

>> SYNTHESIZE MOUNTAINS OF KNOWLEDGE <<

## Submitted Abstract

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Between 2015 and 2020, WWF Caucasus Programme Office started implementing the Eco-corridors Fund (ECF) programme in the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) with the financial support of German Government. The purpose of the programme is to establish and secure connectivity between protected areas within Priority Conservation Landscapes as identified by Ecoregion Conservation Plan for the Caucasus.

This is achieved by funding ecologically sustainable land use while improving the livelihoods of the local rural population. By combining good practices of conservation and societal change, the ECF bridges the gap between ecosystem services and human wellbeing, addressing the social-ecological system at the level of village community as a whole. In doing this it also addresses the environmental and social impact standards related to nature conservation.

20 long term (7-10 years) conservation agreements have been signed with community based organizations representing villages traditionally using the land totally covering around 92,000 ha. In 2022, the second phase of ECF started aiming at concluding another 30 conservation agreements covering over 120.000 ha of land. Currently the programme is supported by Germany, Switzerland and Slovenia.

ECF represents pilot payments for ecosystem services related to biodiversity conservation to the local communities. They are based on habitat management plans, including measures selected from a menu of conservation measures, agreed and performed by the locals. These measures aim at conservation of species and habitats, but at the same time strengthen the economic and social capital of the rural communities.

The preparation of the conservation agreements involves a combination of setting conservation priorities using Habitat Suitability Modelling method from conservation science and of empowering and mobilising local communities using Financial Participatory Approach method rooted in critical pedagogy. So far the programme is a successful example of empowering rural communities to become stewards of their land, connecting traditional values and practices to scientific and conservation-related action and embedding them into the national and international legal and governance systems. The signed agreements prove that win-win solutions to conservation and socio-economic development are possible and indeed feasible.