



ALCP | Alliances
Caucasus 2
REGIONAL MARKET ALLIANCES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

ALLIANCES CAUCASUS 2

LOCAL NATURAL RESOURCE USE FOCUS GROUP SURVEY

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INTRODUCTION

Natural resources are resources/materials that are drawn from nature including sunlight, atmosphere, water, all types of land, forests, all minerals, vegetation, and wildlife and are central to human wellbeing. Use and agency over natural resources through equitable access to information and local decision making is very important and, sometimes, crucial for people who live in rural areas. Natural resources are particularly vital for those with less wealth and who are more vulnerable to social, economic, and environmental changes.

In October-November 2022 the ALCP2 conducted a rural producers/farmers focus group survey to learn more about rural inhabitants' perspectives, knowledge and experience of local natural resource use, management, and protection in conjunction with sustainable local development. The discussion topics included but were not limited to the listing of natural resources used, income generating activities related to these resources, knowledge of relevant laws and existing permissions, gender roles and responsibilities related to the local natural resources and access based on membership of vulnerable groups.

METHODOLOGY

The geography of the focus groups for this survey was selected according to the programme strategic goals in 2022-2026. Eighteen gender disaggregated (nine female and nine male) focus groups were held in five programme targeted regions – Ajara, Racha, Kakheti, Kvemo Kartli and Guria, *see Table 1 below*. The villages were selected according to the following criteria: mountainous villages where locals have main income from livestock, Lori, beekeeping, wild botanicals, or villages near to mountainous resorts, botanical gardens, and other touristic destinations with ongoings infrastructural development: e.g., Goderdzi Pass (AJ), Chirukhi (AJ), Tsalka (KK), Bakhmaro (Guria), Gomi mountain (Guria). In total 81 farmers participated in the focus group discussions out of which 44% were women and 56% man. The farmers were selected randomly. The minimum age of the respondents was 30 and maximum 70. In all focus group surveys across the programme lack of access or inclusion for ethnic minorities is exacerbated by language barriers in accessing different services, information and decision-making which will be considered by the programme during the implementation period.

Region	Number of focus groups	Female	Male
Ajara	8	16	23
Racha	2	4	4
Kakheti	2	5	5
Kvemo Kartli	2	3	3
Guria	4	8	10
Total	18	36	45

Figure 1 Focus Groups Gender Disaggregated Data According to Regions

Gender equality, diversity, and social inclusion (GEDSI) is another cross-cutting theme of vital importance in the ALCP2. Alliances has worked in the most diverse areas of Georgia since its establishment, effectively incorporating ethnicity and gender equality within the programming. Additionally, ALCP2 will be in line with Mercy Corps’ GEDSI Strategy which is a long-term vision of advancing gender equality, diversity, and social inclusion.

The focus groups confirmed that when it comes to gender, women and men are both involved in local natural resource usage, youth and elderly people are also engaged in activities related to the usage of the natural resources, such as taking care of arable lands, livestock husbandry/grazing. The only significant difference is related to forests, men tend to be responsible for timber and women for non-timber forest products. Otherwise, they reported equal access and agency over natural resource usage, such as using water, land, pastures, and natural protected areas such e.g., Alpine Garden in Ajara. Table 1 below shows the roles and responsibilities of women and men in access to natural resources and agency over them.

Table 1 Gender Division of Access and Agency (Decision-Making Ability) in Local Natural Resources Use

Roles & Responsibilities	Access		Agency	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Water resources (river, lake, spring)	X	X	X	X
Forest (as feed resource for bees, pigs)	X	X	X	X
Forest, Timber		X	X	X
Forest, Non-Timber	X		X	
Agricultural Land: pastures	X	X	X	X
Agricultural land: arable land	X	X	X	X
Non-agricultural land	X	X	X	X
Alpine Garden	X	X	X	X
Field to collect wild botanicals	X	X	X	X

When it comes to local development, women and men are equally interested in information related to ongoing development projects. They try to have up-to-date information about laws, regulations and permits. In some cases, females are more involved in public discussions, while male are mostly responsible for applying and obtaining permits for construction and usage of natural resource. In most of the villages, women attend public hearings and discussions, they might restrain to act independently, but always take decisions jointly with other household members. Furthermore, if a village decides to complain about construction without a permit or to protest the insensible use of natural resources, women also participate on the community level, and they together with other community members try to defend their rights e.g., female participants from Shemokmedi village, Guria were actively protesting construction of a hydro power plant in their village last year. Table 1 below shows the roles and responsibilities of women and men in access and agency over local development.

Table 2 Gender Division of Access and Agency (Decision-Making Ability) in Local Development

Roles & Responsibilities	Access		Agency	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Information about Planned/Ongoing development projects/constructions	X	X	X	X
Information about laws, regulations, permits	X	X	X	X
Attending Public hearing	X	X	X	X
Taking Construction permit	X	X		X
Leasing Land from the Forestry or other government entity	X	X		X
License/Permit on natural resource use	X	X	X	X
Complaints on construction without permit, new project idea/design, insensible use of natural resources	X	X	X	X

COMPREHENSION AND USAGE OF NATURAL RESOURCES

At the beginning of the interviews, when the participants were asked to name the natural resources they use, in all cases the first reaction was silence, slight confusion and the query ‘what do you mean?’ Are you asking about mineral resources? Only after the clarification and hinting from the interviewers, people started to answer. This fact indicates that for the farmers the term ‘natural resource’ is associated mainly with mineral resources, and they do not consider all the resources drawn from nature as subjects for special attention or care. They actively use natural resources which they own, e.g., agriculture or non-agriculture land, and those which are vital for living e.g., water and forests and protect those they own.

All the male and female participants named water and agricultural land as the main natural resources used in their everyday life. Forests are also used widely, 72% of the participants use forests for timber, 57% for non-timber, and 44% for feeding bees and pigs. Seventeen percent of interviewees, primarily the farmers from mountainous Ajara, named the Goderdzi Alpine Garden as a local natural resource. None of them mentioned sunlight, solar power or wind as the Green Energy sources, or rainwater as an alternative water source. The farmers do not consider using these natural resources either for saving costs or for generating additional income, on the contrary, they think that e.g., solar panels are too expensive and only rich persons or businesses can afford to install it, however they do not know how much it costs and how much they could save.

WATER

All focus group participants said that drinking and irrigation water is the most important resource for rural people and access to water is still a problem in the most places because of unfair distribution, lack of finances at local municipal budgets for building water systems, construction of hydro power plants on the rivers, climate change, and drought. Tsalka FOCUS GROUPs participants said that irrigation is a big problem and rivers are not fully used for this purpose as local government lacks finances to arrange an irrigation system.

The participants from Shemokmedi Village, Guria said that they had been and continue protesting construction of Hydro Power Plant on Bjuji river because it will decrease their access to irrigation and drinking water. In Kakheti farmers are paying for irrigation water in summertime but there is not enough water in rivers left they say. The majority of farmers think that the shortage of water is a result of climate change, and it affects the quality of land and the amount of harvest including maize, nuts, and hay. The farmers lacked information about climate smart inputs and ideas regarding the effective use of water resources.

LAND

According to our survey agricultural land is the main income-generating natural resource for the farmers, arable land – 100% and pastures 89%. Non-agricultural land is less important for rural inhabitants, only seventeen percent said that this type of land is important for income generating activities e.g., construction of hotels or guesthouses. The land parcels which are far from villages are not used purposefully because of increased transportation and human resource costs. Land registration is still a problem in the villages linked to the increased registration fee (was 50 Gel and 300 Gel now) and lack of legal documents proving the ownership, farmers still use the land parcels which were used by their families for agriculture but cannot get construction permits because formally do not own them, *see more details about this topic below in Local Development section.*

FOREST

After land and water, forests are the most important and used resource for farmers. Forest timber resources are used by 72% of participants for social needs, as a firewood in winter, otherwise cutting the trees in forest is prohibited for them. The process is controlled by the National Forestry Agency which issues special permits, firewood tickets for rural people and allows them to cut the certain limited amount of timber for each HH once in a year. The local government is involved in the distribution of the tickets. The ticket price is almost symbolic 5-7 gel per cube of wood. Each rural HH can get from 7 (in lowland) to 15 (in highland) cubes of wood for social needs. Only 11% of respondents said that timber is an income generating resource for them. The FOCUS GROUPS participants from Tsalka, Kvemo Kartli mentioned that permissions for the cutting trees are not always available on time, sometimes people get permissions when it is already heavy snow, and they cannot extract the wood. Farmers from Khulo stated that landslides and mudslides damage the roads, so they often cannot go to fetch wood in the forest. According to a new Forest Code enacted in 2020 farmers will not be able to cut firewood by themselves from 2023¹, they must buy already cut wood from the Forestry Agency and the price per cube will be increased ten times. Our FOCUS GROUPS participants have heard about the upcoming changes regarding forest use but do not know the details.

Wild animals are a danger not a resource for farmers e.g., Ajara participants told that there is not enough food in the forest, so the wild animals are coming into the villages, destroying crops, and eating livestock.

The forests are also used for agriculture purposes by 44% of the participants e.g., as a pasture for pigs in Racha region. The participants from Oni said that there are no restrictions on using the forest as feed resource for pigs. They were mostly concerned that the village pasture fields have become forested, and the locals cannot even

¹ However the Deputy of MEPA announced on November 29th 2022 that this has been postponed till 2026.

walk into the forest because it is full of dried wood and branches. Cutting wood or collecting dry wood is illegal and people are afraid to clean it - the farmers said.

56% of the survey participants use non-timber forest resources including wild botanicals such as berries, chestnuts, medicinal plants, mushrooms, seeds, and for 22% it is an income generating activity. In Akhmeta, Kakheti the collected wild botanicals are either sold locally in the village or in guesthouses/hotels in Tusheti, besides, local people use wild plants to dye (color) the wool ropes that are used for knitting. The traditionally knitted handcrafts (usually made by women) are also sold to tourists in Tusheti hotels/guesthouses.

PROTECTED NATURAL LANDSCAPES AND BOTANICAL GARDENS

Farmers believe that protected natural landscapes and botanical gardens increase local rural tourism potential. 90% of farmers from Ajara think that the Goderdzi Alpine Garden is one of the most important natural resources for their communities because it draws tourists' interest. One of the most popular tourist destinations in Kakheti region is Tusheti which is a protected area. Alvani village in Akhmeta municipality, where we conducted our focus group, is inhabited by Tushi people, most of them own a house in Tusheti (which could potentially be used as a guesthouse due to their location, though usually they are in poor condition), and are employed there in hotels or just visit Tusheti in summer. According to the focus group participants, the tourism sector has developed in Tusheti because the natural and unique landscapes and local architecture have been preserved there and now hospitality is one of the main sources of income for locals together with cattle and sheep farming which used to be the only source of income for Tushi people. This is true for Guria as well, rural people who live near Bakhmaro and Goderdzi get their main income from tourism.

INCOME GENERATING NATURAL RESOURCES

As already mentioned, rural people use some local natural resources for monetary benefits, for instance, 100% use and have income from arable land and 89% from pastures, but from other natural resources people have less income e.g., 100% of interviewed farmers use water but only 22% mentioned water as income generating resource, these were local inhabitants who work at Nabeglavi mineral water factory or have water mills on a river. 72% of farmers use forest timber resources but only 11% have income from this activity. 56% uses forest non-timber products and only 22% generate income. Collection of wild botanicals is an exception because use and generating income percentages are the same. It is very interesting that the participants could not monetarize income from botanical gardens or non-agriculture land. During the conversation regarding local development, they were talking about tourism and income from it, but when they were asked to name income generating natural resources, none of them named them. *See Figure 1 below where use and income generation are compared.*

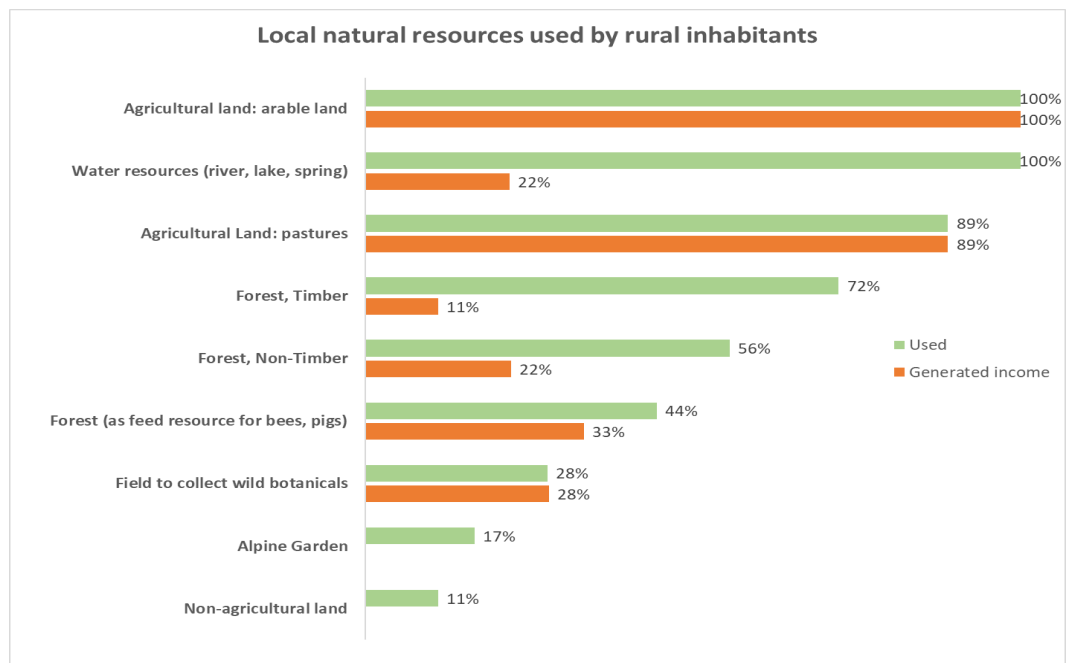


Figure 2 Natural Resources Used by Rural Inhabitants

PROTECTION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

On the question - *who protects and damages local natural resources*, 72% of farmers consider that mainly local people are damaging the environment around them. More than 70% of participants said that local inhabitants and local governments are protecting the local natural resources almost equally. Even though almost all existing natural resources are owned and managed by the central government, only 22% of farmers think that the central government is protecting them. The majority of participants think that mostly local people have negative impact on natural resources, construction companies and private investors are in the second and third places with 39% and 28% retrospectively. Six percent said that tourists are negatively impacting the environment because they throw garbage and waste during their trips. Local government has the most positive appraisal and role here. See Figure 2 below.

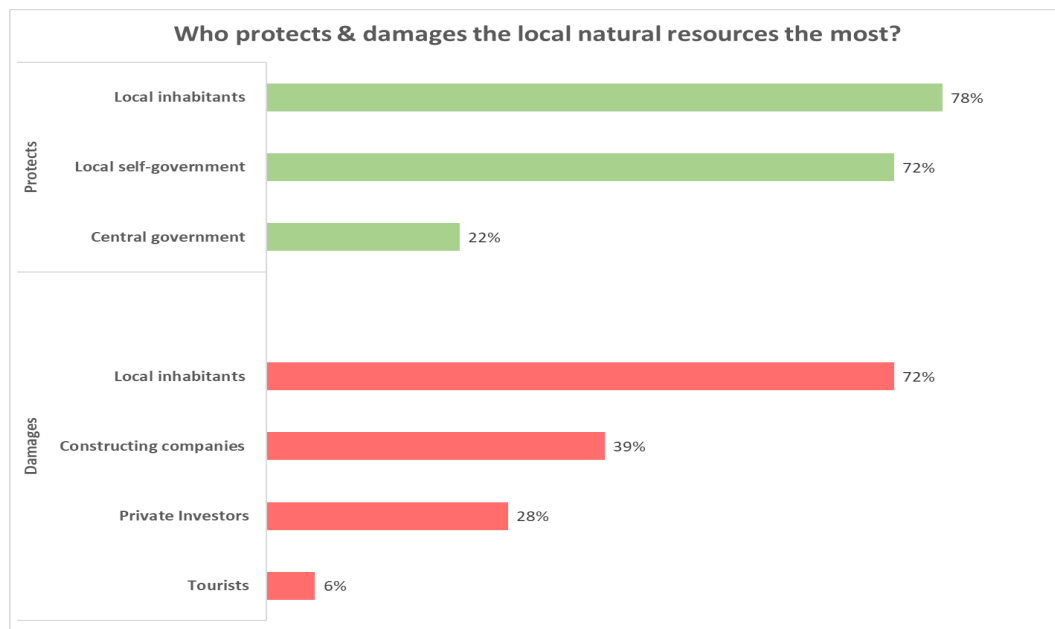


Figure 3 Who Protects, Who Damages

The focus group participants believe that they know all necessary regulations and laws regarding natural resources, but they cannot name the concrete ones. The only regulation they know in detail is about the usage of forest timber resources because most of them have got a permit for cutting firewood. A few of them mentioned permits for construction, mineral resources and a special license to use them, but none of the participants have had experience of requesting such permits.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

For the majority of focus group participants, the main sources of information on natural resources are other farmers, including neighbors and friends, (100%) and local officials (94%). It means that information regarding local natural resources is circulating among people and rural inhabitants share this information to each other. As they mentioned, local natural resources predominantly water and forests are frequent discussion topics for them.

Farmers also try to get information from media outlets: around two-third named TV and social media as the main source of information regarding local natural resources. Women and men had the same answers on this topic. *See Figure 3. below.* As for the importance of the sources, for the majority of farmers it is important to receive qualified information through trainings and consultations or at least from the local government, the media and internet were last in the list.

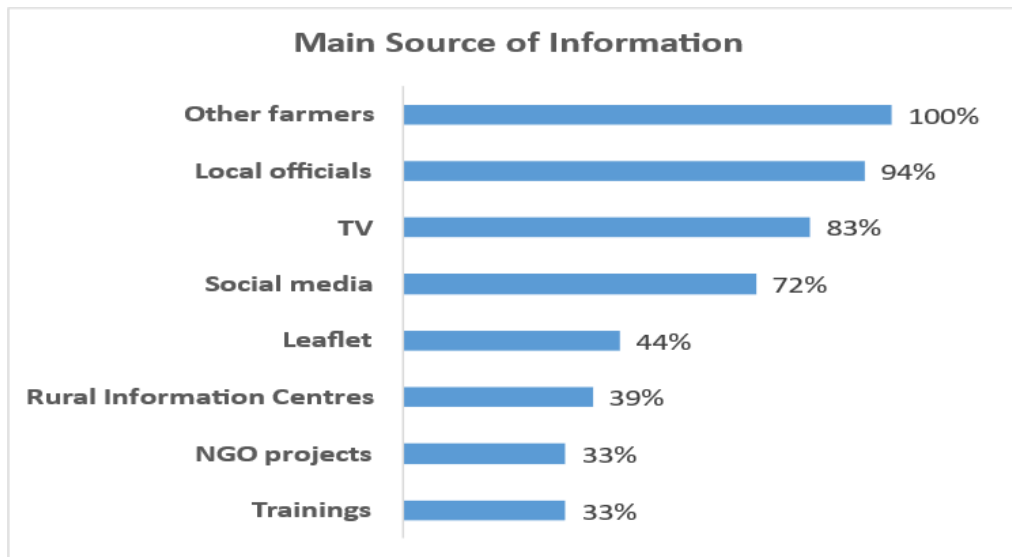


Figure 4 Sources of Information on Natural Resources

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT – INFORMATION AND INCLUSION

The focus group participants’ opinion about local development is very positive. All of them are aware of development projects in their communities but know fewer details about the projects outside of their villages, only seventeen percent of participants said that cannot say are they good or bad. The majority of farmers receive the information about ongoing development projects/constructions (hotels, guesthouses, restaurant, café, cottages, shops) from their neighbors or saw it by themselves, 50% get information from local government but 28% of participants do not have such information at all. See Figure 4 below

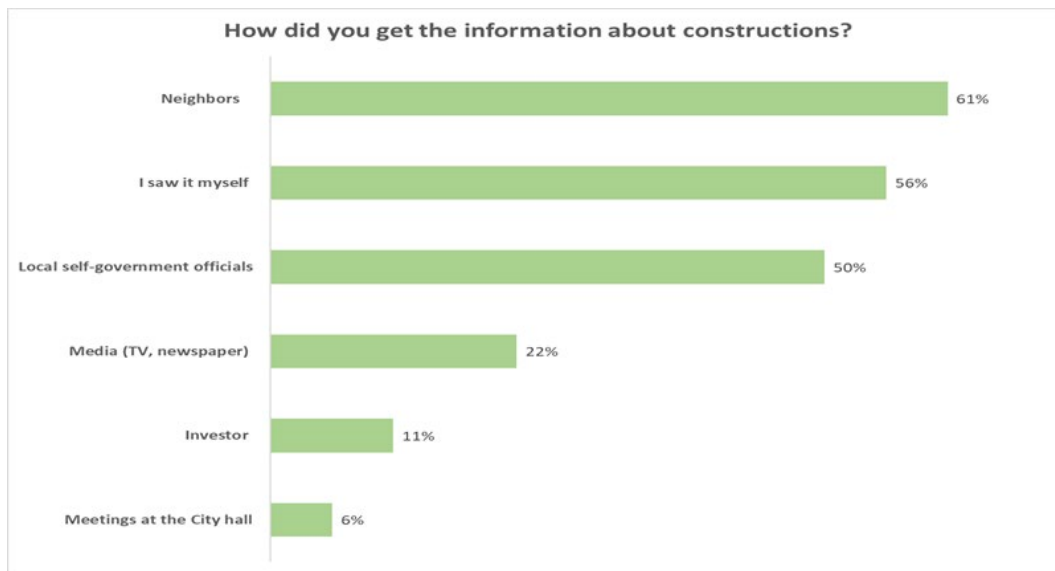


Figure 5 Information Sources Regarding Local Development

On the question *When do you receive the information about construction, before or after it starts?* The votes were split in half. It should be noted that women focus group participants are more aware of planned development/construction projects in advance rather than men through having a Facebook group/chat where local officials are also members, and they share relevant information there. The group/chat is public, though according to the focus groups, it seems women are more actively engaged in it (maybe generally in social media) than men. The majority of men said that they get the information about ongoing projects/constructions in process.

All farmers know that they need to get a construction permit from the local municipality to start any type of construction and the majority of them know about fines/penalties as well. Despite this local people start constructions without the permissions because in the most cases their lands are not registered in the Public Register. Female focus group participants from Guria mentioned that the local self-government is actively involved in development of Gomi mountain as a tourist destination. In 90s of last century many of the villagers had houses there, but due to the lack of finances most of the houses collapsed. People took advantage of the moment and started to illegally appropriate the lands through presenting false witnesses to the public service hall. The local self-government investigates such cases and issues fines. For example, a false witness receives the fine of 5000 Gel + 1 year probation period.

44% think that local landscape, natural resources, and traditions are not considered in implementing local development projects and 56% think they are but more in the sense that they ‘should’ be. 83% said that local self-government is responsible for ensuring all these are taken into account (protection and sensible use of natural resources) when planning the development, only 28% see this as local inhabitants’ responsibility. See Figure 5. Below.

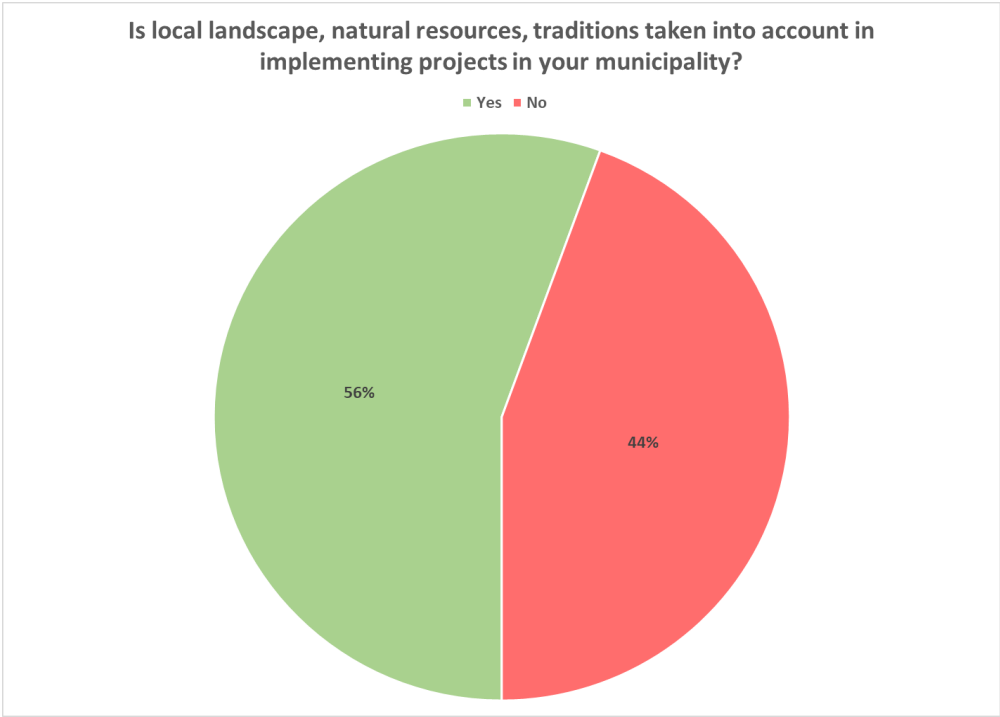


Figure 6 NRs & Local Development

Overall, the survey showed that there is a lack of transparency at the local government level and their plans regarding development of local areas are often unknown, people do not protest ongoing development projects, especially connected to tourism, but lack the information about the environmental risks and costs. The farmers are not involved in the decision-making process when it comes to local development investments and they think that local self-government needs to increase accountability towards local inhabitants regarding local environmental vision and economic development plans, also they lack the information about their rights and, also, on sustainable use of local natural resources.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATURAL RESOURCE USE

According to the participants climate change is tangible now and it negatively affects the natural resources on which the farmers are dependant e.g., water, land, pastures, crops and all types of harvest.

All focus group participants reported that climate has significantly changed over the last years: nonstable weather, stricter winters, heavy snow and increased rainfall in spring, drought in the summer, changing of the durations of seasons, landslides, and floods are more frequent damaging crops and blocking roads. Due to all these changes the amount and quality of harvest has decreased, farmers can no longer stock hay for winter, additional expense for HHs as they need to buy additional feed for their livestock. The majority of farmers stated that lack of drinking and irrigation water is a result of climate change. Local people and local government are not prepared for these changes, municipalities do not have the equipment for coping with natural hazards, they also do not have money for arranging irrigation systems for villages. The farmers do not have information on how to cope the climate change e.g., they all have heard about solar panels, but it is an expensive solution for them which they cannot afford.