

Analyzing Focus Group Data REPORT

The Name of the Organization:

Georgian Society of Nature Friends (GSNF)

Project Title:

„Assessment of a tourist potential of the Alazani river riparian forests and development of an action plan“

Telavi, 2015

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Executive Summary

Domestic and international tourism are important factors in the Georgian economy. The expenditures of foreign guests in Georgia have a significant effect on the balance of payments. Approximately 58% of Georgia's service export revenue comes from tourism.

Tourism development in Georgia is a highly discussed topic; however, rarely we come across either some comprehensive information, a study or a report in terms of tourism resources and problems of the country and its regions.

In the frames of the project “ Assessment of a tourist potential of the Alazani river riparian forests and development of an action plan“ “Georgian Society of Nature Friends“ set an ambitious goal to achieve, i.e. to assess the agro/eco tourist potential of the Alazani river riparian forests and the surrounding villages. The awareness on Agro/Eco tourism was assessed among the population of the 20 villages of Kakheti based on surveys, the information was obtained about how the village population sees the Agro/Eco tourism potential of their villages; we explored the challenges they face in order to develop agro/eco tourism services within their communities as well as their general attitude towards public-private partnership..

The surveys were carried out in 20 villages of Kakheti . Communities in the vicinity of Alazani River riparian forests were selected. The following were the villages: Gavazi, Giorgeti, Duisi, Eniseli, Vardisubani (Lagodekhi Municipality), Velistsikhe, Kartubani, Kisiskhevi, Kondoli, Kuchatani, Leliani, Matani, Napareuli, Tibaani, Qvemo Alvani, Karajala (Lagodekhi Municipality), Dzveli Anaga, Chikaani, Khirsa, Heretiskari. The surveys were conducted during June and July, 2015. The survey methodology was a combination of a 70 minutes focus group interview with the target audience (local farmers, teachers, employees of the Local Lore Museums, etc.) and of a 20 minute questionnaire to assess the social-economic conditions of the focus group participants. We also received public information from every village Gamgebeli representatives based on the specific questionnaire. Totally we surveyed 151 individuals from 20 villages in the age group of 18-65.

The analysis of the data obtained is provided below.

Focus Groups Major Findings

1. About Definitions

Majority of the surveyed residents in 20 villages of Kakheri are more or less aware of the definitions of Agro/Eco tourism, but when they are asked about the services provided under Agro-Eco tourism, most of the surveyed participants find it difficult to clearly identify them. There were few occasions, when focus-group participants linked Eco tourism to the ecologically pure production.

Especially confused about the definitions and the corresponding services are the residents of the villages Giorgeti, Eniseli (in Eniseli people confuse Agro-Eco tourism and its corresponding services with wine tourism), Velistsikhe, Kartubani (in Kartubani people believe that under Agro-Eco Tourism services locals are given the trainings in the mentioned fields), Kuchatani, Matani (in Matani Historical tourism is confused with Agro and Eco Tourism), Napareuli (here people believe Eco tourism is related to keeping things clean and Agro tourism is related to Agriculture), Tibaani, Karajla, Dzveli Anaga, Heretiskari.

Duisi: “In case of Eco tourism tourists come to see our mountains, rivers and reserves. When they come for agro tourism, they hire horses and roam around in the villages, go up to forests on the mountain slopes”.

Vardisubani: “[In case of Agro/Eco tourism the tourist] should see the sightseeing of a specified place. He/she comes to get introduced with the local endemic species and share the experience of the locals”.

Velistsikhe: “Agro tourism is a rural tourism (eg. Local unattended farmhouses present a lure and attraction for the tourists), Eco tourism is when the tourists come to taste ecologically pure production, **and we** believe the tourists come to eat healthy stuff we can offer. They usually come to see what he does not have in his culture, especially interested they are in local cuisine, traditions (i.e. agro traditions).”

Kisiskhevi: „Eco tours comprise hiking, nature outings. Agro tourism is related to agriculture, greenhouses”.

Kondoli: “Eco tourism is more related to having fun, whilst Agro tourism is related to perception”.

Leliani: „Agro is the tourism when you take the tourist to vintage, treat him with barbecue, show him the working process. Eco tourism is related to ecology, to the promotion of ecologically pure production.”

Napareuli: „Eco is associated with cleanliness, Agro is related to Agriculture. People come to Georgia to see the antiquities; people are interested in traditions and nature, tasting ecologically pure products, fresh air. During the Agro tourism the tourists want to see how the locals live”.

Qyemo Alvani: “Agro, tourists might be attracted to seeing sheep-breeding, viticulture, medicinal herbs. This kind of tourism is chosen once tourists are interested in experience-sharing, like how Tushetian Cheese is made, how felt is processed, they want to see the culture of Marani. They might be interested in buying the services of the local lore museum”.

Khirsa: „Eco Tourism is the tourism related to unpolluted environment, fresh air. Agro tourism is Churchkhela-making, wine tasting, seeing the wineries. These tourists prefer to live in family environment or they prefer to move around in an unpolluted environment.” Though, this is the village where few participants mixed agro/eco tourism with the medical herbs related tourism.

2. Evaluating the Agro/Eco tourism potential in rural areas

Most of the residents highly evaluate the agro/eco tourism potential of their villages, though once it comes to specifying the resources the villages have, they emphasize on the historical monuments, which clearly shows people have very less information of exactly what kind of agro/eco tourism resources their villages might have.

Residents of almost all the villages mention that the conditions with them to provide proper agro/eco tourism - related services are very poor. In this regard exceptions are the villages of Kisiskhevi, Giorgeti, Velistsikhe, Napareuli, where based on private investments certain services could be offered to tourists.

In the villages of Kartubani, Karajala and Dzveli Anaga people find it especially hard to identify the agro/eco tourism potential of their villages, whilst below is what other village residents see as the agro/eco tourism potential of their villages:

Gavazi: „We have a pond (Snobiani), Boarding "October", sulfur springs, mountains, good people live here“.

Giorgeti: "We have the lake" Lazika ", which is a privately owned one, the village naturally has a good location, the water with us is good, we have forests."

Eniseli: “We have a guesthouse in the village with limited accommodation; the village shelters the Gramy monastery, there are slate type of stones, the horses are available for riding, we have plenty of forgotten historical sites, we have healing water (sulfur). The village is easily accessible; there are shops, a pharmacy, a branch of a bank. The initiative group worked on a plan of a one-day rural tour, which eventually failed to materialize."

Vardisubani: “We have one of the leading hunting farms, tasty springs, historical monuments, we usually get an abundant harvest."

Kondoli: “The village cannot offer any exciting service to tourists. We have the following advantages: hard-working, hospitable people, economically rich village with a lot of historic sites.”

Heretiskari: „The village is rich with riparian forests, which are now on the brink of destruction, and if taken good care of, it would be a major resource for eco-tourism.

3. Evaluating the significance of Agro/Eco tourism development in rural areas

The majority of the surveyed emphasize the importance of agro/eco tourism development for the future empowerment of their communities. As explained by them, it will result in “increasing the level of civilization”, the growth of employment, constructions in rural areas, rural development, income growth, small businesses development, the revenue diversification.

Giorgeti: „Infrastructure will improve, people will be employed and the living standards will rise up”.

Eniseli: “The women will get employed; residents will be given a motivation to show their potential”.

Kartubani: „The youth will have a desire to stay in the local community ”.

Kutchatani: "The quality of the produced products will be increased that will consequently result in increasing the competition.”

4. Significance of government support in developing Agro/Eco tourism in rural areas

The government implementing different projects in the rural areas to support agro/eco tourism development is deemed to be of great significance. Most of the village residents believe that the infrastructure in the

villages have to be improved: roads, water systems, waste management; also the low interest credits should be available in the rural areas to improve agro/eco tourism, it is important the government to support dissemination of new knowledge. However, people are more appealed to the importance of acquiring the farming skills rather than acquiring knowledge in terms of agro/eco tourism (Heretiskari).

Tibaani: “The government could work in the direction of solving ecological problems in Georgia and also in our village, it would be a good idea to restore once developed artificial pine forests.”

Velistsikhe: „Our village has a problem in water provision and waste management – both are the issues to be dealt by the government. It would be a great idea if the government decides to allow low interest credits for the development of the mentioned sector.”

5. Promoting Agro/Eco tourism and the potential of forming the Association in rural areas; the public access to modern entrepreneurial skills

Public awareness and attitudes towards promotion of agro/eco tourism is dramatically distinctive from village to village as well as is their awareness and attitude towards the potential of forming associations and the public access to modern entrepreneurial skills. However, it is worth mentioning that in a big majority of villages (16 out of 20 villages) it is very low. The villages, where donor organizations or NGOs have been working with locals, are very different in their awareness and attitudes towards modern entrepreneurial skills from villages that have not been given this attention as yet. Once it comes to promoting the agro/eco tourism potential of their villages, locals believe that the Georgian National Tourism Administration has to be more supportive to locals in this direction.

Giorgeti: „It is too early to discuss the promotion of agro/eco tourism as yet since it is not even developed so far. Though, people are discussing the necessity of having an electronic library in the village, but it is vague how it can be used for the promotion reasons. As to access to modern entrepreneurial skills, some individuals manage to get some knowledge in this direction if they try hard, however, the support to the population for developing their skills in this direction does not happen.”

Duisi: “Media and Internet can be of help to promote agro/eco tourism. What is accessible with us is the developing the sports talents with us, this is appreciated by people and their like it”.

Velistsikhe: “With us people do not have the habits of hard-work, attention; accordingly it is too early to form associations, better to start with small cooperation. We believe the locals are not yet ready to be engaged in massive associations. ... To attract tourists we can rely on social media, on word to mouth advertising. It is important every tourist to enjoy the stay with us.”

Qyemo Alvani: “In our village the access to entrepreneurial skills is relatively high, though it is not for the general public.... It is possible to form co- operations and associations by uniting the locals, but for this first we need the good practice examples.... To promote local agro/eco tourism potential we prefer Internet”.

Kisiskhevi: „In order to attract tourists one needs social networking, posters in the entrance of the village, tourist agencies in the towns.”

Tibaani: “We would have loved to unite for some good purpose, but we have no access to any skills including entrepreneurial skills”.

6. Assessing the local natural recourses in terms of developing Agro/Eco tourism

Once it comes to assessing the local natural resources, people from village to village are either overly pessimistic describing them, or they overestimate the reality. However, in general locals seem to be well aware of their environment and in many cases they prove to be the best source of information for any guests from Georgia or abroad.

Vardisubani: „There are riparian forests in the end of the village with the hunting farms there. There are boars, pheasants, francolins, partridges in the forests. The forests are massively cut down with us, it is necessary to close them for another 10 years so that they start self-recovery. Forests have recreational purposes with us. There is no natural monument identified in the vicinity of the village. People prefer to hunt birds (pheasant, partridges, goose, quail) over hunting animals. Hunting is seasonal and a one year license is issued for 11 GEL. The lakes are close to the village as well. People fish in them. Fishing is also seasonal (May, June, July). Fishing also requires a permit and in the borderline area one needs a pass also (it is free of charge). The caught fish is used for eating.”

Kuchatani: „The village has no forest resources, no hunting farms are in the vicinity as well. We have small ground water, though no river as such. Some claim there are lot many medical herbs here, though hwe don not recognize them. People need hunting permit here for 70 GEL a year. For hunting people go to Kvareli forests. There the fishing resources are also available”.

Leliani: „The village has the riparian forests, which are rented away. There is good enough ha hunting farm here”.

Khirsas: „In 3 km-es from the village there is a so-called “ Eagle Valley”, where the caves with the footprints of primitive humans are preserved.... The villages go to fish in the river Alazani for which they buy a seasonal permit for 3 GEL”.

Tibaani: „In the vicinity of the village one can hunt hares and pheasants in case they get the permit”.

7. The use of fuel

As the majority of the surveyed claim that most of the village population rely on firewood since it is easily available and after all, it is the cheapest means of heating. The villagers say they would love to shift to gas-consumptions in case the price lowers down. . Locals are very sensitive towards deforestation and massive felling of the forests, though they also mention that recently the government controls this process strictly and at some villages the forests started recovering.

Kuchatani: „We consume both firewood and gas for heating; It depends on the finances of the families. Those who consume gas, pay 200 GEL per month at average, which is 1000 GEL per season. The firewood costs far less.”

Vardisubani: „It is not long ago that the massive gasification started in the village and already half of the families consume gas, thus, the forest is less affected by felling. Some families still use firewood and the ratio is 50/50. Once using firewood, the heating costs are 500-600 GEL per season, whilst gas consumption is minimum 700 GEL per season.”

Khirsas: „Villagers mostly rely on firewood since only 30 families in the village have access to gas. We would be happy with any alternative means of fuel as long as it is cheap and accessible”.

Tibaani: „We use firewood for heating for a simple reason: it is far cheap than gas. Gas is used to prepare food. It would be welcomed if the gas tariff decreases.”

8. Assessing the social-economic conditions of the focus group members

In order to assess the social-economic conditions of the focus group participants, we asked 151 participants to fill in a corresponding questionnaire.

These are the major findings:

- 1) The 92,05% of the surveyed participants live in the privately owned houses. This presents an advantage for developing the agro/eco tourism since it provides an opportunity for them to start agro/eco tourism services at their own premises.
- 2) The majority of the target audience lives in a household with an average of 4 people out of which at least one is being employed.
- 3) The majority of the target audience believes that the main income of his/her family comes either from agriculture or from the salaries from public sector jobs (approximately 76% of the surveyed).
- 4) The majority of the target audience also believes that if compared to 2014 their incomes are more or less the same (almost 68%), it has decreased for the 18% of the surveyed and increased for the 14%. Surveyed audience believes that the incomes have increased based on the agriculture program implemented by the government; as to the reasons for decreasing the income, most of them blame the devaluation of GEL exchange rate against USD and the natural disasters.
- 5) Most of the surveyed have no much access to trainings and modern skills development. The majority of them (some 63%) have never attended any training at all. Some have attended trainings and information meetings related to environmental protection, business planning, agriculture and farming. The knowledge gained is used unevenly by the. Mostly people claim to use the information gained about the environmental issues.
- 6) Unevenly they assess the role of an individual in the community as well. However, most of them believe that the activities implemented by an individual on the level of the community cannot have big impacts on the community lifestyle.
- 7) We asked the surveyed audience about their experience in business-doing or about their readiness to do business in the future and invest own money in it. Only 41% of the surveyed are ready to start a new business and invest their own money in it, whilst the 70% of the surveyed have already the experience of doing their own business. It is interesting enough that the young ladies (age group 20-40) are more willing to try new business initiatives than the men of the same age group.
- 8) For the majority of the selected representatives of the communities Russian is still a leading foreign language.

Summing up focus Group major findings

- 1) Majority of the surveyed in 20 villages of Kakheti are more or less aware about the definition of Agro/Eco tourism, though when asked about the services provided under Agro-Eco tourism, most of the surveyed participants find it difficult to clearly identify them.
- 2) Most of the residents highly evaluate the agro/eco tourism potential of their villages, though once it comes to specifying the resources the villages have, they emphasize on the historical monuments, which clearly shows people have very less information of exactly what kind of agro/eco tourism resources their villages might have.

Residents of almost all the villages mention that the conditions with them to provide proper agro/eco tourism-related services are very poor.

- 3) The majority of the surveyed emphasize the importance of agro/eco tourism development for the future empowerment of their communities. As explained by them, it will result in “increasing the level of civilization”, the growth of employment, constructions in rural areas, rural development, income growth, small businesses development, the revenue diversification.
- 4) The government implementing different projects in the rural areas to support agro/eco tourism development is deemed to be of great significance. Most of the village residents believe that the infrastructure in the villages have to be improved: roads, water systems, waste management, the low interest credits should be available in the rural areas to improve agro/eco tourism, it is important the government to support dissemination of new knowledge.
- 5) Public awareness and attitudes towards promotion of agro/eco tourism is dramatically distinctive from village to village as well as is their awareness and attitude towards the potential of forming associations and the public access to modern entrepreneurial skills. However, it is worth mentioning that in a big majority of villages (16 out of 20 villages) it is very low. The villages, where donor organizations or NGOs have been working with locals, are very different in their awareness and attitudes from villages that have not been given this attention as yet. Once it comes to promoting the agro/eco tourism potential of their villages, locals believe that the Georgian National Tourism Administration has to get involved in this.
- 6) Once it comes to assessing the local natural resources, people from village to village are either overly pessimistic describing them, or they overestimate the reality. However, in general locals seem to be well aware of their environment and in many cases they prove to be the best source of information for any guests from Georgia or abroad.
- 7) As the majority of the surveyed claim, most of the village population rely on firewood since it is most accessible and after all, the cheapest means of heating. The villagers say they would love to shift to gas-consumptions in case the price lowers down. . Locals are very sensitive towards deforestation and massive felling of the forests, though they also mention that recently the government controls this process strictly and at some villages the forests started recovering.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that despite the fact that villages in Kakheti in the vicinity of Alazani riparian forests in most cases have very good natural resources to provide the agro / eco-tourism services, considerable amount of effort should be applied by the government or by the donor organizations for the development of their communities: 1) In the villages the basic social infrastructure (roads, water, waste management) is under dreadful conditions and what is more, there is a severe lack of tourist infrastructure (hotels, guesthouses, food stops, banks, quite frequently even shops and medical stores are missing); 2) quite scarce and fragmented is the knowledge of population in terms of modern entrepreneurial skills, which ruins their prospects for future development; 3) Very low is the trust to the government and to each other leading to lack of confidence towards any coalition, the creation of the Association or Co-operations.

Recommendations

- 1) Most of the residents positively evaluate the agro/eco tourism potential of their villages, though once it comes to specifying the resources the villages have, they emphasize on the historical monuments, which clearly shows people have very less information of exactly what kind of agro/eco tourism resources their villages might have.

Residents of almost all the villages mention that the conditions with them to provide proper services related to agro/eco tourism are very poor. The majority of the audience targeted by the survey in the mentioned villages has poor access to modern trainings. The majority of them (approximately 63%) have never attended any training. Thus, it is important to arrange free trainings for the interested parties (e.g. farmers, people engaged in agriculture or those who wish to be engaged in guesthouse businesses) where they will be explained how to engage in agro/eco touristic activities; these trainings can be arranged in villages where the NGOs and international donors work (Heretiskari, Leliani, Vardisubani, Kartubani).

- 2) In the adjacent riparian forests of the villages (Heretiskari, Giorgeti, Vardisubani, Leliani and Kartubani) the Georgian National Tourism Administration should arrange tourist infrastructure, namely: bird watching facilities, tourist paths, shelters for travelers (bungalows); the River Alazani has a good potential for developing rafting. Local NGOs can contribute to infrastructure development by launching the corresponding projects and by fund raising.
- 3) Local NGOs and the business sector should initiate arranging several guesthouses within a pilot program in abovementioned villages, which will offer agro tours to visitors (horse-riding, grape-pressing, churchkhela-making, cow milking, tasting local natural products: fruits and vegetables, home-made cheese, home-made wine, meat and meat meals, etc.).
- 4) Only 41% of the surveyed are ready to start a new business and invest their own money in it, whilst the 70% of the surveyed have already the experience of doing their own business. Residents of almost all the villages mention that the conditions with them to provide proper services related to agro/eco tourism are very poor. In this regard exceptions are the villages of Kisiskhevi, Giorgeti, Velistsikhe, Napareuli, where based on private investments certain services could be offered to tourists. Thus, in these and other villages it is important that the government issues the low interest credits supporting the development of cafeterias since the survey showed an evident lack of the latter in the villages of Kakheti.
- 5) For the majority of the selected representatives of the communities Russian is still a leading foreign language. In order to communicate with tourists and in general, for developing the eco tourism it is very important to increase the number of English-speaking people in the villages. Correspondingly, I assume that it will be a good idea to have free English language courses available for the villagers in the target villages; this initiative can be implemented with the support of both corresponding municipalities and the local NGOs (e.g. the corresponding resources are accessible at Leliani Community Center).
- 6) Promoting Agro/Eco tourism potential locally and abroad is a crucial issue. In order to promote the agro/eco tourism in the mentioned villages one can engage TV, Printed Press, make footages and prepare articles about any guesthouse in the villages (eg. Eniseli, Qvemo Alvani), or about the local lore museum in Gavazi, historic monuments of Vardisubani and etc. Social Media can be also used as one of the tools of PR. I assume that NGOs have a big part in promoting local eco tourism potential since they present the most active part of their respective communities.
- 7) Locals are very sensitive towards deforestation and massive felling of the forests, accordingly planting the plantations of short-rotation fuel-energy vegetations could be a solution to this problem. After planting the similar plantations the cheap energetic resources would become available to the communities, especially for the villages where the forest is thin and the alternative resources, i.e. gas is not accessible

for the population as well (Kondoli, Velistsikhe, Karajala, Heretiskari, Vardisubani, Giorgeti, Leliani, Khirsa, Tibaani, Kartubani, Dzveli Anaga). In these villages it is justified to plant either *Populus deltoides* or *Robinia pseudoacacia*. Being under demand these plantations support the infrastructure development in the villages, which will have positive impact on the environment (correspondingly on eco-tourism development) and will reduce the migration process through the creation of social stability in rural areas. Produced timber can be used as a fuel in local heating systems. Forest plantations play an important role in improving the degraded areas and biodiversity; this characteristic of theirs can be used in case of Heretiskari as an example, where the part of village lands are turning into swamps; it is possible to plant White acacia here which is characterized by the rapid growth and development in deep, moist soils.

