
Caucasus Environmental NGO Network

Corruption in Georgia: forestry case

Catherine Nakashidze

Corruption in Georgia

- Corruption in Georgia is a historical phenomenon, existing in soviet times, and even before that.
- Today corruption is still quite high, especially in the field of FORESTRY resources.
- President of Georgia M. Saakashvili called for struggle with corruption as it is impossible to have democracy in the country, unless the transparency and accountability is reached.

Methods of struggle

- Methods of struggle today mostly include some repressive measures, displacements of officials and restructuring, leading to changes in ministerial offices every two-three months.
- But first it is important to find the reasons for corruption, its roots.

Roots of corruption

- Social background – high poverty and unemployment
- Incomplete and contradictory legislation
- Improper sectoral planning and management
- Sector depends on state budget, financing is not enough and inefficient
- Low awareness (legal and environmental)
- Lack of transparency
- Lack of political will for positive changes
- Weak institutional arrangement
- Weak law enforcement level
- Non-consideration of local traditions

What was done?

- Simplified legislation, but no systematic approach and strategy for that
- Financing and salaries improved, but sometimes the most qualified staff was dismissed and incompetent newcomers recruited
- Even lower transparency level
- Plans of privatization of forests are set together with the forestry policy that is under consideration right now

The main problems of forestry

- Illegal logging – both for fuel wood and commercial round wood
- Pests and diseases of trees, caused by incompetent care and low financing
- Illegal hunting and fishing in the forest
- Infrastructure (like terminals, railways etc) that calls for forest cutting not accompanied by compensation planting
- Forestry privatization – if not properly planned and resources valued, might lead to disaster for Georgia
- Other problems include land degradation, desertification, overgrazing, erosion, lack of natural growth, that are also partly linked with the corruption

Recent success

- In 2005 Georgia (together with other 45 countries) signed Declaration on Forest Law Enforcement and Governance in Europe and North Asia.
- The commitment taken includes:
Development of national plans to combat illegal logging, trade, and better sectoral management

But...

- Even as the Declaration was signed and donors expressed their will to help it realized, still no real on-site activities have taken place, nor a single document was created.

Public participation to struggle with corruption

- Instead of harmonizing our laws with the Aarhus Convention, new legal changes make this distance even bigger. With the new laws, opportunity for public participation in decision-making is virtually impossible, especially combined with low awareness of people about their rights and threats of the planned activities.

Forestry example

- The Ministry published draft version of “Reform of forests” in January 2006, pretending to be “awaiting and open for public comments” (deadline was March)
- Several NGOs – CENN, Green Alternative, Greens of Georgia etc – sent their comments on the Reform
- In April, the new version was placed on the MoE web-site WITHOUT any changes
- For justification they announced that did not receive any comment....

New legal changes/ forestry

- Environmental permit was removed from the list of required permits for planned activities
- Public participation is very limited, almost no mechanisms for it exist
- Owner of license on use of forestry resources can split, let or alienate it. No public participation is possible on that stage

Some steps forward

- Recently Environmental Inspectorate was established in the MoE.

They have presented their draft strategic action plan for 2007-2010.

According to this plan, the Inspectorate will combat illegal logging, corruption, illegal saw-mills, export of timber abroad and other criminal activities in the field.

Is Inspectorate for good or for bad?

Some acts should be developed by the MoE after the Inspectorate (IEP) was set forth, but are still missing, for example “Methods for calculation of damage caused to the environment”, etc

It can also lead to the new opportunities of corruption in the field

With the establishment of inspectorate, forest outlet checkpoints were ceased, as well as control by the local forestries. Instead, IEP has to carry out field checks, that taking into account personnel of IEP and number of hectares is almost impossible.

Forestry vs IEP

- Therefore, we have two authorities, responsible for one task (control) – forestries and Inspectorate, that are blaming each other and also excuse themselves with the circumstances like low salaries, lack of capacities etc.
- This is a perfect ground for corruption and illegal logging in the field.

Other problems of IEP

- It is very difficult to carry out illegal logs` requisition and sale properly: no facilities to store, to transport, no incentive to fill out all necessary documents
- No procedure for closing/ sealing illegal saw-mills yet exists
- Random checks “for media” instead of systematic approach in every region

Adigeni head of administration:

- “Adigeni Forestry and Environmental Inspectorate are corrupted criminal groups that perfectly match each other. They measure everything by money. They jointly control timber traffics and direct money to their pockets. – A.Sukhiashvili *

The timber is sold for 2 GEL (1 USD) to the sawmills, than processed and sold for 500 USD in Armenia and Azerbaijan, according to A.Sukhiashvili.

* Published in Adigeni newspaper and Akhali Versia

Other “tricks” of corruption

- Forestry, Police and Customs seem to be linked in one “corruptive chain” while dealing with the transport of wood. “Tricks” include “playing” with weight of wood (dry/ semi-dry/ newly cut), permitted load of trucks and illegal timber/ documentation.

Nepotism in the sector

- Currently, there are many unqualified and unprofessional foresters that were appointed only thanks to their party membership, relatives or friends in the government.
- This is reflected not only during appointment to a position, but also while distributing bonuses, allowances etc.

Collisions in the legislation

- Nowadays the legislation is even more complicated and incomprehensible than it was before the recent reforms.
- This leads not only to illegal use of natural resources and increased corruption but also creates problems for the business in the sector.

More information:

- We would like to thank NGO GREEN ALTERNATIVE for providing outstanding report on “Problems of forestry sector of Georgia: illegal activities and legislative collisions”. This report as well as many other interesting data can be found on:

www.forestgeo.net

www.greenalt.org

www.cenn.org

Thank you!

For more information please contact
Catherine Nakashidze
katya.nakashidze@cenn.org