



Restoring peasants' dignity

“Our strength is in diversity, taste, flavour, quality, tradition and hospitality. That is why agroecology is so important for Georgia. If we develop an agroecological way, we maintain what is our strength. We will develop a way that will be ecologically sound and will keep us important in the market in terms of quality.” – says Elene Shatberashvili from Elkana Association from Georgia in an interview with Paulina Jeziorek from Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation from Poland.

Paulina Jeziorek: Elkana is a unique organization from Georgia, implementing modern approaches based on past traditions. Could you explain what are Elkana’s main fields of work?

Elene Shatberashvili: Elkana is a Georgian association of smallholder organic farmers and agriculture producers. It was established in 1994 as an agricultural advisory service provider organization to its member farmers. Strengthening of rural population and

a development of rural farming are Elkana’s major fields of interest. We cooperate with agronomists from different fields who work with our members helping them to convert to organic farming, improve farming practice, introduce various novelties etc. We organize trainings, farmers exchanges and other events for our farmers. In the beginning, it was only agricultural advice, later marketing and business development support was added to it.



These people worked with farmers helping them to improve their marketing abilities, making connections, developing business plans and brandings of their products.

In 1996 Elkana started working on agricultural biodiversity conservation. Currently it is a very important part of our work. We run small conservation farms, one in the south of Georgia in Tsnisi, Samtskhe-Javakheti region, where we have old varieties of fruit, grapes. We restored old varieties of legumes there as well. A wheat restoration is especially important for us as Georgia is one of the countries of a wheat culture origin. There are five endemic species of wheat in Georgia and it is the only country where you will find so many. Most of the old varieties of wheat were not cultivated during the Soviet Union period[1]. Things were based on different logic then, everything was organized so as to feed the huge country. Georgia was focused mainly on fruit and vegetables production especially wine, tea and citrus, field crops were not the priority. While for example Ukraine had to focus on field crops. Therefore we lost a lot of our agricultural heritage then.

Can you explain what you mean exactly when you talk about agriculture biodiversity conservation in Georgia?

According to Convention on Biodiversity[2] the term refers to conservation of the whole agricultural ecosystem like f.e. wild plants or insects that are beneficial for ecosystem functioning in agriculture. But in a more narrow sense when we speak about an agriculture of biodiversity, it refers to old varieties, species of cultivated plants, their wild relatives, as well as local breeds of animals. This is an agricultural biodiversity. And a conservation of it means to restore, reproduce, cultivate and maintain.

There are two types of conservation: ex-situ conservation and in-situ conservation. Ex-situ conservation means conservation in gene banks in scientific collections. In-situ conservation is conservation in the places of origin. So in terms of agriculture biodiversity it means on-farm conservation. We created a seed depository for these ancient crops. First we established a collection of local varieties of fruits and berries, started to produce their seedlings and sold them

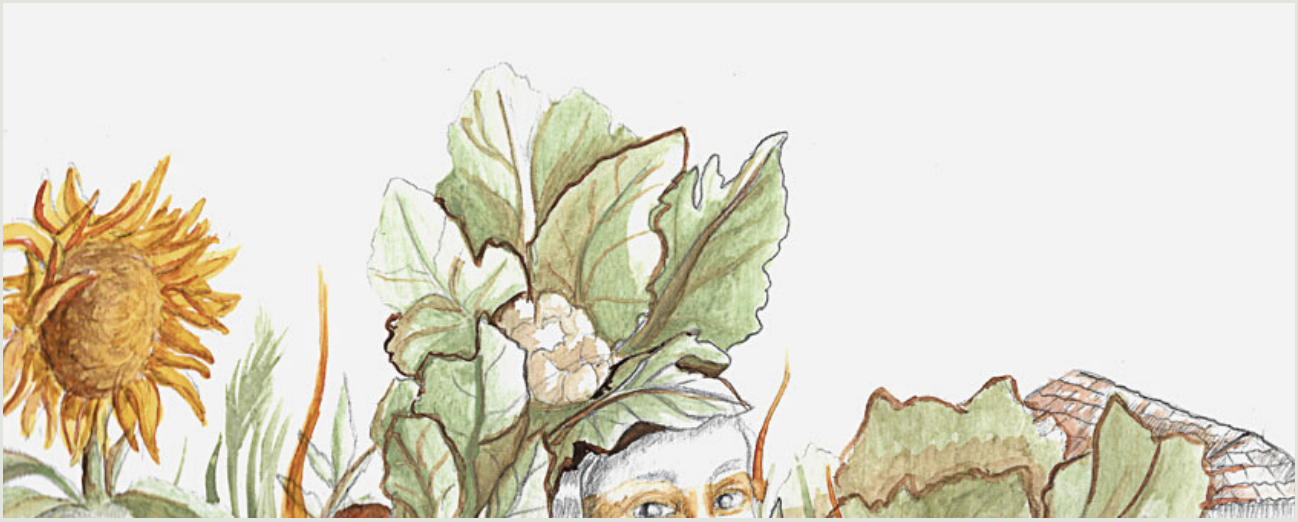
to interested farmers for a low affordable price. As for the legumes, wheat varieties and other types of field crops, we took seeds from gene banks as they were not cultivated anymore.

They were only preserved ex-situ and the tradition of their cultivation and production was almost lost. We had small amounts of seeds, but we sowed them and multiplied the seeds. We got in touch with a network of farmers and members that were interested in cultivating those old varieties of crops. We gave them seeds for free, but they were obliged to return twice as much at the end of the season. Next year we could give seeds to other farmers and so on. That is what we do on our 4 hectares conservation and demonstration plot in Southern Georgia.

We have an animal conservation farm in eastern Georgia as well. It is based in Zemo Khodasheni in Kakheti region. In the beginning it was a place of conservation of many local breeds which were about to go extinct. I mean especially a local breed of pig called the Kakhetian pig. It is black and it was endangered species after the swine fever epidemic in Georgia. Now our farm's focus is mainly on the pig species restoration.

[1] The Soviet Union Period lasted since 1922 until 1991 for Georgia.

[2] The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is the international legal instrument for "the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources" that has been ratified by 196 nations.



But we raise local chicken and cows as well. We raised goats, but we have learnt that one cannot have everything on a small farm.

Elkana's work is focused on agro-tourism and rural tourism support as well. We have a network of rural houses where guests are received. We developed certain standards and we offer trainings on how to provide good quality services.

Another important part of Elkana's work is advocacy and public relations. When we speak of conservation it always needs legal support and all kinds of public activities. For example the Kakhetian pig has black skin and that is why the price for its meat was lower. Then you have to educate and explain why it is a valuable breed.

Personally I am involved especially in advocacy. We mainly work on a local level, but it was always important for us to be connected internationally. We would like to learn new concepts. As Georgia was isolated from the rest of the world in the Soviet Union period, we were very much behind what was discussed. Currently agroecology and food sovereignty are approaches we want to explore, develop and share.

I have been working for this association for many years considering myself a part of the community.

In my work I am mostly concerned with farmers' problems. I support my colleagues that are farmers as I would like to improve their lives. Improving their lives will improve the lives of others in Georgia and other parts of the world.

How much influence does Elkana have in your country?

Elkana is quite well known, but still our influence is limited. People trust us, our farmers and their products. We are the only organization in Georgia, whose work concerns agroecology, traditional production, and agricultural biodiversity conservation. We do have some influence on policies, sometimes we are asked for a consultancy when the authorities plan to change the law.

How do you consider the position of agroecology in Georgia? What is missing in Georgia so agroecology could flourish there? On the other side, what is hindering the development of this approach?

In terms of agriculture Georgia consists of small farms with diverse production. We have a very diverse landscape so our farms differ from one another very much. Although we have a tradition of cultivating different fruits and

vegetables and there is richness due to our climate and our tradition, the size of farms is a hindering factor for economic development. The average size of a farm in Georgia is about 1.2 hectares. Still Georgian farms produce most of the products in the country. Actually, agroecology is quite a new term for Georgia. We know organic farming, but it is something different as it is based on certification and legal rules. While agroecology is rather a way of living. The concept is new and a discussion around it is needed so it can become part of our agricultural community. We need more educational work as well.

Also in rural areas of Georgia we have the problem of the Soviet past and people are very reluctant to cooperate. They are closed inside of their community or village. So our job is to find farmers who are interested in change and work together with them. The best learning tool in my opinion is learning by example. It restores hope as well.

When we speak of UDROP[3] it is about the rights of peasants. But nobody wants to be called "a peasant" in Georgia as peasants are considered to be a second sort of people.

[3] UDROP - The United Nations declaration on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas



So we try to restore the dignity of peasants, focus on the richness and knowledge we have and strengthen the people from our surrounding. I hope one day it will make a bigger change on a national level.

What kind of educational methods do you use? And how do you try to restore the peasant dignity?

I think that exchange visits for farmers worked very well. People are eager to see what others are doing and they want to learn from them. It can be costly to bring people to another place, but you have to realize that some people from one region of Georgia never visited another Georgian region and they do not know how people live and work there. Such exchange visits combined with discussions can make a big change. A crop testing also can be a way of facilitating change. It makes people eager to experiment. There is a big interest in visiting the conservation farms and learning about the old varieties of plants and breeds of animals. I think it is also important to connect people to the market. Consumers and producers learn from each other and recognize each others' needs. It also restores dignity as short chains are personal, people know each

other and can build trust. Producers feel much more important than if they just sold products from farmgate to a middleman. I think that our cooperation with agronomists also works pretty well. They try to renew the knowledge, visit our members every year, discuss what was done and how it could be done otherwise. They tell farmers about good examples from their regions, connect them together according to similar problems.

You mentioned UNDROP, a declaration on the rights of peasants, so I would like to ask you how you perceive this declaration in the light of Georgia? What is hard to change in your opinion and what effect this declaration could bring in the future?

I think UNDROP is a big opportunity. It is a chance for change for politicians and people who are affected but do not realize where the problem lies. It gives voice to rural populations that were historically neglected. Politics were made by people in the cities and their vision, mentality and way of life is different. Even though many of the politicians come from villages, their interest and focus is different now. UNDROP gives the opportunity to understand policies from a rural

perspective and give a new perspective on rural area development. Agriculture is not just an industry that you can shut down if it is not efficient. It is a cultural richness, way of life and interaction with nature. It gives an important basis for our identity.

Do you think that UNDROP can help bring a political change in Georgia?

I hope that it can make a change, but we have to put a lot of work into this. Firstly, we have to work on how to translate the declaration into our contexts. There are local and national laws applied to rural areas in Georgia without a clear policy view in which direction these regulations should support rural development UNDROP brings all of the issues together, it helps to see a big picture much better. However, there are so many small things that need to be changed in order to implement this declaration. It needs a lot of focused work on a national level. It is not a short process. What do you think is blocking UNDROP and agroecology in your local context on the political level or in everyday life? Speaking of politics, the hardest to deal with is the mindset of officials that is oriented toward economies of scale, business, profits. I mean this



conventional approach of bureaucrats who work on agricultural policies. They are oblivious to real agricultural problems. They may agree that organic production is good, but they lack vision. Sometimes they try to do good things, but in the end, they support a development in the wrong direction. I think it is hard and I do not think that Elkana is as influential as I wished it to be in that sense.

And looking from farmers' perspective, what is blocking UNDROP or agroecology development is lack of self-confidence. It has been 30 years past the Soviet Union period, but we still experience a very negative impact the suppressive policies from that period had on the Georgian people. Self-confidence, believing that change is possible is a big challenge here. If they believed in themselves, they could make a big change, but many of them are pessimistic, which is the reason we have huge migration. Many farmers migrate to cities or other European countries like Poland. They end up as farm workers abroad instead of fighting for their future in Georgia.

Elkana has been helping in rural tourism development. Multifunctional farms can sustain themselves much

better. But do you think that farms in Georgia cannot be efficient economically otherwise?

I think they can. I do not think all farms in Georgia should convert into tourist farms. Such multifunctional farms also have limitations. Economy of farms depends on their business plan. You can produce a good quality wine even on a small piece of land in Georgia. Small scale wine makers export to top markets all over the world. They do not need tourism. But some farmers cannot support themselves working on a small plot and they have to diversify their income.

Why some farmers cannot support themselves working on their plots? What is the reason for that?

In many cases the farms are too small. And if farmers do not produce high quality crops, it is difficult for them to support themselves financially. And often this 1.2 hectares, the average size of a Georgian farm, is divided into small pieces. In the Soviet Union period the land belonged to kolkhozes, but to appease people, the authorities gave each family a small parcel of land to cultivate. In the early 90-ties, after agricultural land reform, ownership was transferred to citizens. So pieces of

land are really divided now. It seldom happens that this one hectare is located in one area. Most often the land is divided into smaller plots. That is why farmers have problems and struggle to support themselves, especially if the interest rates are high, there is no proper technology support. There are a lot of problems related to that.

Could it work economically for small farmers in Georgia?

I do believe that for Georgia it is the only way to go. Even if you consolidate small parcels it is still small. We have neighbours like Turkey, Iran, Russia. Their farmers will always have big areas and stronger machinery. Our strength is in diversity, taste, flavour, quality, tradition and hospitality. That is why agroecology is so important for Georgia. If we develop an agroecological way, we maintain what is our strength. We will develop a way that will be ecologically sound and will keep us important in the market in terms of quality. So I believe that Georgia has to focus on quality products. We are blessed with a good climate. Now it can change, but historically we have always had a good climate that helped farmers to produce many things.



foods with a special flavour. It is our exceptional quality. We have to be focused on that instead of producing

How can an agroecological approach help in your region in terms of climate change?

Agroecology is a flexible concept, which incorporates a lot of approaches. In terms of climate change, in agriculture one can use multiple approaches like focus on drought resistant crops for example In case of agroecology, especially it is about traditional varieties, which are adapted to changing climate. Diversified farming is another helpful agroecological tool. If something is not surviving, you still have other crops. So agroecology is more adaptive than traditional monoculture production. In terms of that, agroecology really makes sense.

Do you cooperate and keep in touch with other countries from your regions? We were one of the first organizations in our region to work on organic farming and therefore we became active in the region. Elkana had joined a project with organizations in the region and Elkana’s consultants were organizing organic farming training in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan,

Armenia, Azerbaijan and other countries. We had a lot of connections in the early 2000s. Now the organizations found their ways, however we still keep in touch and still cooperate although less intensively. But still we work on different issues and projects. Recently we have been working on an agroecology development, but it is quite a complex issue. The concept of organic farming was ready to copy while agroecology is something you have to digest and make it fit your region. So I think the work of exchange is ahead of us.

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