



MAXIMIZING SUSTAINABLE PASTURE MANAGEMENT IN GEORGIA: A HOLISTIC POLICY PERSPECTIVE¹

ABSTRACT

*This policy brief presents a comprehensive analysis of the pasture management landscape in Georgia, emphasizing the vital role pastures play in the country's livestock sector. It identifies various challenges facing the family farms and livestock industry, notably the presence of a suboptimal pasture management system. The paper concludes with recommendations aimed at addressing these challenges, advocating for improved legislative frameworks and alignment with EU *acquis* in agricultural field, unified pasture leasing systems, formalised communal grazing system, enhanced role of Pasture Users' Unions and bottom-up planning processes.*

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

For policymakers

- Adoption of a new legislation to establish unified approaches to sustainable pasture management;
- Implement Comprehensive pasture management strategy;
- Align Georgia's legislation and policies with EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

For development operations

- Develop and test the criteria for the management system of commonly used pastures and the membership standards of Pasture Users' Unions (PUUs);
- Provide technical assistance to Georgia to align its national legislation and policies to the EUCAP requirements.

BACKGROUND

In Georgia, pastures play a pivotal role in sustaining both agricultural households and diverse livestock product manufacturers. Animal husbandry is ingrained in the fabric of the population's livelihood, serving as a source of income and diversification.

The significance of pastures in Georgia's livestock sector is evident as they cover approximately 1.7 million hectares, representing roughly 25% of the entire country and over 50% of agricultural fields. These pastures provide the livestock sector with an economical and accessible feed base, adaptable to various seasonal conditions, optimizing livestock grazing practices.

Utilizing pastures for feeding livestock significantly reduces the dependence on purchased feed, benefiting sectors like cattle and sheep farming. For small family farms engaged in cattle breeding, pastures serve as a means of income diversification and a source of locally produced food for consumption.

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Securing or bestowing formal rights to use pastures in Georgia involves navigating varying legal mechanisms and procedures, contingent upon the nature of pasture ownership and the authorities designated for pasture disposal and management. Issues stemming from the classification and registration of pastures and meadows persist, notably due to the substantial portion of pastures lacking official registration. A significant portion of unregistered pastures remains primarily under state disposition. Consequently, there is a possibility of registering and potentially leasing or privatizing the unregistered pastures, converting them into arable land.

Unleased Pastures: Utilization Disparity

The majority of pastures remain unleased. According to the latest agricultural census in 2014, households and legal entities (either through ownership or leasing) utilize 265,200 hectares of pasture. This implies that out of the existing 1.7 million hectares of pasture, only 17% are formally utilized—either owned or leased.

Residents of rural settlements and community groups *de facto* exercise traditional rights over village pastures. This includes actual utilization and the right to impose restrictions, even though these decisions lack a formal legal foundation.

Residents of a specific village typically access particular alpine pastures based on their proximity to populated areas. Alternatively, more mobile users may also exercise traditional rights to utilize distant pastures. This practice is frequently rooted in the utilization models of pastures from the last century, which, in turn, were built upon much earlier traditions.

Nevertheless, the mentioned rights lack a legal foundation, as there is no corresponding legal framework in place. This absence poses a significant impediment to establishing a formalized pasture usage system.

Additionally, consideration must be given to the weakness of local institutions in terms of governance when addressing pasture utilization challenges. It is important to acknowledge that the local population retains a deep understanding and knowledge of traditional rights to use specific pastures. This understanding should be considered when developing the legal mechanisms for regulating pasture management.

FINDINGS

I. Regulatory and Policy Gaps in Pasture Management

The existing legislation in Georgia falls short in regulating crucial systemic elements of pasture management. This includes oversight of sustainable utilization and conservation planning of pastures, as well as the formulation of grazing plans for agricultural areas.

Legislation in Georgia does not clearly define the authority responsible for managing state-owned pastures, except in cases involving protected areas and forestry systems. The legislation lacks provisions for involving local users in the decision-making process regarding pasture management and governance. Farmers lack agro-environmental support measures from the state.

II. Environmental Challenges in Pasture Management

Environmental and ecological issues, such as land degradation on pastures, persist due to the unresolved ownership and usage dilemmas. This uncertainty often results in the unsustainable exploitation of pastures, as users lacking formal rights are less inclined to implement measures aimed at improving pasture conditions.

Lease agreements often lack detailed provisions outlining the rights and obligations of users (lessees) regarding pasture management, relative to the comprehensive spectrum of responsibilities. The legislation lacks flexible mechanisms for pasture management, posing particular challenges in protected areas and in arid and semi-arid landscapes, such as the Kakheti region.

III. Unregulated Communal Grazing Practices

The existing regulatory framework falls short in addressing the utilization and ownership of pastures, particularly in villages adjacent to these vital resources. There is a notable absence of legal provisions pertaining communal practice of collective grazing.

The regulatory gap fails to acknowledge the customary connection that local users have with nearby pastures, disregarding their historical rights and claims to these valuable grazing lands. Simultaneously, it overlooks the significance of recognizing access rights to pastures situated at a distance, a practice often integral to the livelihoods of these communities.

Pasture Access Challenges

The vast majority of pasture users lack formal usage rights, with only 20% of approximately 400,000 households owning livestock possessing such rights according to the 2014 Agricultural Census.

Accessing pasture through the auction system presents significant barriers, as it entails high costs and favors the highest bidder, excluding many local users.

Moreover, participation is challenging for those unfamiliar with technology. Small and medium-sized farmers, who commonly graze livestock collectively, face additional hurdles due to a lack of formal organizational structures, hindering their joint participation in leasing auctions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR POLICY MAKERS

I. Adopt New Legislation for Sustainable Pasture Management

Adopting new legislation to establish standardized methods for sustainable pasture management across all types of pastures, irrespective of ownership, utilization form, or departmental jurisdiction. This legislation would also facilitate the implementation of zoning-compatible usage models including communal use of pastures, and institutional mechanism sat both national and local levels for effective pasture management.

In addition, the development of by-law normative acts for pastures involving crafting detailed regulations, norms, rules, and procedures to govern the new management system comprehensively. These acts should aim to define the content, including guidelines for pasture use, planning, and the establishment of pasture user associations.

II. Ensure Comprehensive Pasture Identification, Classification and Registration for Informed Decision-Making and Sustainable Land Management

The identification, categorization, and classification of pastures should be conducted comprehensively, ensuring uniformity and accuracy nationwide. The objective of this process is to establish a spatial database that facilitates well-informed decision-making. A critical priority involves promptly identifying and categorizing pastures and meadows, integrating and registering this data into the land cadastral database of the public registry for comprehensive land management and planning.

Evaluating pasture degradation conditions and trends. This assessment is essential for ensuring sustainable land management practices. The evaluation of degradation trends shall be conducted in alignment with sustainable forest management principles and can be coordinated by the *National Agency for Sustainable Land Management and Land Use Monitoring*.

III. Establish Detailed Methodological Guidelines and Procedural Rules

Formulating municipal-level guidelines tailored for pasture utilization planning is crucial, encompassing aspects like pasture evaluation, zoning delineation, user identification, and assessment of traditional usage patterns and rights. Additionally, the *National Agency for Sustainable Land Management and Land Use Monitoring* shall play a pivotal role in establishing a national framework for pasture assessment and monitoring, developing best practice manuals for pasture farm unit development, and ensuring standardized approaches and effective management strategies are implemented.

FOR DEVELOPMENT OPERATIONS

I. Support in Optimizing Payment Structures for Pasture Use

The determination of optimal payment amounts for pasture use, encompassing lease fees, rent, property taxes, and other relevant factors, necessitates rigorous examination and analysis. This evaluation should consider the diverse types and quality of pastures, prevailing market prices, and the modalities of payment, while also aligning with green fiscal policy objectives. Additional studies are essential to justify these payment structures comprehensively.

II. Support in Criteria Development and Institutional Framework Refinement

Developing and testing the criteria for the management system of commonly used pastures and the membership standards of Pastures Users' Unions. Additionally, refining the legal and institutional frameworks of user unions through testing, support, and capacity-building initiatives to ensure effective governance and sustainability.

IV. Align with the Requirements of the EU Common Agricultural Policy

Alignment is essential for ensuring that Georgia as a EU membership candidate country meets the requirements for EU membership and adopts best practices in sustainable pasture management. By introducing EU-like agri-ecological and agri-environmental measures, in addition to implementing cross-compliance requirements for all state support measures in agriculture and rural development, Georgia can enhance its agricultural support programs, promote sustainable pasture management practices, and move closer to meeting the standards set by the European Union for membership and sustainable agricultural development.

State-set Pasture Costs: Assessing Financial Burdens

The baseline leasing prices set by the state for owned pastures are considerable (1 hectare/ 15 GEL), further compounded by property taxes on the land. Consequently, when factoring in all types of payments, the total associated costs can escalate to as much as 30 GEL per hectare.

III. Foster Multi-Stakeholder Approach

Foster collaboration and partnerships between government agencies, agricultural organizations, research institutions, and civil society to promote sustainable pasture management practices.

IV. Support in Alignment with the EU Policies

Provide technical assistance to the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia to align its national legislation and policy to the EU CAP agri-ecological, agri-environmental and cross compliance requirements.