

# Supporting Georgia's Protected Areas: Linking Conservation and Local Development

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## Introduction

According to Aichi target 11 of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the global network of protected areas (PAs) shall be extended to cover 17% of all terrestrial areas by 2020. Internationally, progress has been achieved, with PAs now covering 12.5% of all terrestrial land. Challenges remain: Notably developing countries still lack both capacity and financial resources to adequately set up and manage PA systems, a gap that requires continuous commitment of international donors (di Minin & Toivonen, 2015).

In this regard, approaches that aim to reconcile conservation and poverty reduction have been increasingly common in recent years: Between 1980 and 2008, almost three quarters of the total international aid allocated for biodiversity conservation was targeting “mixed” projects that explicitly addressed both ecological and economic objectives (Miller, 2014). This contribution presents one such project, the Support Programme for Protected Areas in Georgia (SPPA), and introduces the local context and existing challenges.

## Background: Georgia's protected area system

The Caucasus region is recognized as being among the 36 global biodiversity hotspots defined by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF, 2016). Georgia specifically is known for its extraordinary rich biodiversity and high diversity of landscapes, and is home to a number of threatened species, many of which are endemic to the region.

The first strict nature reserve in the Caucasus region was founded in Georgia in 1912. More protected areas were established during Soviet times; yet, at the dawn of Georgia's independence in 1991, the 15 existing strict nature reserves accounted for just 2.4% of the territory (Zazanashvili, et al., 2009). Over the past 15 years, Georgia has set up an ambitious programme to strengthen and enlarge its national PA system, supported by international partners and despite mounting pressures from commercial land-use for agriculture, logging, water consumption and energy production. The country's PA network now comprises 84 PAs of different management categories. In total, these areas cover 524,026 ha, or 7.5% of the country's territory. This number is still far below the Aichi 11 target of 17%, but plans to further enlarge the system exist, both in terms of expansion of existing protected areas and the establishment of new ones.

Yet, challenges persist, both at the political level as well as in terms of land-use conflicts. Notably economically marginalized remote rural areas are characterized

by a high dependency on natural resources, e.g. for agricultural purposes, firewood, or hunting. Thus, consolidation and further development of the PA system appears to depend largely on the successful integration of conservation and socioeconomic local development goals.

### The Support Programme for Protected Areas

SPPA is a five-year programme (2014-2019) co-funded by the German development cooperation in the Caucasus through KfW Development Bank. It is implemented under the “Eco-regional Nature Conservation Programme (ENCP)” in the Southern Caucasus Region, launched by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in 2001.

The purpose of SPPA is the enhancement of natural resources and PA management, providing support to four selected PAs, while at the same time improving the socio-economic situation of the adjacent rural communities. A total of 8.25 million EUR is being invested in the development of the four partner PAs and their support zones – the areas in the periphery of or enclaves within the PAs, which have direct influence on the PAs through natural resource use, land tenure or traditional land use rights of the respective population.

Thus, the programme seeks a balance between two equally important and mutually reinforcing objectives:

- Improvement of natural resources and protected area management of the selected PAs; and
- Improvement of the socio-economic situation of adjacent rural.

Specifically, the programme is divided into the following outcome areas:

Table 1: SPPA outcome areas

Outcome Area (Area of intervention)	Expected outcome/result
Planning for PA Development	Selected PA have available all necessary planning documents for their development and the promotion of the adjacent communities
PA Management	Selected PA are recognized and have a functional PA management
Support Zones	Adjacent communities of the selected PAs benefit from investments in the socio-economic development of the support zones of the PA
System Level	The national PA system is strengthened in particular topics according to international standards
Sustainable Financing	Sustainable financing of the national PA system is supported

### Conclusions: Challenges and lessons learned

The diversity of expected outcomes makes SPPA a complex endeavour. So far, numerous activities have been implemented or are under way, from baseline studies as basis for management planning, benchmarking and monitoring, to infrastructure planning, local stakeholder involvement and co-management structures through the establishment of PA friends associations and regional advisory councils, and the

implementation of socioeconomic support measures by means of a Financial Participatory Approach (FPA). Experiences so far are encouraging both on the side of reforming PA administration structures as well as in terms of local stakeholder involvement and initiatives, e.g. through the joint elaboration of small-scale projects at village-level and funding through FPA. Such initiative is not self-evident in a country with a long tradition of top-down decision making during the Soviet era, and widespread scepticism among rural local communities toward the central government. Future challenges include the sustainable continuation and development of the established instruments, in order to make PAs in Georgia genuine drivers of local development as well as biodiversity conservation.



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