

Sustainable Land Management for Mitigating Land Degradation and Reducing Poverty in the South Caucasus Region: IRMP (Integrated Resource Management Plan) Meetings with Target Communities

On January 21- February 10, 2010, Green Lane organized IRMP meetings with members of Alaverdi (Sanahin, Akner, Madan), Akhatala, Tumanyan, Shamlugh, Aqori, Neghots, Teghut, Shnogh, Marts, Dsegh and Qarinj communities. These meetings were organized within the framework of the ongoing regional project "Sustainable Land Management for Mitigating Land Degradation and Reducing Poverty in the South Caucasus Region". The project is being implemented by REC Caucasus in close partnership with CENN with the financial support of the European Union and covers the Khrami-Debeda and Alazani-Iori watersheds in the South Caucasus region.

The aim of these meetings was development of Transboundary Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP) together with the local community members. Integrated Resource Management Planning is a modern method of natural resource management, where all components of land utilization and natural resources are not taken separately but are considered in a complex holistic manner. It is a roadmap providing implementation of the resource management process in an integrated manner which considers each resource in the context of a single natural complex. Integrated Resource Management Planning has the potential to identify complicated interrelations existing among all components of natural complexes and planning the future strategy of management on the basis of these interrelations which eventually provides for achieving sustainable development of the whole natural complex. In present development of IRMP will be concentrated on land resources related problems existing in the target areas and the ways of their solution.

Seminars aimed to discuss and identify the key causes of land degradation in these communities together with local community members and outline the ways to mitigate the negative impacts of these factors on land resources. Altogether around 139 participants attend these meetings out of which 68 (48.9%) were women.

The meetings were facilitated through different participatory methods that created proactive environment for live discussions and sharing ideas. The participants came up with considerably long list of various land degradation related problems. Akhtala, Alaverdi and their neighboring communities face a number of environmental problems such as soil, air and water pollution (the latter relates particularly to the problem of contamination of River Debed), which contribute to land degradation, affect health of local population of the area as well as quantity and quality of the agricultural products produced on the area.

In all the communities the decrease in soil fertility is caused mostly by application of inappropriate agricultural technologies. The participants of IRMP meetings noted that it will be important for them to have the results of soil tests and analysis of their areas. Noteworthy is that over the last 20 years on the farmlands of these communities no soil testing has been conducted. As a result, farmers either do not fertilize their fields or do it in a wrong way. For the recent years, there are not also available any results of soil monitoring, thus, over the time, vast land plots registered in the state inventory of land resources (land cadastre) as arable lands deteriorated and could not be used currently as farmlands. At best these areas can be used as pastures. This is another reason for their concern. The participants stressed that attention of the authorities and public must be drawn also to this problem.

During the meetings, it was mentioned that natural resources (especially forest resources) are intensively used by population in all the communities in ineffective and unsustainable way, which is mainly caused by application of wrong agricultural techniques. In this context it is very important to offer special trainings and educational programs on sustainable nature resource use and management to local community members. Another step to be taken is to provide people in the areas that are free from the threat of chemical contamination with favorable conditions for sustainable farming and help them in turning environment protection into source of additional income.

For some of the communities (Shamlugh, Dsegh, Neghots, Aqori) cattle-breeding is one of the most important sectors of economy. In these communities for feeding the animals' farmers are mostly using natural land resources such as pastures and haylands. Thus, one of the urgent issues for them is to provide

enough quantity of protein-rich legume forage crops, which would certainly contribute to increased animal productivity and higher quality farm production.

Among the other environmental problems faced by local community members are deforestation (Marts, Dsegh), ineffective and unsustainable use of agricultural lands, poor conditions of farm land plots (Tumanyan, Shnogh, Aqori, Shamlugh, Qarinj), loss of biodiversity (Alaverdi, Sanahin, Akner, Madan, Akhtala).

The local communities face significant difficulties in marketing of their agricultural products. There are not special collection centers for vegetables, fruits, wild berries and other agricultural products. They stressed that establishment of this kind of centers in the large communities would significantly contribute to development of agriculture, reduction of unemployment, improved social conditions, increased birth rates and less migration in the area.

In addition, local population suffers from natural disasters due to which many agricultural plots remain uncultivated. Proper hail guard, mudflow and landslide control, application of proper farming techniques under drought conditions could help people to overcome the difficulties imposed on them by natural disasters.

Lack of access to credit resources for farmers (often due to high interest) and the fact that banks mainly offer short-term credits also hinders development of agriculture in this region. There is urgent need for initiating active cooperation with those banks and credit providers that offer long-term group-based low interest credits.

As a result of these and the same kind of IRMP meetings / workshops¹ organized in the same watershed on the territory of Georgia will be developed Khrami-Debeda Transboundary Integrated Resources Management Bilateral Plan.

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