



Regional Environmental Center for Caucasus

Interim report

“Support Development of Biodiversity Conservation Policies and Practices in Mountain Regions of the South Caucasus”

Starting from December 2011 REC Caucasus has started implementation of the new project financed by Norwegian Ministry of Environment entitled **“Support Development of Biodiversity Conservation Policies and Practices in Mountain Regions of the South Caucasus”** which aims to build capacity of local communities and authorities to address biodiversity loss in forest ecosystems of mountain regions of South Caucasus in order to improve participatory biodiversity management.

Specific Objectives of the project are as follows:

- To raise awareness and knowledge of local communities and local authorities in mountain regions and decision-makers at national level on values of forest ecosystems services and biodiversity and the benefits from their conservation and sustainable use and to increase willingness to protect biodiversity.
- To introduce practices of biodiversity management planning at local level in participatory manner.
- To demonstrate practical application through implementation of pilot projects on restoration of degraded forest ecosystems and respective enhancement of their values.

The project is being implemented in three South Caucasus countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The Project duration is 2011 - 2014.

In December 2011 project workplan, as well as upcoming activities for 2011-2012 have been elaborated. Relevant TORs for National Team Leaders in three countries were worked out.

Information on project targets and overall goals has been placed in Project Fact Sheet and disseminated among relevant experts in South Caucasus countries, as well as placed on REC Caucasus website <http://rec-caucasus.org/n.php?id=1324018128&lang=en>

Regional Expert Meeting

Regional Expert Meeting has been organized in December 2011 aimed to present project goals and objectives and planned activities, to elaborate common methodological approaches, discuss the relevance of the project activities to national and regional needs, discuss implementation modalities and activities for 2012 work plan.

Regional meeting helped to identify priorities for development of Ecological and economic approaches to structure evaluation of ecosystem services, and elaborate recommendations of

appropriate valuation methodologies to examine the economic costs of biodiversity loss and the costs and benefits of actions to reduce these losses.

Regional meeting has discussed issues regarding involvement of relevant country stakeholders, steering committees, and proposed role of partners, as well as TEEB methodology, including

- Ecological and economic approaches to structure evaluation of ecosystem services
- Recommendations of appropriate valuation methodologies to examine the global economic costs of biodiversity loss and the costs and benefits of actions to reduce these losses.
- Economic assessment of values of ecosystems services and biodiversity (including forest ecosystems)
- Elaboration of Forest resource use study in selected communities, as well as GIS database development
- Gap analysis of relevant existing regional / local policy, strategies, programmes

First Day of the Regional Expert Meeting

1. Opening of the Meeting

The meeting was opened by the Executive Director of the REC Caucasus Ms. Sophiko Akhobadze. The Deputy Executive Director of the RECC, Ms. Nune Harutyunyan made a brief overview of the objectives, activities and outputs of the project “Support Development of Biodiversity Conservation Policies and Practices in Mountain Regions of the South Caucasus”, and presented TEEB methodology and economic valuation of ecosystem services.

2. Presentations

First presentation was made by Mr. Ioseb Kartsivadze, who spoke about National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), including TEEB activities at regional level, ongoing activities on NBSAP revision and updating, development of National biodiversity monitoring system, biodiversity protection mechanisms, protected areas, as well as information sharing and awareness raising activities at the national level.

Following Mr. Kartsivadze, the word was passed to Mr. Arzu Mustafayev on behalf of the Republic of Azerbaijan, who presented the national strategy on biodiversity preservation, specifying key directions of the strategy, including: conservation of genetic resources of flora and fauna, improvement of environmental education by improving information exchange and cooperation at the international level, ensuring wide dissemination of ecological knowledge and creating opportunities for active participation of communities in the evaluation of the impact of anthropological activities on the environment.

Mr. Mustafatev informed attendees on national action plan for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in Azerbaijan, including conservation and efficient use of forest biodiversity, expansion of protected zones and conservation of biodiversity in transboundary areas. Mr. Mustafayev added that there were changes in the policies of resource management in communities, which was approved by the Ministry of Environment in Azerbaijan.

Armenia was represented by National Focal Point on UNDCBD Ms. Tatyana Danielyan who underlined the progress in different aspects including expansion of protected territories, invention of new parks, elaboration of forest management planning, as well as adoption of business plans. She added that research has been carried out within the field of biodiversity and process of Red Book preparation. Importance of economic assessment of ecosystem was stressed by the national focal point, who pointed that this good practice will be promoted by the project. The lack of information regarding biodiversity issues of local communities and importance to raise awareness on local level was also underscored by the speaker.

The word was passed to REC DED Ms. Nune Harutyunyan who spoke about activities of the project, mentioning awareness raising events of local communities in the pilot regions and introduction of effective planning for biodiversity management. She once again underlined that economic assessment of ecosystem services and biodiversity is vital for biodiversity conservation in local communities. Gap analysis of local policies, strategies and programs to identify issues related to biodiversity conservation, sustainable forest management, as well as elaborating recommendations to improve relevance of biodiversity and the increased public participation in adoption of regulations regarding forest management.

Ms. Ana Rukhadze's presentation discussed the use of forest resources, declaring that TEEB (The Economics, Ecosystem and Biodiversity) approach is applicable to any ecosystem, especially forest resources. She introduced the recommendations and outcomes based on the study on the use of forest resources to be conducted within the framework of the project. Envisaged outcomes included identification and assessment of relation between local communities and stakeholders, and use of forest resources. Information gathering for better perception of processes and scale of forest resource consumption in local communities was also addressed in her speech.

Optimistic opinions were expressed regarding future governmental support of the project, in case implementers prove efficiency and effectiveness of the project, as well as its economic benefits. As assessed during the meeting, the RECC's approach to appeal to respective local governments, receive recommendations on project improvement and form steering committee contributes to growth of the project.

Second Day of the Regional Workshop

1. Presentation of working Groups

Day II of the meeting was opened by Deputy Executive Director Ms. Nune Harutyunyan, who summarized the previous day and revised recommendations and outcomes of the meeting.

Questionnaires were distributed to the attendees and three working groups were formed accordingly, in order to elaborate recommendations and make presentations on the assigned topics taking into consideration national priorities.

Group I made presentation regarding development of biodiversity conservation plans at the local level. Elaboration of working plan for ecosystem management and conservation at the local level, development of working group for elaborating local plans including local communities, experts and NGOs, inclusion of local plan in regional development plan and approval of this plan by the authorized body. Additional recommendations were made regarding elaboration of legislative framework in natural resource management, as well as awareness raising activities of local communities such as information sharing and trainings.

Group II concentrated on aspects of economic assessment of values of ecosystems services and biodiversity (including forest ecosystems), offering to develop separate groups for all cases (ecologists, economists, sociologists), implement special trainings for authorities responsible for planning and include lawyers and local authorities in biodiversity management processes. Recommendations were made regarding involvement of additional financial resources, participation in global environmental activities, as well as focus on more valuable and economically effective ecosystem services.

Group III discussed possibilities to earn money by providing ecoservices, taking into account private and governmental willingness to invest in ecosystem development. Recommendations were proposed regarding elaboration of regulatory mechanisms for balanced use of forest

resources and biodiversity conservation which included, creation of consultative and advisory bodies from local government and municipalities, development of recommendations for creation of protected areas, formation of normative framework for ecotourism development.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Key decisions and recommendations provided at the end of the meeting

- Involvement of focal points in decision-making process
- Dates and timelines for activities must be clearly defined
- Special trainings for specialists in TEEB should be conducted,
- Take into consideration recommendations from relevant institutions already working in the sphere
- Focus on national priorities. TEEB is new to eco-region and methodology should be adjusted to local needs
- Include elaborated biodiversity conservation plans in the regional development plan
- Influence decision making and elaborate practical applications.
- Request to select international expert for the TEEB assessment.

Formation of Steering Committees

Formation of Steering Committees in all three countries has been done, members of SC have been officially appointed by relevant ministries and agencies, as well as NGO representatives. Steering Committee meetings were already launched.

Steering committees discussed the following issues:

- Introduction of project goals and planned activities,
- Elaboration of common methodological approaches on TEEBs, relevance of the project activities to national needs, implementation modalities and activities for 2012 work plan
- Identification of priorities for development of ecological and economic approaches to structure evaluation of ecosystem services,
- Recommendations of appropriate valuation methodologies to examine the economic costs of biodiversity loss and the costs and benefits of actions to reduce losses in selected communities.

The feedback received from Steering Committees

- Importance on public awareness component, and inclusion of communities in project activities
- Highlighted growing costs of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, and necessity to draw together expertise from the fields of science, economics and policy to enable practical actions,
- RA Ministries of Nature Protection, Ministries of Agriculture, other relevant stakeholders noted that the project is in line with the countries' current needs, and the tendency to put it into the practices is welcomed. They noted that the topic of ecosystem services is important both for preserving biodiversity and using economic benefits through TEEBs, and the project idea initiated by REC Caucasus is much appreciated.

The following recommendations were provided by SC :

Recommendation: Scientific surveys have been conducted in the forest surrounding areas and certain manuals are prepared by State Agrarian University and will be very effective to use that publication in the assessment procedures within the project implementation.

Recommendation: Since the project is international, it will be appropriate to have international expert with an experience to suggest and transfer foreign expertise with the project, which will be elaborated and localized at the local level. This project is a pipeline relevant to current demands of the countries and is seen as a best applicable tool. For this, funding for international experience exchange should be increased to improve current theoretical and practical knowledge.

Recommendation: In the context of climate change, the theories/scenarios should be observed, like how those approaches will be productive, effective, because growing climate change impact forced changes year by year and has reduced productivity of proposed interventions from 60-70% to 30-40%, it's theoretically seen relevant, but it can't be known practically how it will be applied and what results could be expected, without initial surveys and analysis. So before applying project methodology, certain observations are required in the pilot areas.

Recommendation: Work plan activities need to be more expanded, and some additional funding should be accumulated in research, training and public awareness related activities since there is an obvious need for international experience, improvement of skills of the national TEEB experts (due to the lack of knowledge and direct TEEB experience), as well as experience exchange in the form of stakeholder meetings and workshops.