

Photo by: Mikheil Kasradze
Batefi Lake

CENN - Helping Georgia to Grow & Develop, A Year Reviewed

INTERVIEW BY KATIE RUTH DAVIES

The COVID-19 pandemic has further demonstrated humanity's precarious relationship with the environment, - CENN Executive Director Nana Janashia tells GEORGIA TODAY in an exclusive interview. "While the origin of the coronavirus outbreak is yet to be determined, over recent years we've seen a rise in diseases as the world continues to witness the unprecedented destruction of wildlife habitats due to human activity. There is also research that suggests that people living in highly polluted areas have been hit harder by the pandemic. So, it is absolutely critical that we learn from the current circumstances and prioritize environmental issues, doing all we can to tip the balance towards nature preservation and sustainable development."

Despite the difficult conditions resulting from the pandemic, non-governmental organization CENN has continued actively working on its core environmental directions in 2020, among them sustainable forest resource management, climate change, disaster risk reduction (DRR), climate resilient agriculture, rural development, water sanitation and hygiene (WASH), social entrepreneurship and green innovation, digital and sustainable tourism, land degradation neutrality, waste management, and air pollution.

"CENN has been working even harder this year to raise awareness of these issues and to use this opportunity to push for changes that positively impact the environment and the vulnerable communities," Janashia says. "We quickly adapted to the changes and continued our activities in an online format as much as we could."

We asked her to give us some of the 2020 highlights of CENN's work, and she was happy to oblige.

WATER 4 THE POOR

"Water 4 the Poor is among those important highlights of the year that was linked with COVID and the successful implementation of our WASH program," she tells us. "Within this project, we managed to assist the communities at risk health-wise by providing them with needed information and first-aid materials and equipment. CENN also implemented improved water-related infrastructure for the poorest and most marginalized communities in Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti, and Imereti. This was one of the most important parts of the project, as access to drinking water increased for approximately 4,000 people, mostly children and women. We would like to thank the EU, the project donor, for their support on such an important issue."

"But we certainly had even more important wins this year that also need a mention!"

ADOPTION OF THE FOREST CODE OF GEORGIA

"Adoption of the Forest Code of Georgia came as a result of long and comprehensive work from us and the other actors involved in the process. The Forest Code was adopted by the Parliament of Georgia on May 22, 2020. The document broadens the scope of socio-economic benefits of forests, while introducing regulations aimed at maintaining and protecting biodiversity and the ecological functions of forests. The Forest Code will help resolve problems with illegal logging, will generate income through non-timber forest products, and as a result will diversify the rural economy."

"Essentially, the forest code will introduce the multifunctional management of forests according to assigned categories (Protective, Protected, Recreational or Agricultural forest), introducing inclusive forms of forest management by involving communities, municipalities, private agricultural entities, and the Church, and by establishing commercial use of a forest's non-timber resources. The initiative was carried out within our sustainable forest management project funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation."



Photo by: Giorgi Bezhanishvili. Semifinal of Niko Ketskhoveli School Award 2020

SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESSES

"The EUENPARD supported projects 'Embrace Tsalka' and 'Keda LEADER' funded dozens of local businesses and social projects in both municipalities from various sectors such as agriculture, tourism, gastronomy, and education," Janashia says. "Despite the shifting restrictions, all projects are being finalized successfully, and the funds came at the right time, when the businesses needed support the most. In total, in 2020, we supported 15 businesses in Tsalka and 26 in Keda."

EDUCATION AND YOUTH

"2020 has seen close collaboration with universities in Georgia and Armenia to ensure the introduction of green and social entrepreneurship courses at the higher education level. As a result, the following courses have been developed:

"A Green Entrepreneurship BA course and reading materials for Ilia State University (Georgia) – the program was created in collaboration with the university, and the course will be launched from spring semester 2021.

"Circular Economy BA Course for ISET (Georgia) – the course was launched this autumn and will be completed by the end of this year.

"These initiatives were supported by EU4YOUTH."

NIKO KETSKHOVELI SCHOOL AWARD

"The Niko Ketskhoveli School Award is an annual nationwide competition for youth, focusing on the environmental and social activities, which is a big component of the forest project funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC)," she tells us. "The competition requires the schools to carry out a series of environmental and social activities throughout the year, through which they score points and are subsequently assessed by an independent jury at the end of the year.

"The participant schools did incredibly well to adapt and not let the pandemic hamper their activism. An unprecedented 700 schools registered this year, out of which the 150 best schools made it to the semi-finals.

"We naturally wanted to recognize their determination, and so made sure that the competition finals were carried out as they are every year. The Niko Ketskhoveli School Prize Award finals took place on October 26, on the National Day of Austria."

PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE AND DIGITAL TOURISM IN THE CAUCASUS

"For the first time in Georgia, we're creating a dialogue on sustainable tourism based on green values. CENN promoted digitalization of the sector as the driver of economic growth for regional tourism. The Digital Caucasus project is a regional initiative and promoted tourism development in the regional dimension."

HAVE YOU KEPT UP ANY LONG-STANDING PROJECTS DESPITE COVID CONDITIONS?

We kept all projects active, and changed formats in some cases to adjust to the circumstances.

Our challenge was to quickly and effectively adapt to this unprecedented situation, and CENN quickly refocused its efforts to respond to the crisis caused by the pandemic, carrying

Agrokseli LTD, Keda, Village Dzentsmani. Local dried fruit enterprise funded by the project "Keda Leader"



Photo by: Lasha Gigauri
Kokhta-Mitarbi Resort

Photo by Tako Jibuti, EU4Youth/ CENN conference on youth opportunities and employment



Photo by: Giorgi Nakashidze
Luxury Camping "Hill Inn", beneficiary of the project "Keda Leader"

out activities to help slow the spread of COVID-19 in target regions and also to help vulnerable communities to protect themselves and adapt to the situation created by the pandemic.

Here are a number of COVID-19 response strategies that we put in place and carried out:

EMBRACE TSALKA PROJECT UNDER THE EU ENPARD PROGRAM

In April, CENN funded three initiatives in Tsalka municipality to effectively address health and education problems posed by the spread of COVID-19.

1. Retraining and helping medical and health workers in handling COVID-19 cases in Tsalka.
2. Giving access to education and information during the pandemic - this initiative ensured equal and timely access to education and information for the residents of Tsalka municipality. The project implemented non-formal education online courses for school students, equipped students of socially vulnerable families with smartphones, and created access to internet and TV channels to engage them in online learning activities.
3. Providing psychological support for youth in lockdown in Tsalka.

KEDA LEADER PROJECT UNDER THE EU ENPARD PROGRAM

The EU supported Keda LEADER project also launched a rapid response plan to tackle the challenges facing the rural community in the municipality. It is important to remember that the municipality was also hit hard due to the stagnation of tourism, as the majority of the communities relied on tourism as a source of income.

As a result, the following initiatives were funded and carried out:

1. Helping the youth with remote learning: A professional and skills development educational initiative was funded, focused on the youth living in Keda municipality, and including a series of trainings useful for professional development, as well as online skills, to help the young people adapt to remote learning and working.
2. Providing psychological support during the pandemic to people living in Keda municipality and also providing educational training for parents.
3. Digital marketing and tourism: A project

aiming to improve the digital marketing skills of the beneficiaries living in Keda, particularly focusing on the tourism sector and developing tourist packages tailored to the restrictions and limitations during the pandemic. In addition, a new digital tourist platform was launched that promoted local tourist destinations through virtual tours and helped the beneficiaries book tours and holiday stays.

SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This project, which is supported by the Austrian Development Cooperation, purchased 2,000 reusable face masks made by the members of the Akhaltsikhe and Ambrolauri Adult Education Centers, and 2,000 rolls of toilet paper made from recycled paper, and other sustainable hygienic products, from the recycling company Kriala. We then organized the distribution of these products to vulnerable groups in the high mountainous regions of Georgia in May.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2021, WHAT PLANS DO YOU HAVE?

We have several new projects that started this year, and others that are starting in January, that deal with very important and pressing issues, such as digital and green growth of the tourism sector, the climate change program, plastic waste, food waste, WASH, climate resilient agriculture, and land degradation. Considering the impact of COVID-19 on the environment, and in parallel with rising poverty and various industries hit hard by the pandemic, these projects are more important than ever, and we now have to work even harder to mitigate the effects of this last year's and still ongoing crisis.



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