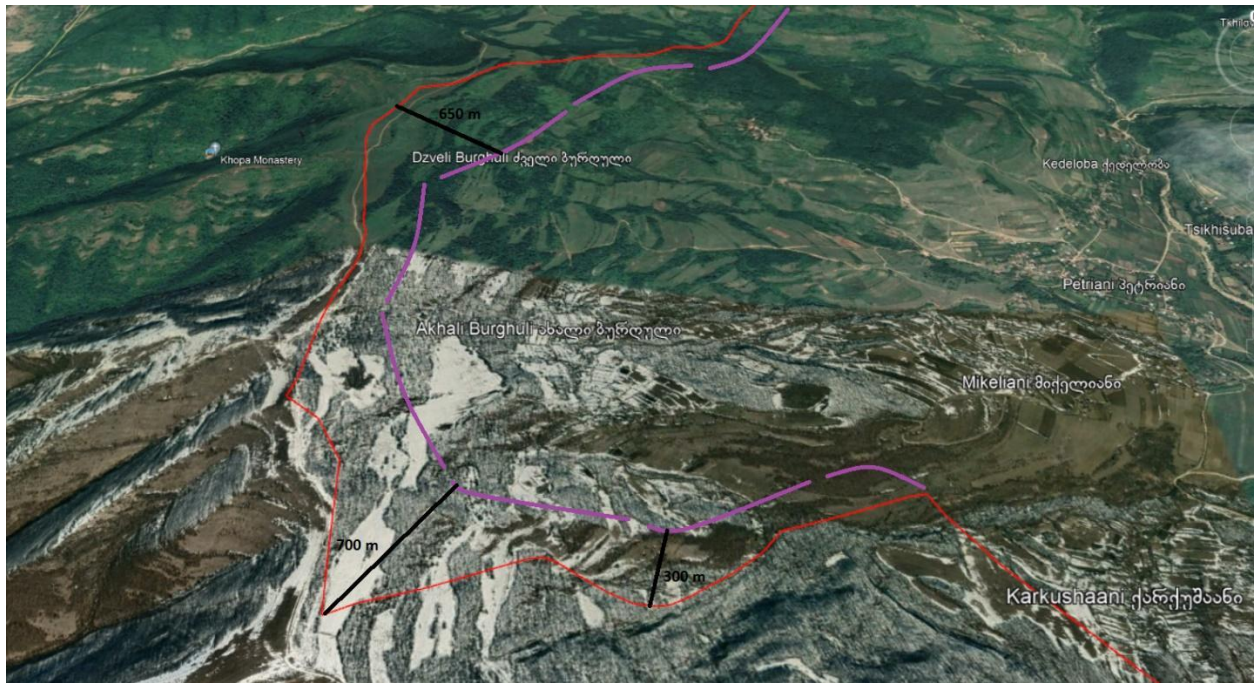
Map no. 17: Fear Zone Covering the Forest in the Area of the Skhviló Fortress

Dusheti Municipality

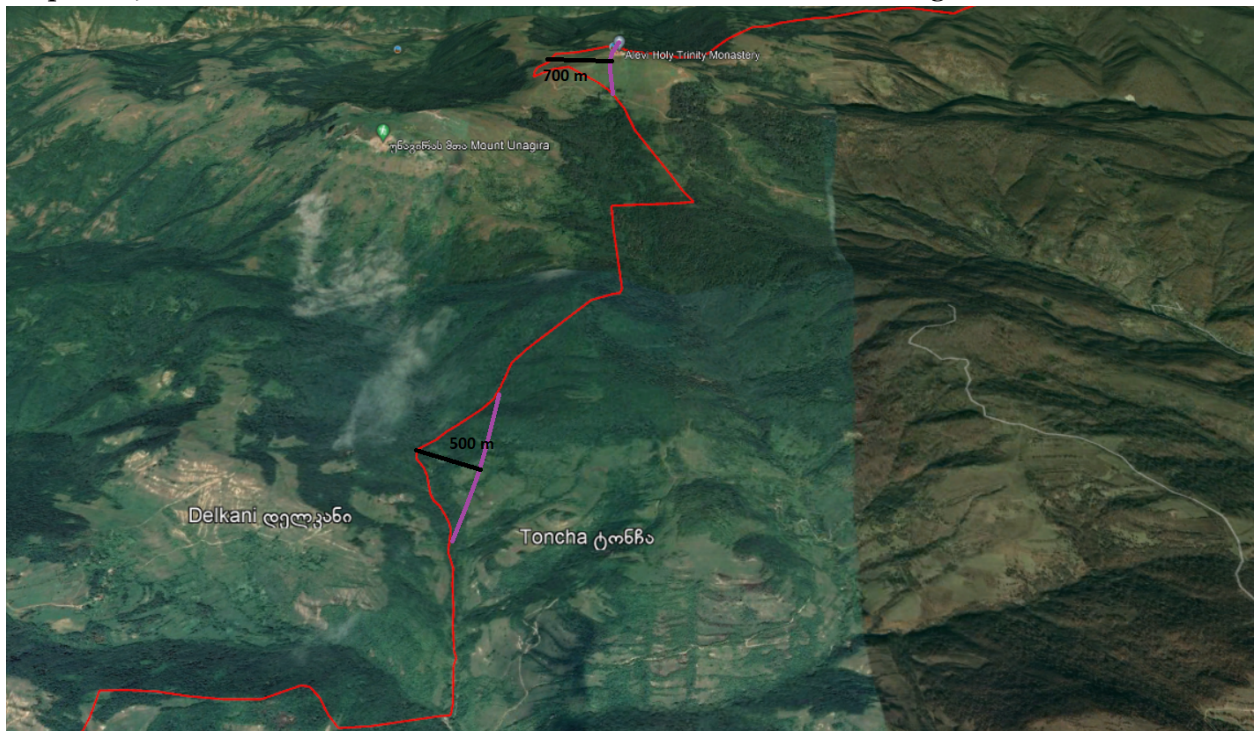
Most of the ABL in the Mtskheta-Mtianeti region follows the line of the high hills where fear zones do not appear. However, several fear zones severely hinder the development of local communities in the southwest of the Dusheti municipality.



Map no. 18: Fear Zone in the Hills of the Southwest Dusheti Municipality

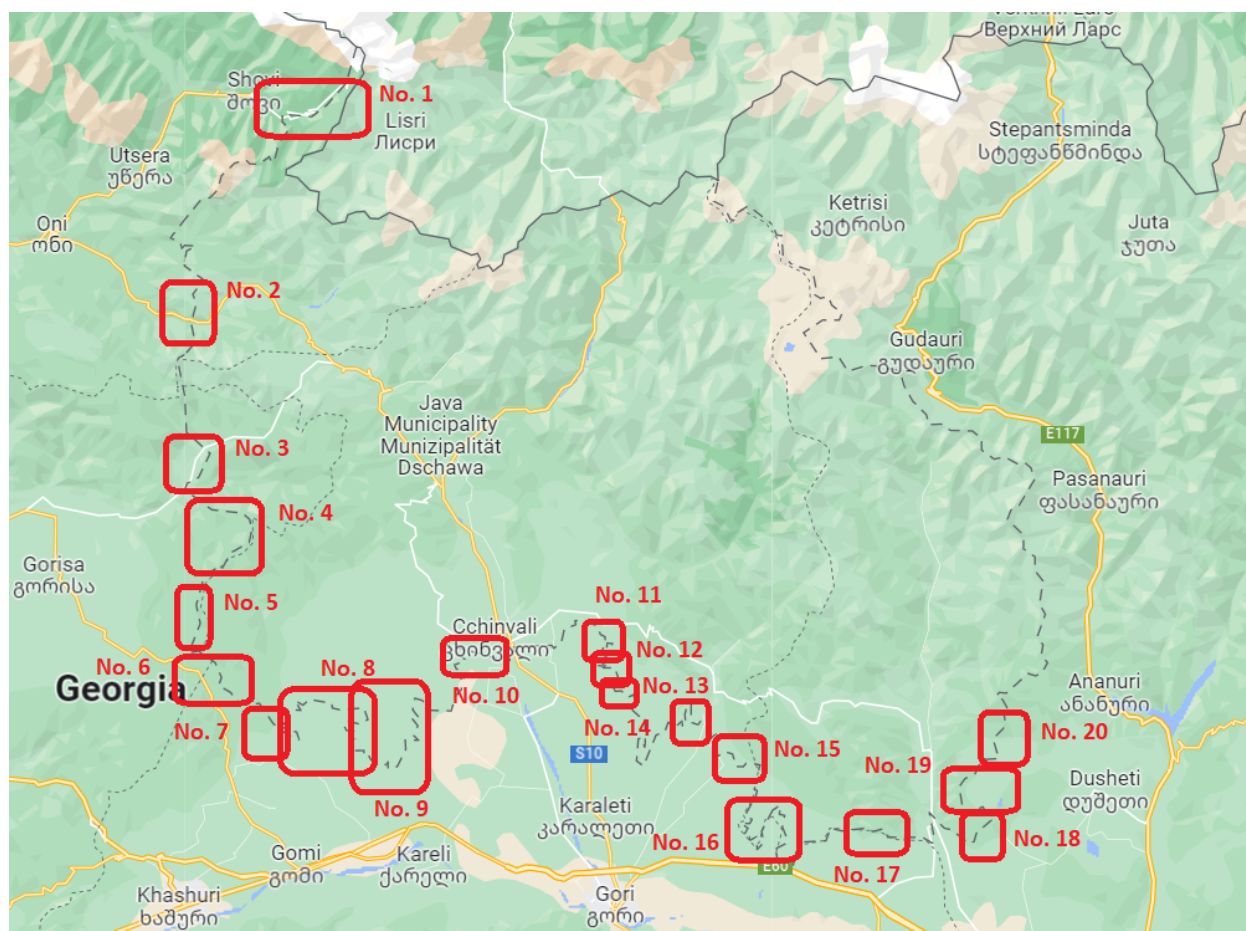


Map no. 19: Fear Zone in the Area Close to the Settlement of Akhali Burghuli



Map no. 20: Fear Zones Close to the Settlement of Toncha and the Alevi Holy Trinity Monastery

Map of the Monitored Area



Conclusion

The phenomenon of "borderization" receives relatively comprehensive coverage in the Georgian and partly also in the world media. The same is the case with the kidnapping of residents by Russian border guards. Given Georgia's long-term policy of avoiding open conflict with the Russian Federation, Tbilisi's options concerning "borderization" are limited to observation and recording.

On the other hand, in the issue of illegal detentions of Georgian citizens on the ABL, increased police presence proves to be a relatively effective policy. This is proven by the results of our fieldwork such as, for example, from the villages of Gugutiantkaari, Kirbali and Koda.

On the flip side, the phenomenon of "fear zones" in terms of their scope, nature of spread, consequences and purpose has not been sufficiently explored so far and deserves more attention.

Women and Youth^{68, 69}

Introduction

As demonstrated above, challenges within the ABL community constitute complex range conditioned by the region's specifics. It also concerns the two most threatened groups - women and youth.

Specific situation of women is to a great degree determined by the fact, that each gender group has roles related to their lifestyle and dedicated chores.

Regarding youth, the main challenges revealed in the course of the fieldwork and focus groups concern education and engagement in recreational, cultural, and sports. However, beyond these basic outline rests a wide range of other interlinked problems.

Women

As an outcome of the conducted field and focus-group interviews within the research framework, several major tendencies have been identified.

Linkage to the municipal centres appears to be a primary concern for women. As respondents stressed, due to the lack of bigger employers, they can usually only work in agriculture and selling products on nearby markets, however, even this opportunity is hard to pursue considering an inefficient public transport schedule or insufficient amount of public mini-busses. Both aforementioned problems, lack of employers and insufficient public transport, further stimulate mass migration of locals into the cities and abroad, the vast majority of whom are women. "Job opportunities for local women are scarce; thus, they emigrate".

The lack of professional training is another serious factor causing additional unemployment. The focus group interview outlined a similar case, where the woman from the village Chorchana, who has medical education as a nurse, was concerned about the scarcity of local opportunities for career rearrangement or development since neither her diploma (released in the Soviet time) nor her qualification is recognized as relevant today, so on the one end, she is unable to employ in local ambulatory and on the other, the village remains without nurse since the wage is so low that little does for anyone from the other village or center worth working there.

⁶⁸ Focus groups with women from target communities conducted on October 17. 2022

⁶⁹ Focus groups with youth from target communities conducted on October 18. 2022



Young woman with her child in Arbo. Photo: Tamta Gokadze. Arbo on 7. November 2021.

Among top priorities, lack of irrigation water was considered to be one of the most severe, by female respondents. Since agriculture is a major source of employment for ABL women; an irregular or insufficient supply of irrigation water severely affects productivity of their fields. According to most interviewed women, the problem is further aggravated by two factors - climate change (due to global warming, atmospheric precipitation has been reduced in recent years) and disorderly arranged irrigation system infrastructure.

Respondents from some communities identified also problems with drinking water. In settlements where the quality of drinking water is low, villagers, usually women have to fetch and store it from neighboring villages, which, from respondents' experience, is highly inconvenient.

Besides problems with water and an unstable security environment in the villages along the ABL, banks especially restrain themselves from providing agricultural loans to villagers.

Local women also identified several successful practices. One of them is the IDFI (Information Development and Freedom Institute) - campaign "Fruits of Heroism" which has been implemented in several ABL villages under the framework of the project: "Solidarity Branding". It intends to increase the realization rate of agricultural products produced in mentioned villages via the promotion its production and merchandise in several hypermarket chain such as Carrefour and Zgapari.

Regarding the initiation and actual engagement in the process of solution-seeking regarding the above-mentioned challenges, most respondents from focus groups were active. Considering 2/3 of interviewed women revealed to be assertively engaged in an advocacy campaign to the government to fix infrastructural problems (road, water ditches, and external illumination) in their villages on municipal and central authority levels. They also attend Sakrebulo meetings and annual budget reports. However, this may be considered to be a sampling bias since during the field research in target communities, local women demonstrated a much lower level of activism.

Women who have never been part of such activities name information vacuum or irrelevant spread of information as prime reasons. According to the women interviewed, they do not have access to information about under which auspices and framework they can direct their concerns to the local government. From their perspective, it is a fault of either having no active mechanism of local government in strategic communication with citizens or using an existent mechanism inefficiently - spread information on their websites - that has a meagre rate of viewers (women especially, due to their household chores, can not manage to pursue to those web sites actively).

Women link the problem of accessible information and vacuum to their prime challenge - unemployment. Yet in a scarcity of workplaces, even if a rare vacancy appears, before announcing a public contest, employer institutions spread information in inner circles, select relatives or acquaintances for vacant positions, and public contests turn out to hold in vain.

Women relate the problem of unemployment to kindergarten scarcity as well. In several ABL villages, for instance, Arbo and Kordi, kindergarten does not work. Mothers often cannot take their children to a neighbouring village. In such case, mothers must devote their whole time to chores and children. As a result, even if suitable workplaces existed for them, they would not have been able to work. Partially, this circumstance demonstrates the social tendency of stereotypical devotion to roles, functions, and chores according to gender within the society of our focus. Men are hardly likely to participate in the upbringing of children fully; thus, as voiced by respondent women, active social work in awareness raising is essential within the community - not only with women but also (even more) with men.

Youth

Inefficient transport schedules and insufficient public vehicles remain a top priority for youth alike of women, however uncomfortable transport arrangement affect their pursuit of higher education - they require to take additional classes with tutors after school to pass United National Exams for university enrollment, so leaned on the transport schedule, they are unable to manage to return home after additional classes (since to certain villages, the last bus from municipal centers leaves at 5:30 or 6:00 and their classes last far later) so they have to stay at their relatives in town, or those who have no relative living in Town, have to return home and cover more than 10 km on foot.

In another circumstance, even if they manage to catch the last bus, another issue is problematic - since merely several buses serve their villages and the juncture between any two ranges from 1 to 1.5 hours, pupils who travel to town for classes often have a considerable time gap between their arrival to an actual start of the lesson, or between two lessons which are an inefficient spend of time for them. From a youth perspective, it is a vital town not to be the primary center for both formal and non-formal education opportunities.

Respondent youth voiced ideas about the creation of communal education hubs that would solve the majority of their challenges: provide them with tutors and flexibility to arrange lessons more freely without dependence on transport; provide service of youth workers by certain regional organizations suggesting a list of non-formal education activities (and their range of interest are huge: started from civic activism and leadership ended with programming and scientific engineering); they recon, the hub also creates free space for youth to study, hang out and communicate with one another outside school.



Local children in Chvrinisi. Foto: Tamta Gokadze, Chvrinisi on 29. April 2022.

Another significant concern for ABL youth is the lack of recreational places. Young respondents appreciate that several municipalities installed external exercise equipment and built mini-stadiums in target communities while propagating healthy lifestyles. However, they would welcome the construction of recreation parks where village youth could spend time together. Since the civic activism rate among ABL youth is above average (several community leader youngsters participated in the interview as respondents), the youth is also ready to take care of the recreational infrastructure if international donors would install it for them.

Conclusion

In the case of women and youth, general problems identified during the field research were repeated, as well as several specific problems.

The most mentioned general problem for both groups was insufficient public transport. Compared to the interpretation provided by the respondents during the field research, the given problem was marked by the Focus groups participants as comparatively more severe. Also, insufficient public transport negatively affects the lives of women and youth in target communities in other ways.

In the case of women, insufficient public transport had a negative impact on their ability to find employment. This applies especially to women with small children who do not have good access

to kindergartens. On the other hand, young people from the target communities are disadvantaged in accessing education due to insufficient public transport.

However, specific problems should be noticed too. For women, these include, in particular, the lack of opportunities for training and retraining and the limitations resulting from their traditional status and roles in families. In this regard, the local youth is particularly troubled by the lack of recreational facilities.

IV. Areas of Intervention

I. Effectivity of Local Economy

Problem: Transport costs to nearby markets

Small producers carry their goods to markets independently, with respondents repeatedly complaining about high transport costs. The problem with the high costs of transporting production to markets also affects producers of alternatives to apples, such as raspberries.

Intervention 1: To centralize transport of local production to markets

Practice shows that if a more central transport of their production is organized, their profits can be significantly increased.

The Rosehips from Atotsi project, in which members of the De-Occupation Movement helped to organize the transport of rosehips from the village of Atotsi, can serve as one example of the effectiveness of this approach. Due to fuel prices, residents of Atotsi could only afford to sell their crops in nearby Gori. Organized transport to the market in Tbilisi increased their profit several times. This approach can also be applied in communities focused on cattle breeding, especially cheese producers.

Intervention 2: To construct central warehouses

Mr. Lomsadze stressed the positive effects of the organized transport of local production to target markets could be further strengthened by building central warehouses with cooling boxes on strategic roads. They could become an intermediary between the local producer and store chains.

Intervention 3: To continue contributions for the purchase of cooling boxes for crop storage

Respondents repeatedly mentioned cooling boxes for crop storage as an excellent tool for increasing profits in the context of the glut of the local Georgian market. Respondents particularly praised the state support system for purchasing such boxes.

Problem: Lack of agricultural mechanisms

Although the lack of agricultural machinery is a problem in many rural areas of Georgia, it was exacerbated in villages on the ABL by the 2008 war. By the time local communities were evacuated due to the war, virtually all agricultural machinery was stolen from many of them.

Intervention 4: To improve access to agricultural machinery

Two main approaches have been implemented in the region to solve this problem. The first is machinery centers where farmers can rent agricultural machinery. Their advantage is a wide selection of machines and accessories corresponding to the current needs of individual farmers. The disadvantage is the quick amortization of the rented equipment and the often-high costs of transporting the equipment to more distant villages. This approach, however, has been on the decline in recent years.

The responsible authorities prefer the second strategy. These are state subsidies for purchasing agricultural equipment and subsidies for interest payments for loans in commercial banks. This policy allows local farmers to buy their agricultural machinery and rent it to other farmers in the area for a fee. In the long term, such a policy might address the problem of amortization of machinery rented from machinery centers and the often-high cost of transporting machinery too far away settlements. The positive effects of this policy, if properly implemented, will only begin to manifest in a few years.

Problem: Unused potential of cooperatives

Cooperatives are at the center of interest of the responsible authorities, who see them as a tool for streamlining the local economies of villages on ABL. The field research carried out as part of this project (especially the visit to the village of Kvadi) suggests that this may indeed be the case. However, the persistent lack of interest and mistrust on the part of local farmers remains an obstacle to implementing this strategy.

And this is despite the extensive program of support for cooperatives from the state.

Intervention 5: To support more intensive informational campaign

Kvedi's example, among others, demonstrates that training and promotional events can change the dismissive attitude of local communities. Therefore, it is necessary to consider local authorities' support precisely in the sphere of education and the promotion of cooperatives.

Problem: Unused potential of intensive orchards

Intensive horticulture has been developing in the region for several years, demonstrating a positive potential for the further development of the local economy. In combination with the diversification of production, intensive orchards can improve the socioeconomic situation of local communities with small plots of land and create additional seasonal jobs. However, their potential was not sufficiently utilized. Due to the relatively high input costs, only larger farmers can afford to create intensive orchards. Intensive orchards represent an opportunity, especially for farmers with small plots of land. However, they usually need more capital.

Intervention 6: To support further development of intensive orchards among small farmers

Foreign donors could help the responsible Georgian authorities find practical solutions to support small farmers interested in establishing intensive orchards.

Problem: Inability of local producers to expand on European markets

Although several products from Georgia manage to establish themselves on the European market, local apples do not. Meanwhile, they are not only the main agricultural product of most of the target communities but also of the entire Shida Kartli region.

Intervention 7: To support local producers of apples willing to expand on EU markets

Due to their quality, local apples have the potential to make a name for themselves, but for now, the process of growing them does not meet the strict rules of the Union. The continued support of the Georgian authorities in implementing EU requirements in apple cultivation is, therefore, still requested and necessary. Otherwise, many target communities and a large part of the region will remain hostage to the Russian market.

Problem: Lack of brandmaking of local production

Several larger growers and producers from ABL have expressed interest in selling their products in commercial chains, saying they do not know how to proceed.

Intervention 8: To support brandmaking of local production

Practice shows that creating a business brand and establishing contacts with business chains proves to be another effective tool for supporting local economies. Besides centralized transport, the Rosehips from Atotsi project also created a brand of the same name which helped boost sales.

Moreover, with the joint efforts of USAID, Zinc Network and the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), farmers living near the occupation line in Shida Kartli can sell their agricultural products in the Carrefour and Zghapari store chains. Consumers can buy fresh fruits, dried fruits and nuts under the brand name of Heroism Fruits. This campaign can be enlarged and cover not only stores but also restaurants and other consumers of agricultural products.

Intervention 9: To increase ability of local producers to use advertisements via social media

Smaller local producers, in particular, do not have the means to advertise. Social networks are often the only alternative for them. It would therefore be beneficial to increase their knowledge of social media marketing.

II. Diversification of local production

Problem: Fear of diversification

Many respondents said they are afraid to experiment with diversifying their production because they do not know what crops besides traditional apples can be grown on their land. Therefore, some suggested that the state should fund soil analysis in the target communities to determine which alternative crops are suitable for cultivation.

However, as Mr. Lomsadze stressed, the soil analysis can only identify the amount of three macroelements in the soil – nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus. These are three main elements each plant takes from the soil. Nothing will grow without them.

Phosphorus is needed for the proper growth of roots, potassium for the growth of fruits and nitrogen for the growth of the rest of the plant.

Regarding the soil analysis, he added that the responsible agencies know exactly what the ratio of these three elements is in the soils in individual regions of Georgia.

The whole Shida Kartli region lacks phosphorus, yet it is abundant in Potassium. Although farmers should add nitrogen to the soil every year, they often add too much. As a result, they often change the Ph of the soil, thus decreasing the ability of their plants to absorb Potassium.

Intervention 10: To conduct systematic leaf analysis in target areas

Mr. Lomsadze believes that the region and target communities could benefit from a comprehensive and systematic analysis of plant leaves. Leaf analysis is carried out in the spring and can reveal precisely what elements the given plants lack, unlike soil analysis. The knowledge in question can be used by farmers the following year. Based on the analysis of plant leaves, they will know exactly what substances they need to add to the soil and in what quantity. Farmers can thus not only supply their plants with exactly the elements they need and avoid spending money on unnecessary fertilizers.

Intervention 11: To create a map of niches and clusters of diversification

Field research, as well as additional information from local experts, indicate a positive impact of the type of diversification when clusters of villages diversify by partially re-orientating on one specific plant suitable for their area.

MR Lomsadze believes that this trend should be further supported. According to him, the target region would benefit from the map of niches. Such a map would indicate which specific crops can each cluster of settlements of a microregion produce most effectively – based on the proper analysis of various factors.

The state would then financially support only that specific type of prop in a given cluster or microregion. Locals will focus on a limited set of crops most suitable for their region, and they will specialize in them also through further education. Locals from one cluster would also be able to buy specific herbicides and fertilizers together in more significant quantities for wholesale prices, thus saving their production costs.

Intervention 12: To support training and education focused on alternative crops

Farmers trying to diversify their production often choose from a narrow range of well-known and proven varieties. As a result, only partial diversification occurs when such producers continue to compete strongly with each other.

The diversification of agricultural production in the target communities has two phases. The first is a reorientation from dominant apples to an alternative crop (for example, tomatoes). This can be achieved by systematically educating farmers from individual clusters about the diversity of particular crop varieties, their cultivation, advantages and disadvantages.

III.- IV. Youth and Women

Problem: Domestic violence

From an interview with a local psychologist and several respondents, it emerged that one of the problems of local communities is domestic violence. At the same time, there are no safe spaces in the communities where psychologists could work with victims of domestic violence (especially children) in a secure environment.

Intervention 13: To conduct a psychological/sociological analysis of the situation in target communities

A project that, in cooperation with local psychologists, would map the situation in the target communities, determine their needs and propose solutions.

Intervention 14: To create small psychological clinics

Creating a network of minor psychological points. Such a point can have a form of a single room where patients and victims will feel comfortable and not afraid to cooperate with a psychologist. One such point could be created in Plavi, where a local psychologist lives.

Problem: Lack of security

Living under a sense of instability and insecurity decreases their effort to set up enterprises to empower housewives.

Intervention 15: To increase the security of women and youth

Donors should help local authorities in developing solutions which would increase security of local communities with special focus on women and youth.

Problem: Infrastructure

During the focus discussions, one of the top priorities went to the problem of infrastructure. Infrastructure being out of order or fixed just in the central parts of the villages often constitutes barriers for women. More precisely, in some target villages for USAID Zrda Activity Project, where grants were allotted to agricultural initiatives and special priority was devoted to women, electricity and gas systems were not arranged in the vicinity of cultivable land, which disturbed their project proposals on greenhouses.

Intervention 16: To arrange electricity and gas systems for purposes of greenhouses

Adaption of grant proposals for this circumstance. More precisely, allowance for project proposals to encompass the provision of electricity and gas supply in the requested budget. It should be

noted that due to the specific natural characteristics of the Shida Kartli region, greenhouses are rentable only for limited production of specific plants.

Intervention 17: To increase the control of allocated grants

A monitoring framework for controlling grant capital should be elaborated.

Problem: Lack of information

The research revealed the lack of access to public information for local women in engagement opportunities with self-government. The vast majority of challenges in the youth section of the ABL community are linked to education and employment.

Intervention 18: To improve access of women and youth to information

Donors should help to develop a plan of increased access of women and children from target communities to useful information.

Problem: Public transport

Inflexible transport schedule, that encumbers youngsters to prepare for Unified National Exams or engage in cultural or entertaining and non-formal educational activities. In Khurvaleti, Zerti and Ditsi, the last transport from town leaves at 17:30 and 17:00, which is extremely inconvenient for youngsters. Similar problems were observed in most visited communities.

Intervention 19: To improve access of young people and young families to public transport

Conduction to comprehensive calculation and rearrangement of vehicles serving each village in accordance with the need of the population and set up a new schedule with an increased number of vehicles or extend service time till 22:00 pm is needed.

Intervention 20: To establish communal educational hubs

Establishment of communal education hubs or centers providing classes after school where youngsters will be able to take additional lessons and prepare for exams properly.

V. Security

V. Security

Problem: Fear zones

As the results of this study also show, the security threats that local farmers, and especially herders, face in fear zones or near the ABL, have the potential to damage local economies significantly. The fear of possible detention by Russian border guards has resulted in a part of economically significant agricultural land and pastures remaining unused. Most importantly, the arrest of residents of communities near the ABL does not only occur when they unknowingly cross the line. According to available information, Russian border guards often cross the ABL themselves in some areas and detain residents of local communities near their homes.

Intervention 21: SOS Button

This relatively cheap and easy-to-use device is intended for shepherds and field workers close to the ABL or Fear zones. After being spotted or chased by the Russian border guard, beneficiaries can activate the device, which will immediately alarm Georgian security forces and fix the position of the incident in GPS. Data from a pilot project conducted by the De-occupation movement indicate that implementing the SOS button can decrease kidnappings and improve security in the most vulnerable communities on the ABL.

Intervention 22: To establish video-control of the ABL

Creating a camera surveillance system in areas with the highest activity of Russian border guards, combined with a rapid response system, could increase the security of the most threatened communities.

Intervention 23: Strengthening the police presence in the most vulnerable/isolated communities

The field research revealed, among other things, that increasing the police presence in some of the threatened/isolated communities (such as Gugutiakari or Koda) significantly reduced the number of incidents and increased the sense of security of local residents. Many other communities, however, suffer from the absence of the presence of Georgian police.

VI. Tourism

Problem: Unused potential of local tourism

The zone around the occupation line is less attractive for tourists due to the lack of security, but as a whole Shida Kartli and especially Racha has great tourist potential. Agri-tourism is also poorly developed.

Intervention 24: To train locals as tourist guides

There is a problem of unemployment among the youth of the region. With the help of the state and the private sector, it is possible for young people living near the occupation line to train as tourist guides.

Intervention 25: Organization of regional festivals

In the villages located near the separation line should be promoted the local markets and activities that will contribute to the development of their economy. In the villages, there is a tradition of festivals and sports events, which can also be turned into an activity supporting the production of local farmers. These could include horseracing or wrestling competition

Problem: Unused potential of agritourism

Several respondents expressed interest in the development of agritourism. However, they stated that they do not know how to implement the subject concept in practice and where to look for a source of funding.

Intervention 26: Analysis of potential for development of agritourism

Donors could help local authorities analyze the potential of agritourism in target regions and communities. A similar initiative could help identify the most suitable communities and grant schemes.

Intervention 27: To train and educate communities with potential for development of agritourism

Training on the prospects of agro-tourism for farmers and representatives of small and medium-sized businesses. It is necessary to assist them to get certificates in agrotourism management. The agritourism sector grows, so does the demand for educated workforce. Also, Development of customer-oriented service programs.

Intervention 28: Create a system of financial support

Incentives and financial support are needed in order for Farmers/ guesthouses to carry out necessary renovations and Improvements to meet international standards. Farms have to receive grants and incentives to improve their buildings. It is crucial Also for agritourism to develop new enterprises and expand existing businesses, resulting in increased opportunities and revenues.

VII. SMEs*Problem: Lack of information*

Interviews with members of target communities show, that local farmers and small businesses don't have complete information about state and private projects. they lack information, partners, and skills to apply for business development projects. The lack of low-interest loans was noted for micro, small and by medium-sized enterprises as one of the biggest obstacles factor.

Intervention 29: To organize forums

Organizing forums with the participation of financial institutions and government organizations with representatives of local small and medium businesses. The forum should be about state and private programs for small and medium businesses.

Problem: Absence of initial capital

Research shows that local entrepreneurs and farmers do not have the funds to start new projects. Also, they know little about the projects of the state.

Intervention 30: To organize business idea contests

To support young entrepreneurship, donors could organize business idea contests. which will help reveal new business ideas and start-ups.

Intervention 31: To conduct an analysis of potential for the development of manufactories for processing agricultural production

Donors could help local authorities analyze the potential of small manufactories, which could process local agriculture production in target regions and communities and create additional

working places. A similar initiative could help identify the most suitable communities and grant schemes.

Intervention 32: To support the purchase of small fruit dryers

Small fruit dryers have proven to be a suitable means of increasing crop income for small and medium-sized farmers in several communities. Many not only increased their revenues but created more jobs seasonally. At the same time, dryers are not very financially demanding from an investment point of view.

Problem: Inability to establish itself on the market

As research has shown that local producers often struggle to sell their products.

Intervention 33. To organize regular fairs

Donors might support organization of regular fairs for entrepreneurs from ABL in the capital and other big cities.

Intervention 34: To conduct information campaign: Buy products produced near the occupation line

Information campaigns “buy products produced near the ABL might help to increase the attractiveness of local producers on local and, later, maybe international markets.

Problem: Lack of small shops

Respondents from several villages complained about the absence of small shops, which forces them to go to more distant villages to buy basic food or to rely on expensive mobile shops.

Intervention 35: To support small private shops in target communities with grants and training

Field research in several settlements has shown that even small grants for private businesses, combined with entrepreneurship training in the area, can positively impact the target communities.

VIII. Education and information

Problem: Lack of information about the development in the municipality

Residents often have a better overview of what is happening at the national level than the situation and developments in their region. They rely only on local newspapers published by municipalities and oral information. Therefore, they often miss important information and opportunities that immediately impact their lives. Experience from Slovakia shows that independent online local media are viable and can increase the local population's interest in events in their region and their awareness.

Moreover, independent local media do not need high investments for their creation and operation. In the context of target groups, they can also provide experience and practice to local

youth interested in journalism and contribute to better awareness of the local population about grants and state support.

Intervention 36: Train young people/ students from target region in local journalism

Donors could organize meetings of local students with successful local journalists from abroad. Subsequently, they could organize training that would give those interested practical knowledge on managing the local media successfully.

Intervention 37: To create pilot projects of local media

Donors could support several pilot projects of online local media covering also target communities on the ABL. In case of a success programme might be implemented in neighboring regions.

Intervention 38: To create online platform devoted to protection of interest of local communities through civil journalism

Donors might help to creating an online platform (agency) to protect the interests of the population living near the dividing line and involving local youth through citizen journalism. They could organize training for young people in citizen journalism. as well as material assistance, through the transfer of smartphones, tablets, and computers.

IX. Green innovations

Problem: Unused potential of green innovations

Due to the more acute problems associated with the consequences of the 2008 war, green technologies still need to be implemented in the target communities. At the same time, they could help their further development during legal implementation.

Intervention 39: Analysis of potential for implementation of green innovations in target areas

Donors could help local authorities analyze the potential of green innovations in target regions and communities. A similar initiative could help identify the most effective innovations and create a map of possible projects.

Intervention 40: To implement agrivoltaics technologies

Communities on the ABL are especially suitable for the implementation of Agrivoltaics technologies, which combine the harvesting of agriculture with solar energy in a way that augments the performance of both. Solar farms can also use agrivoltaics to grow pasture for grazing animals and native pollinators. Mr. Lomsadze believes such a project could even turn part of the region into an energetic hub, providing local farmers with cheap energy and extra income.

X. Settlement-specific interventions

Problem (Tseronisi): Lack of irrigation

Residents of Tseronisi said that the irrigation system that once worked in their town is not connected to the system from the De facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region but to the system from the south.

Intervention 41: To restore the irrigation system in Tseronisi

According to respondents, cleaning the old channel, stretching several hundred meters of pipe and installing one pump would only be sufficient to restore the irrigation system in the village.

Problem (Zadiantkari): Lack of irrigation

Residents of Zadiantkari claimed that similarly to Tseronisi the irrigation system that once worked in their town is not connected to the system from the De facto South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region but to the system from the south.

Intervention 42: To restore the irrigation system in Tseronisi

Donors might assist responsible authorities in reconstructing a given system or irrigation.

Problem (Jria): Ponds – lacking experience

A resident of the village of Jira has built two ponds where he wants to catch fish to sell to nearby towns and villages. In villages with poor soil and a lack of pastures but with clean river water, ponds can become a good impetus for developing local economies.

Intervention 43: To support a pilot project of ponds in Jria

The man prepares the ponds at his own expense, facing several problems, such as poisonous algae and otter raids. In implementing his project, he would be helped not only by financial assistance but also by know-how.

Problem (Perevi): Lack of opportunities for youth

Perevi is an example of how elementary infrastructure for young people can create a positive relationship with the village in these young people, regardless of whether they live there for a long time or visit their grandparents in the summer months. Several young respondents told us they were considering developing tourism or agrotourism in the village, so they could stay there and not have to move to the city.

Intervention 44: To further develop infrastructure for local youth in Perevi

Young respondents from Perevi claimed they would be thankful for creating a picnic area on a nearby riverbank that would serve youth from a broader region. Others would welcome the creation of a small indoor sports hall, enabling the local youth to engage in sports even in the autumn and winter months.

Problem (Racha): Unused potential of agritourism

Several settlements in the Racha region nearby the ABL, such as Iri, Tsedisi, Kvedi or Jinchvisi, are threatened with gradual complete depopulation. At the same time, these are villages that,

thanks to their wonderful nature and relatively long distance from ABL, are ideal prerequisites for developing agritourism.

Several local respondents said that they plan to start an agritourism business. At the same time, however, they added that they need more information about the possibilities of support from the state and donors.

Intervention 45: To support the development of agritourism in target communities in the Racha region

Residents of the target settlements interested in doing business in agritourism would need training from the funders in the first stage, where they would learn how to write projects, where to look for financing, and the principles of doing business in agritourism.

Problem (Gremi valley): Rabid animals

The inhabitants of communities in the Gremi valley face problems with often rabid wolves and jackals, which threaten not only the shepherds but also penetrate the villages themselves in the evening. Wolf attacks have already claimed human lives in the region.

Intervention 46: To help inhabitants of Gremi valley to address problems with rabid animals

Foreign donors should help the responsible authorities propose practical solutions to the problem. Experiences from other communities show that street lighting helps solve issues with wild animals in villages.

Problem (Zaardiantkari): Damaged roofs

The inhabitants of Zaardiantkari have been living in damaged houses even 15 years after the end of the war. Although their homes were not completely destroyed, the damaged roofs cause them serious problems all year round. The village is currently inhabited mainly by pensioners who do not have the financial means to restore their houses.

Intervention 47: To help reconstruct damaged houses in Zaardiantkari

Repairing the damaged roofs would significantly improve the living conditions of the Zaardiantkari residents.

Problem (Jria): Swine fever

Respondents from the village of Jria complained about swine fever, decimating their herds. At the same time, pigs are the only alternative to cattle in the lost traditional pastures.

Intervention 48: to help local authorities address the problem of swine fever

Respondents said that although samples of the dead animals had been sent to local laboratories, the issue had persisted for several years. Donors could help local authorities identify the cause of pig deaths and provide training to local farmers to reduce the risk of further outbreaks.

Problem (Ergneti): Severe lack of public transport

Although several settlements on the ABL face problems with local transport, Ergneti is one of the most isolated of all. Insufficient local transport was by all respondents identified as the main issue, preventing people to return to the village.

Intervention 49: To improve transport links of Ergneti

Donors should help residents of Ergneti to increase the number of minibuses leaving from the village to regional centres.

Problem (Arbo): Lack of opportunities for local youth

Respondents in several visited villages drew attention to the problems of local youth, who fall into passivity, alcohol and drugs due to a lack of free time for activities and perspectives.

Intervention 50: To fund the youth centre in Arbo

The local priest from Arbo father Giorgi plans to open a youth centre on the church premises, where he could work with local youth. Father Giorgi wants to use the centre to involve local youth in sports activities and education and teach them various crafts. Donors should consider supporting his project, which could later be implemented in other target communities.

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STRATEGIC ANALYSIS



"Blooming fruit trees near ABL in the Kareli district. Author: Tamta Gokadze".