

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES THROUGH EMPLOYMENT IN GEORGIA

Lela Merabishvili

Social Inclusion
Officer
Georgia

INTRODUCTION

Back in 2015, when the South Caucasus office was piloting the Employment Shuttle⁶ approach, nobody anticipated how significantly it would affect the participants that joined the projects. The methodology was both simple and flexible, yet also comprehensive and well rounded. With the guidance of Action Against Hunger Spain, the shuttle approach was first applied in Georgia in 2015 to support the economic empowerment and access to labour markets of Internally Displaced Persons (from the conflicts of the early '90s and 2008) and their host communities. However, when analysing the results of this first programme, which came through

6 An Employment Shuttle is a group of 20-25 motivated, unemployed people who are guided by a coach over the period of 5 months to develop their skills, knowledge, professional competences and connections that will allow them to find employment. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keJkkCCs2z8&t>

staff observations and beneficiary feedback, it became apparent that the positive outcomes went far beyond the number of employed individuals, or those who returned to education. The Employment Shuttle approach also managed to create lasting connections among groups of people who had never met before. It allowed a diverse group of individuals to work together, to share ideas and opinions and to discuss issues of mutual interest and concern. In a small and diverse region like South Caucasus, which has suffered a number of conflicts and political upheavals, connecting people and building confidence is of high importance.

With that idea in mind, in 2016, the Employment Shuttle approach was implemented again, this time as a means to connect two communities - ethnic Georgians from Akhmeta town and ethnic Kists from Pankisi Gorge in Akhmeta Municipality, that, although they are only half an hour driving distance from one another, have limited interaction and engagement. The project team

came up with the idea following the COBERM⁷ call. Programme staff organised a workshop to discuss the possibility of incorporating successful approaches from the previous project within this new call. Considering that the new project location had limited employment opportunities, and that Employment Shuttles had been mostly successful in areas where there are more job openings, an entrepreneurship component was added to complement the project. Furthermore, meetings and field visits were planned with the local partner organisation, Kakheti Regional Development Foundation, to learn more about the specificities of the remote target area and to adapt the project design to the needs of the future participants.

7 Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism funded by the European Union and implemented by UNDP.



RATIONALE FOR THE INTERVENTION

Pankisi Gorge is one of the most remote and ethnically diverse parts of Akhmeta Municipality, situated towards the northern Georgian border with the Russian Federation. The majority of the Pankisi population is Muslim, whereas the population of Akhmeta town is Christian Orthodox. Following the influx of refugees from Chechnya between 1999 and 2002, the Pankisi Gorge became an area with a high level of insecurity. Nonetheless, following the active engagement of the Georgian authorities, and support from international and local organisations, the area has once more become safe and peaceful.

The socio-economic situation, however, remains largely undeveloped, due to a poorly developed business sector, a heavy reliance on subsistence agriculture, very limited employment opportunities and underdeveloped infrastructure. The population in Pankisi lives a very isolated life and has little interaction and contact with communities outside the gorge. Cultural and religious differences and misconceptions have also periodically led to strained relations between the Georgian and Kist communities.

THE PROJECT AT A GLANCE

To address some of these issues, from 2016 to 2017, Action Against Hunger implemented the LINC project: “Leveraging Employment Initiatives and Networking to Build Confidence among ethnicities in Georgia”. The project’s overall objective was to enhance confidence building by contributing to increased participation of local ethnic groups in joint activities. Main activities included awareness raising, training sessions on

STORIES FROM LINC PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

AKHMETA TOWN, MALE

“Here in Akhmeta you are somehow isolated from the outside and we have very few opportunities available. I don’t think that we’ve ever had a similar project implemented here before, so I am very happy for having had the opportunity of being part of it.

Together with other topics we discussed important issues such as tolerance and gender equality and we also learned about entrepreneurship. We had a very interesting corporate volunteer visiting, who didn’t just come to teach us something, but he walked us through his story, how he established his start-up and how it developed into a large business venture. It was a truly inspiring and eye-opening experience, just like the entire project.

Team work sessions allowed us to get to know one another better and also to have fun while doing so. It broke down barriers, not only among Kist and Georgian participants, but between Kist men and women too. You know, you look at things in such a different way when you have the chance to meet people from other cultures. I’ve become friends with Kists and I know we’ll stay in touch in the future too.”

KIST, FEMALE

“We are living in a very religious society, my parents always tell me to never have any kind of interaction with Georgians, because they are Christians, but having met them and having the opportunity of travelling together in Kazbegi or in Tbilisi... I know that they are people whom we can trust, and I am not expecting bad things from them now...”

confidence building, entrepreneurship training and grants funding. Most importantly, this project used the employment shuttle methodology (as a five-month coaching and peer-learning course for personal and professional competences’ development) while simultaneously also supported community project initiatives implemented by local youth from Akhmeta and Pankisi and the provision of entrepreneurship grants. Twenty young people from Akhmeta town and twenty from the Pankisi Gorge participated in all project components. This experience gave them the opportunity to meet regularly, learn about each other, develop their competences, initiate joint community projects and establish their own business start-ups. But most importantly, the project created a space for dialogue and intercultural exchange, breaking down the stereotypical views that exist in both communities.

The Employment Shuttle approach was used as a tool to connect young people and allow them to work together towards a shared objective. Because of the very limited employment opportunities in the region, Action Against Hunger decided to add an entrepreneurship component to the project and give self-employment opportunities to the most motivated individuals with the best business ideas. Throughout its duration, the project enjoyed strong support from the local government and the Akhmeta local authorities contributed to the implementation of the community initiatives by providing services and financial resources.



KIST, FEMALE

"I am so happy that I had an opportunity to meet Georgians in an informal environment. It helped me to understand that they are not enemies. And they can understand that we are Muslims wearing our traditional clothes, but still we are the women from Georgia."

PANKISI GORGE, FEMALE

"I used to be a very good student, but as I got married when I was still in high school, I didn't get the chance to continue my studies. This always affected my self-confidence and I thought I wouldn't be accepted into the programme. Luckily, I was wrong. But even after joining the team and meeting my peers, I thought they knew more and were much more capable than I was, as they had studied in the university. So, I was very shy and unsure at first.

However, the welcoming and friendly environment allowed me to express myself and share my ideas. I'll never forget the day when my team members selected me to be the one making the presentation. I felt so confident and brave. I have so many responsibilities at home but, somehow, I found time for everything. I woke up earlier than usual each day, full of enthusiasm and motivation to get things done and be able to go to Employment Shuttle sessions.

I haven't felt this happy and empowered in a long time. Looking back at those months, I realized that it helped me find myself. I discovered that I can be self-confident, I can believe in my own capabilities and I can find a job. Currently I am taking an English language and a computer course."

For more information contact:
Imerabishvili@sc.acfspain.org

GOOD PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED**1 Strong local partnerships**

The project benefitted hugely from the engagement of a competent local partner within Akhmeta Municipality, without whom it would have been very difficult for it to be successful. Kakheti Regional Development Foundation (KRDF) has been working in the area for a very long time and has established a high degree of trust within the two communities, as well as with the local authorities and representatives of the Council of Elders, who are highly respected, non-formal leaders of Pankisi Gorge communities. This strong relationship helped provide a secure working environment for project implementation and resulted in high levels of engagement of the local population.

2 Active community involvement and adaptability

The activity that supported the highest level of confidence building was the joint Employment Shuttle sessions where the two shuttle groups came together twice a month. As the project developed, there was a high demand from participants to increase the frequency of such gatherings as they found these meetings both interesting and useful. Consequently, the approach was adapted accordingly allowing increased

interaction among participants.

Likewise, the community component of the LINC project significantly supported the confidence building process within the communities of Akhmeta and Pankisi, while they were developing their project ideas. Later on, communities worked on the library rehabilitation in Akhmeta town and built an outdoor fitness park and playground in Pankisi.

3 Focus on building entrepreneurship skills

Since most participants did not have any previous knowledge, or experience in entrepreneurship, more time needs to be dedicated on business skills' trainings in the future to ensure that participants have the necessary knowledge and capacity to lead their own ventures. Another approach for the project suggests forming separate groups for employment and entrepreneurship related questions during the selection process to better evaluate participants' interests, capacities, and goals regarding self-employment.