



# Nature-Based Tourism Development as a Tool of Community Transformation from Communism to Capitalism: The Georgian Experience

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the changes to the income and economic structures of several local communities in Georgia. These changes have occurred through the creation of protected areas, and the communities in this chapter lie in the neighbouring zones of protected areas. The Georgian case represents a very slow restructuring of income sources through tourism

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development in two different parts of Georgia, where the social landscape is very diverse and complicated. Two protected areas (PAs) and their support zones in southern and western parts of Georgia were selected due to their significance and the value of their natural features. The two areas include Javakheti Protected Area and Machakhela National Park. Both protected areas in this study are quite young. Javakheti Protected Area was created in 2011, while Machakhela National Park in 2012. Therefore, their effect on the support zone population is still in the formation process and both regions are not yet listed as popular touristic places of Georgia. Categories of protected areas in Georgia are based on international standards and the guidelines of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which Georgia has adopted since its independence in 1996. However, legally protected areas were created through Georgia's regulation entitled the System of Protected Areas.

The Soviet regime created an iron curtain between Soviet republics and the rest of the world and set territories into full isolation. The consequence of this isolation resulted in the development of a closed economy, where decision-making was completely handed over to the central authorities. Generations grew up under centralized control without any avenues to change their circumstances, and they lost their identity and an understanding of the importance of protecting their living environment. For many years, societies living within the borders of the Soviet Union were unable to take control or influence their surrounding reality and were not allowed to participate in decision-making processes (Paresishvili, Kvaratskhelia, & Mirzaeva, 2017). Thus, the transformation process from a Soviet regime lifestyle to a more open system of capitalism-based market structures and development was painful and difficult.

The transformation of social and economic structures in support zones of the abovementioned PAs from the past socialist system, and the adjustment to a new capitalistic reality, is quite an interesting process in terms of tourism development. To understand the past is crucial in understanding the tourism-developing processes because shifting from one regime to another may trigger new values and associated habits for the community (Klůvanková-Oravská, Chobotová, Banaszak, Slavikova, & Trifunovova, 2009). For this reason, the path-dependence theory was applied to identify the main processes of decision-making within the communities during their involvement in the tourism development processes (Brouder, 2014). According to many researchers (including Griffin, 1993; Isaac, 1997; Sewell, 1996; Tilly, 1994), answers to crucial social phenomena can be

found only through path-dependence theory. Furthermore, path-dependence theory can explain how certain decisions are made and how certain circumstances are determined/influenced by decisions made in the past, even if past conditions are no longer adequate (Mahoney, 2000).

The path-dependence theory has two subtypes, often referred to as self-reinforcing sequence and reactive sequence. The self-reinforcing sequence implies that institutional patterns firmly distribute rising benefits via constant adoption that, over time, becomes impossible to transform even if different options present themselves as more effective. Reactive sequence is more relevant in our case study and implies a chain of events, when a reaction to an event is the same as reactions to ancestor events, and each step depends on previous steps. Thus, the final event in the sequence results in typically the same outcome as past decisions along the decision-making path (Mahoney, 2000). Therefore, based on the path-dependence theory, we analyse the cause of social transformation and the effect it had on tourism development.

In this chapter, the authors reviewed projects in Javakheti and Machakhela, which were primarily implemented by the Georgian Ecotourism Association. In following subsections, key elements are underlined and discussed, such as:

- The involvement and participation of local communities in the tourism development process, specifically, destination development, conservation of natural and cultural resources, and the economic development of the community.
- Environmental interpretation as one of the most successful communicative processes aiming to awaken interest, a change in attitude, and to achieve the visitor's understanding and enjoyment in relation to the resource being interpreted.

The authors see natural and cultural heritage interpretation as one of the key instruments to influence the revitalization of intangible culture and lost traditions, the development of long-term economic growth, and the transformation of attitudes towards business development via supporting small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with start-up capital and basic knowledge acquisition. Therefore, the study identifies the main actors of the tourism industry in the selected areas, their education level, the social and economic situation of local communities, and outlines the need to raise awareness towards sustainable development via tourism services. Additionally,

this chapter highlights the use of participatory approaches of tourism planning in rural communities as a means to increase ownership of public decisions. As a result, this study suggests recommendations to achieve greater consent among conservation and tourism actors and the local population within community tourism projects located within the support zones of protected areas. As path-dependence theory looks at events that took place in the past and how they influence present decisions and define alternatives for the future (Brouder, 2014), this study explains forms and structures of tourism to assess and analyse tourism service providers.

The goal of this chapter is to present and share the Georgian experience of tourism development caused by the creation of PAs and shows the achievements of select projects, how to identify path-dependence, and how to build new tourism experiences with slight changes to the already existing phenomena.

### LIFE AT THE EDGE OF THE IRON CURTAIN

After 28 years of independence, Georgia is gaining popularity as an emerging destination on the world tourism map. According to the words of Secretary General of the UNWTO, Zurab Pololikashvili, “Georgia’s position confirms that the country has become one of the leaders in the sector after several reforms” (Agenda.ge, 2019). But acceptance of these reforms by the local population was a very complicated process. To clearly understand how the economic landscape evolved over time, leading to changes in regional economies and ultimately tourism development, we need to look back to Georgia’s Soviet past.

The first large-scale settlement of Armenians in Javakheti appeared after the war between the Ottoman and Russian Empires in 1828–1829, when Javakheti fell under the control of Russia’s Imperial Army. While the communist regime ruled over Georgia from 1921 until 1991, the story of Russian annexation dates back more than two centuries, and the laws established by the ruling governments were aimed to decrease national self-consciousness.

Considering that the Soviet regime created what became known as the ‘iron curtain’ between the Soviet republics and the rest of the world and that all Soviet territories experienced full isolation, it is hard to imagine that there were communities with more restricted living conditions than rest of the Soviet Imperium. Because Akhalkalaki and Machakhela had shared a border with Turkey since 1952, during the Cold War the Soviet Union expanded the region’s military base, and until 2007, the Russian

Army maintained a presence in Akhalkalaki. The proximity to the Turkish border also meant that Javakheti and Machakhela were closed zones during the Soviet period, foreigners were banned from entering the area, while the Soviet citizens needed a special permit to visit. Thus, on the one hand, Soviet isolationist policies alienated the area from other local communities in the mountainous Adjara region. Other communities living in the border zone along the outside boundary of the Soviet Union shared this situation. On the other hand, the area composed a closed community of ethnic minorities—Javakheti Armenians.

Isolation determined the development path of the region that included a closed economy dependent on Russian military bases (Øverland, 2009). The result was that:

- Decision-making was completely handed over the central authorities;
- Government had full control over the land and other agricultural assets;
- Generations grew up under centralized control without any ability to change their circumstances; and
- The community lost its identity and the understanding of the importance of protecting their living environment (in terms of nature and culture).

Moreover, these closed zones experienced a rise in xenophobia, which limited community-based activities and instilled low levels of trust towards other community members (Brooks, 1992). Only blood relatives were worthy of trust.

Soviet propaganda was extensively based on strengthening the working class. Therefore, establishing a system of ‘government for the working classes’ gradually transformed into a centralized regime that neglecting any property rights for its citizens. Dependency on this path is still visible today in the non-acceptability of a need to manage and care for common property, as well as an expectation that wellbeing and development will come from the central government to the rural areas.

### *Soviet Collapse*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the common economy ceased to exist. The transformation was hugely chaotic and based on the consumption of common resources (wood cutting) and rural activity

(York, 2008). The primary aim of the local population was to escape from the country to improve their living conditions. In Machakhela, many residents began immediate migration to Turkey for summer temporary jobs. Agriculture and livestock farming was the main income source for those that remained behind. According to Mancheno, Zazanashvili, and Beruchashvili (2017), the difficult socio-economic situation mostly impacted the forest resources of the Machakhlistskali Valley, around modern day Machakhela National Park.

The military base was the only part of the old Soviet economic infrastructure that remained active after the fall of the Soviet Union with both formal and informal economic functions, especially in the Javakheti region. The most important formal contribution of the base to the local economy was through employment and wages. Base-related employment included military staff, support staff within the base, and auxiliary employers, such as the Russian school and hospital. Soviet, later Russian, military bases were a stable market for agricultural products produced by locals. Moreover, “The Russian military base at Akhalkalaki was the main socio-economic pillar of the Javakheti Armenian community, providing security, employment opportunities, education, and social security to the local inhabitants” (Øverland, 2009, p. 4) until its closure in 2007.

This negative historic memory has had a large impact on Georgia’s transition to capitalism. Nihilism has affected almost every strategic planning process at the local, regional, and national levels (Shubladze, 2018). The initial phase of creating PA legislation, tourism strategies, and the masterplan for the local communities resulted in a lack of interest in the participation of the planning process. In both Javakheti Protected Area and Machakhela National Park, the creation of PAs cannot be seen as a well-known land-use conflict paradigm caused by restrictions of traditional uses of the surrounded resources. Instead, the creation of integrated support programmes for support zones around PAs was the first drive of change from the traditional Soviet economy.

## METHODOLOGY

The general methodology for each case was slightly different based on the specifics of the study area. However, national government departments and agencies, local government, private sector, NGOs, professional associations, and local communities were used as the main contributors as a means to collect baseline information. Compiling baseline information

included a comprehensive set of categorized data, information, and knowledge that encompass the analysis and overview of strategies or previously conducted studies, including visitors surveys. This information was necessary to understand the environmental, social, and strategic planning context. The goal was to create a platform for the further development of ecotourism products by assessing the actual situation.

The main objective of stakeholders' involvement was to develop cooperation between the stakeholders and the project team for assuring successful project outcomes. The stakeholder analysis process was carried out in three essential steps:

- Identification of stakeholders and their interests in the project;
- Conducting individual meetings or workshops with stakeholders; for each conducted dialogue/workshop, there were elaborated meeting minutes; and
- Assessing the influence, importance, and level of impact upon each stakeholder and identifying how best to engage stakeholders.

Field work was aimed at collecting information from primary sources to identify tourism potential in terms of tourism resources and services available, as well as establish gaps that could impact the future of the tourism value chain. This component included an inventory of attractions (using datasheet for assessing nature and cultural monuments) and direct interviews with the local community (using questioners and assessment sheets for each type of potential tourism service provider, namely accommodations, food facilities, agritourism farms, craft producers, etc.).

## DISCUSSION

In remote areas that have traditionally relied on primary resource extraction, the expansion of tourism could be considered a viable scenario for poverty reduction. Tourism in remote areas is often introduced as a new economic activity at times when traditional industries are collapsing, as occurred in post-Soviet countries. Considerations of path-dependence, path-destruction, and path-creation are evidence of change from one regime to another, especially when discussing changes in the structure of economic systems. New paths should be adjusted to new realities. One of the most valuable resources of Georgia is its natural diversity, which makes destinations in the country potential places of Unique Experience Propositions.

Georgia has more than 100 years of tradition in the protection of nature and its richness. The first PA was Lagodekhi Strict nature reserve dating back to the year 1912. By the end of 1991, there were 15 strict nature reserves in Georgia covering 2.4% of the country's land area. Today, Georgia boasts 87 Protected Areas with different categories according to IUCN criteria: 14 strict nature reserves (140,672 hectares), 11 national parks (352,459 hectares), 41 natural monuments (2258 hectares), 19 managed nature reserves (70,392 hectares), and 2 protected landscapes (34,708 hectares) (Agency of Protected Areas, 2019). PAs cover more than 14% of the whole Georgian territory.

Georgian PAs play a key role in biodiversity conservation and, at the same time, offer an excellent recreational opportunity for visitors to enjoy the country's diverse nature. Ecotourism development in protected areas is defined as a tool for increasing the financial sustainability of the Georgian Protected Areas system. Over the last years, the Agency of Protected Areas and the Ministry of Environment Protection and Agriculture in Georgia, in a coordinated manner with international donors, have made efforts in order to develop tourism infrastructure and services in and around PA's to attract visitors.

### *Development of Protected Areas, Tourism Services, and Household Income*

In the beginning, the local communities surrounding Machakhela National Park and Javakheti did not understand that the transformation of daily activities of rural life into services for interested tourists could become potential opportunities. A lack of awareness and knowledge of the tourism field triggered tourism development in an unsustainable way (Hausser & Siegrist, 2006). The primary cause of unsustainability was a false perception of tourists' needs. Authentic and historic houses started to lose their originality when adjusted to the needs of customers; for example, when building new bathrooms for the guest rooms, original and authentic materials or forms were never considered (Voll & Mosedale, 2015).

Financial support initiatives for PAs by donor organizations and implementation scenarios elaborated by the United Nations were focused on forms of ecotourism that did not overwhelm or degrade the main tourism attributes (i.e. the pristine nature and cultural landscapes). Various types of technical assistance were carried out in a variety of projects, such as the elaboration of tourism development plans, identification of training needs



in local communities, and the delivery of training that included theory, on-the-job training, and individual consultations.

In both regions, gaps in the tourism value chain were identified very quickly. It was obvious that local communities could benefit from food services activities, such as the sale of rural products, specifically honey or cheese, as food souvenirs. The masters of traditional crafts started to produce small-scale and inexpensive artworks. However, they adjusted their production to fit the needs of visitors based on the following criteria: handmade, characteristic to the area, functional, easy to transport, and inexpensive. Another successful source of income created through these programmes was the transformation of traditional farming activities into experiences for tourists, such as the annual harvest.

Development of tourism services in the support zone of the PAs ensured the sustainable growth of visitor numbers in Javakheti region and doubled visitation to Machakhela in 2016–2017 (Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2017). The growth in both regions in 2018 is also significant.

The value of natural resources has changed in both regions among the local communities. Natural attractions are no longer seen as just something that exists near their houses. It has become more valuable because people from other countries are motivated to visit the area and are spending money in the region.

### *Machakhela National Park: Community Involvement in the Sustainable Development of a Tourism Destination*

Machakhela National Park was created in 2012 as part of an ecological corridor, which also includes Camili Biosphere, Mtirala National Park, and Kintrishi Nature Reserve, in order to preserve the ecosystem of the Colchic Forest. The park is located 40 kilometres from Batumi in Khelvachauri Municipality, Autonomous Republic of Adjara. In 2015, under the United Nations Development Programme, the Machakhela Tourism Development Strategy and Action Plan 2016–2020 was created to ensure the long-term sustainability of Machakhela National Park. However, distrust of past regimes resulted in a lack of confidence by the local community in the strategies and processes proposed.

Past memories of the common economy, especially for a closed community, resulted in disrespect towards public ownership of the land. Therefore, the creation of the national park and restricted access to local resources resulted in negative attitudes of locals towards the PA. In order

to remedy this, several projects were implemented in the national park and its surrounding support zone. The main focus was to encourage and involve the local community in the development processes and, therefore, to increase the benefits received from the creation of the PA. To take into account path-dependence, social research to identify local needs and abilities was started. Based on this information, capacity-building training sessions were planned with the main objective to develop a sustainable ecotourism product with involvement of community and local resources.

Four thematic eco-touristic trails were developed in Machakheli Valley based on the identification of their tourism potential.

- **Ethnographic route ‘Machakheli’** is an exclusive opportunity to embrace both the valley’s past and present lifestyle in a short period of time, to observe the unique traditions preserved until today, and personally meet people who have converted their ancestors’ knowledge into contemporary daily routines.
- **Gastronomical route ‘Machakhela Nobati’** offers a unique opportunity to explore an assortment of tastes throughout the valley. The tour provides an occasion for visitors to familiarize themselves with distinguished food and beverages, typical not only for Machakheli Valley but also for the whole Adjara region. The guests can observe traditional food cooking and winemaking processes first hand and personally experience the famous hospitality of Machakhela Nobati.
- **The Wine trail** is a tangible cultural resource of the valley, which connects vineyards, an old wine press, and a wine cellar dating back to the tenth to twelfth centuries.
- **Adventure route Dunga Waterfall Trail** offers opportunities to see Dunga Waterfalls, the Colchic Forest, and panoramic views.

The abovementioned trail designs included directional signs and information boards as small tourism infrastructure.

Along with development concepts of eco-touristic trails, training was provided for the local community. Based on the needs assessment, training programmes were aimed at increasing the understanding of the tourism sector in general, the potential linkages that could be created between local people and the tourism sector, and the potential costs and benefits of increased tourism. The training programmes also provided an overview of potential involvement by local people and ways to expand the tourism supply chains, while recognizing socially and environmentally sustainable practices.

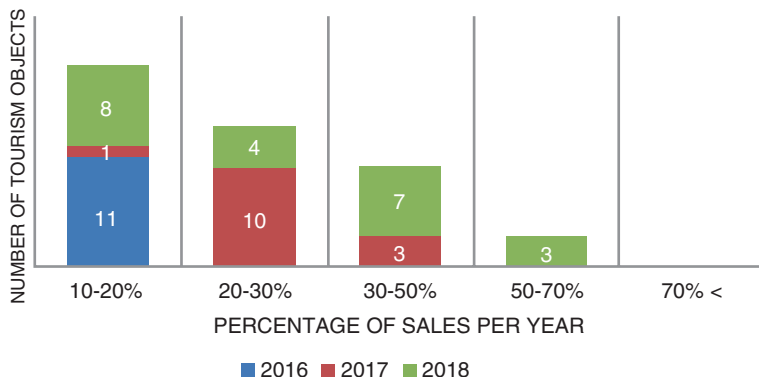


Fig. 12.1 Percentage of sales among tourism service providers

Cooperation between tourism stakeholders, local government, national park administration, and tourism service providers increased the effectiveness of community and destination development. This, in turn, led to an initiative to develop the region under one brand, the ‘Machakheli’ Green Destination concept. At the same time, increased demand from both organized and non-organized tourists, as well as both domestic and international arrivals (see Fig. 12.1), supported community unity. As evidenced, during the threat of building a new hydroelectric plant in the valley, the whole community stood together to oppose this development project.

### *Nature-Based Tourism Development in Support Zone of Javakheti Protected Area*

Javakheti region, which unites Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki municipalities, is a unique part of Georgia in terms of its natural, cultural, and social environment. It is situated in the Lesser Caucasus in the triangle of Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey and is an official border crossing into Turkey and Armenia. This area provides access to one of the main tourist attractions in Georgia, Cave City Varzia. The establishment of PAs, along with basic infrastructure, became the driving force for tourism development in both municipalities. The Protected Areas of Javakheti are situated on the almost tree-less Javakheti plateau at an altitude of 1800–2800 metres above sea level. It is confined by the Trialeti Ridge in the north and the Abul-Samsar and Javakheti Ranges in the south, which stretches into Turkey’s north-eastern plateau (the Çildir Lake area).

The establishment of Javakheti National Park in 2011 was financed by Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau and was implemented by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in co-operation with the Agency of Protected Areas under the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection of Georgia. The main purpose of the Javakheti PAs is to protect the representative sections of the Javakheti Mountain ecosystems and wetlands. In order to protect the lakes and marshes, which are separated from the park, managed reserves/sanctuaries were created. The park and the reserves include important habitats of flora and fauna and are regionally and internationally important resting places for migratory birds. The lakes and surrounding ecosystem give wildlife watchers, namely bird-watchers, great opportunities to enjoy corncrake, marsh and Montague's harriers, common cranes, Dalmatians and white pelicans, red-necked and black-necked grebes, and white storks. However, bird-watching is seasonal, most attractive in spring and autumn.

The region is also rich in ethnic diversity. The Slavic community of Dukhobors, Georgians, Armenians, and Greeks have preserved traditional characteristics for each ethnic community. Based on the Samtskhe-Javakheti Regional Development Strategy 2014–2024, agriculture and tourism should become a major development strategy for the regional economy (Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia, 2013). In the area's rural settlements, SMEs, such as guest houses, small cafes, and traditional craft masters who are offering interactive craft master classes to the visitors, are one of the fast-growing business sectors. Despite the fact that the number of visitors to Javakheti PAs is not high (6803 in 2016 and 6872 in 2017), tourism could be a key factor for the transformation of the current economic model because of the considerable dynamic growth each year.

The Ecotourism Development Strategy 2019–2025, supported primarily by the Caucasus Nature Fund, and a new strategy by the Transboundary Joint Secretary in the third phase of the programme and in cooperation with WWF, points to two challenging issues for the sustainable development of Javakheti region as an ecotourism destination. First, local tourism service providers still need to understand the value of their environment and intangible and tangible culture in relation to tourism development. Second, the main gap in the tourism value chain is the involvement of local community in the decision-making process in terms of destination development and capacity-building. Therefore, the ecotourism strategy was created using participatory approaches from the initial planning phase.

This was followed by a set of workshops, led by national experts, through which stakeholder working groups were formed in order to create the vision, a set of strategic goals, and strategic product development.

Based on a training needs assessment of local tourism service providers, the shortness of the season is the primary reason why local populations do not fully believe in development and job creation through the tourism sector. Moreover, limited communication with the outside world during the communist past has resulted in a lack of openness to international visitors and new developments. Services provided in the municipalities are still focused on the local market and not international visitors.

Armed with this information, the strategy creation process was divided into several phases:

- **Preparatory phase:** The first step was the creation of a relevant team based on a public-private partnership framework. Working groups were responsible for conducting a SWOT analysis, the creation of a vision, and strategic goals. The national ecotourism experts only had a guiding role in the process, supporting local stakeholders through a value chain assessment, attraction inventory, and needs assessment of local tourism service providers;
- **Second phase:** The creation of strategic products based on the gap analysis; and
- **Final phase:** An action plan and strategic product development plan were approved during a final workshop involving the local stakeholders.

The main success of this project was the participatory approach used during the strategy writing as a means to raise awareness for local stakeholders. The ecotourism strategy development approach was based on the regional and national standards for the management of ecotourism in protected area, elaborated in the Transboundary Joint Secretariat, Phase II framework. Path-dependency was identified during the assessment stage, and the creation of a new path, in terms of public, private, and civil involvement, ensured that the involvement of the local community supported ownership development throughout the whole processes. Workshops were implemented for rangers and guides, and local involvement was quite high. The inclusion of local stakeholders in the planning phase contributed to an increase in trust among the local communities, which accelerated the development of the touristic process.

## CONCLUSION

The application of path-dependence theory to explain, realize, and create tourism development in remote areas of post-Soviet countries, like Georgia, is useful to understand the reason behind the appearance of gaps in the tourism value chain. Proper identification of the problems can lead to an adequate assessment of local reality, which is a good basis for further strategic planning.

In both cases of Georgian PA development, Soviet forms of social behaviour were primary challenges for tourism development. Reactive sequences of path-dependency, compared to self-reinforcing sequences, were the most relative method describing the situation in Georgia. By developing new development paths, the following accomplishments were noticeable:

- Nihilism against tourism strategies and plans were reduced through the involvement of the local population in the planning process, including the establishment of the vision and strategic goals for the area;
- Respect and protection of public property became more valued after moving to a public-private partnership allowing for increased community benefits from environmental resources; and
- The development of tourism products and services were based on the modifications of existing resources and their new life cycle.

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