

An aerial night photograph of a mountain village. Several tall, stone towers are illuminated from within, casting a warm glow. The houses and buildings are also lit up, and the surrounding landscape is dark with some greenery visible. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

# Vibrant Mountain Communities

Regional Development in Mountains:  
Realizing Potentials, Tackling Disparities

Sustainable Mountain  
Development Series



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The high-mountain town of Mestia (1 500 m asl) in the Upper Svaneti region of Georgia, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Agriculture is a pillar of the region's economy (GTW/shutterstock.com)

# From mountain law to effective national strategy in Georgia

**Tinatin Tkeshelashvili and Magdalena Nowakowska**

Almost half of all settlements of Georgia are located in high mountain areas. However, only nine percent of the country's 3.5 million people live there. Highlander communities face challenges related to accessibility, depopulation and a lack of public services and amenities. A four-year Strategy for Development of High Mountain Settlements of Georgia offers a systemic approach to tackle these challenges.

The mountainous landscape of Tsageri municipality in northwestern Georgia offers the potential for tourism but also for agriculture, e.g. for vineyards (M. Kurashvili)

Georgian mountain regions suffer from a shortage of employment opportunities and infrastructure, and from impacts related to climate change. But these regions also offer prospects, such as tourism, which has the potential to become an engine for growth. Since 2012, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in close partnership with the Government of Georgia and with support from the governments of Switzerland and Austria, has been implementing a US\$ 11.6 million project on fostering regional and local development (FRLD) [1]. The Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia is the key partner in this endeavour, which puts special focus on mountain municipalities in four regions.

The FRLD project follows a holistic, multilevel approach to create sustainable change in Georgia's mountain municipalities. At the national level, the project supported the government in developing and adopting a Law on High Mountainous Regions of Georgia [2, 3]. To operationalize the law, the country's first four-year Strategy for Development of High Mountain Settlements 2019–2023 and a two-year Action Plan 2019–2020 were formulated. This was done in a participatory process involving different sectors and stakeholders, led by the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure and assisted by the project. The strategy was adopted in 2019 (Box) and the government committed projects/programmes with new funding of GEL 784 million (US\$ 260 million) for 2019–2020. The strategy provides an overarching framework to promote economic development, improve social welfare and common infrastructure, and expand access to services for the approximately 300 000 people in the nearly 1 800 high mountain settlements. It is thus a crucial instrument to guide development initiatives and investments by different actors at the national, but also at the local level.



*"Our goal was to create new job opportunities for unemployed, socially vulnerable or internally displaced women. They were given the opportunity to learn new skills – in this case, we taught them different types of handicrafts. Currently 80 women are taking part in the training courses. Eventually, 25 of them will be permanently employed in the workshop."*

Inga Metreveli, WERKS project manager

## Lessons learned

- A holistic, multilevel approach is needed to guide sustainable development of mountain settlements in a more systemic way by joining efforts of various national, international and local actors.
- A participatory approach towards development and multistakeholder engagement is key to success. It is important to bring together representatives of the public, private and civil sectors who will bring their own expertise and added value.
- Developing local capacities and attracting new financial resources is crucial to multiply the effects of assistance to local actors.



Women in Oni revive and modernize traditional crafts as new income sources (V. Valishvili/UNDP)

In order to contribute to the strategy's overall goal, the FRLD project also engages with local authorities and communities by building their capacities through various training/learning programmes. It helped them to create municipal development documents that define specific goals and priority areas. To effectively contribute to these priorities, the project pioneered various grant schemes. One scheme provides direct funding for municipalities, and so far, ten municipalities have been awarded grants worth up to US\$ 25 000 each. The first recipient was the high-mountain municipality of Tsageri, at the foot of the Greater Caucasus range. It used the money to improve the municipality's visibility to promote job-rich local tourism ventures. This involved providing the local tourist information centre with equipment, erecting road signs and creating promotional materials to showcase local culture and touristic sites.

Another funding scheme targets local civil society organizations to foster participation of local communities and support them in advancing local potential. Local initiative groups are currently working on seven projects. One of them is WERKS – Women Empowerment in Racha-Lechkhumi-Kvemo Svaneti – which is based in the high-mountain town of Oni. The organization, in partnership with a group of artisans, trained local women in traditional craft. The works produced by the women in Oni are sold abroad as well as in an ethno-shop renovated as a part of the project. In 2019, a Sustainable Development Goals Festival was held in Ambrolauri, a unique mountain municipality with enormous development potential. Attended by national and international partners, the purpose of the festival was to highlight the importance of the mountains and draw attention to highland development challenges.

The socio-economic damage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic heightens the need for, and importance of, local economic development initiatives that strengthen the resilience of highland communities. In response to this urgent need, UNDP is re-designing and adapting the funding scheme to help municipalities, local entrepreneurs and communities to reduce the effects of the pandemic.

### Strategy on the Development of High Mountainous Settlements

The strategy envisions equitable and sustainable development of Georgia's highland regions and defines three strategic goals [4]. Specific activities are laid down in a two-year Action Plan (2019–2020) which also identifies agencies and their responsibilities, as well as concrete implementation measures.

**Strategic goal 1:** Sustainable development of highland settlements focuses on the development of tourism, support to agriculture and entrepreneurship, improvement of road infrastructure, and environmental protection and management of natural resources. Concrete measures include construction and rehabilitation of museums, development of tourist infrastructure and rehabilitation of cultural heritage monuments.

**Strategic goal 2:** Social support to local communities fosters the improvement of quality education, health care, access to communal services, communication, culture and sport-related infrastructure. It supports youth and addresses demographic dynamics. Concrete measures include: construction of facilities for emergency medical assistance as well as for preschools, schools and solid waste disposal; the rehabilitation of potable and irrigation water systems; preventive measures for mitigating impact of natural disasters; and the improvement of electricity and gas networks.

**Strategic goal 3:** Access to public services aims at introducing innovative systems in the management of public services and increasing access to public services. Concrete measures include improvement of Internet coverage and introduction of integrated information management systems in the municipalities.

*“Despite the pandemic, tourism remains a priority for our economic development. Its potential still needs to be unpacked and presented to the world for the benefit of local people.”*

Mikheil Meshveliani, Deputy Mayor of Tsageri municipality

## References and further reading

Note: URLs were last checked on 23 September 2020.

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