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*INDIVIDUAL VS COMMUNITY RESILIENCE: CASE OF GEORGIA*

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**Abstract**

Present Paper examines the concepts of individual and community resilience in Georgia. The goal of the present paper is to investigate the interplay between individual and community resilience in the context of donor-funded initiatives at the local rural level through the creation and strengthening of Community-Based Organizations (CBO).

Present findings are based on ample fieldwork conducted in Georgia in 2022 among the active rural CBOs, using a mixed-method approach: 1) a quantitative phone survey of CBOs; 2) Focus group discussions with beneficiaries of the CBOs' activities (both online and face-to-face); 3) in-depth interviews with the leaders of the CBOs; 4) in-depth interviews with the representatives of the local self-government, and 5) expert interviews with representatives of donor organizations working to increase the resilience of local communities.

Based on the data analysis and triangulation, the paper argues that resilience building in Georgian communities is mainly undertaken by the development partners using the top-down approach, and while on an individual level, these interventions do increase resilience, on a community level the impact is much less evident, and in some cases, non-existent. The theoretical and practical implications of our findings are extremely relevant since this is the first attempt to analyze the concept of resilience in the Georgian context and the findings contribute to further future analysis in this regard. On a practical level, our findings could be instrumental for the developmental partners, working in this area in Georgia, to adjust their programming to achieve more sustainable results not only on the individual but community levels.

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*Keywords: Individual Resilience; Community Resilience; Georgia*

**Introduction**

The present paper examines the concept of resilience in rural Georgian communities after 30 years of gaining independence from the Soviet Union. Similar to other post-Soviet countries, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the population of Georgia had to re-adjust to the new realities, which often were harsh both economically and politically and decreased social security and quality of life significantly. It could have been expected that to survive these challenges the population might have developed community resilience strategies to cope with a variety of challenges and difficulties. However, in an example of Georgian small rural communities, we argue that this is not the case. Their level of community resilience remains extremely low or even non-existent, despite continuous attempts by international and local NGOs aiming to strengthen local development and improve the lives of the local population. Moreover, we argue that while on an individual level, such interventions are positive, resulting in increased capacities of individual CBO leaders

and project beneficiaries, they do not contribute significantly to building and/or improving the resilience of the communities which remain largely disintegrated.

The term - resilience - is difficult to translate into the Georgian language. This is partly due to the fact that the concept of resilience is very new in the Georgian context, with little or no academic research undertaken in this area. The concept is mainly used on a policy/programmatic level by international NGOs or developmental partners, who often focus on increasing individual and community resilience in relation to such areas as disinformation, natural resource usage, climate change, and the most recent – COVID-19. However, when it comes to academic research of individual and/or community resilience against more general and broad issues of community security, the present paper could be the first attempt to evidence to what extent Georgian rural communities and their populations do possess the ability to re-bounce and by absorbing the shocks of the stress, become stronger.

To understand the existing context, a historical background is important to describe. In the second half of the 19th century, when Georgia was still part of the Russian empire, Georgian public intellectuals started discussing enlightenment ideas in Georgia. The Georgian intellectual elite tried to introduce concepts related to national identity, self-government, solidarity, and civic society (Kvadagiani, 2018; Margvelashvili, 2021; Okudjava, 2021). This resulted in several activities aimed at increasing access of the population's less advantageous groups to educational opportunities in the Georgian language, the establishment of public libraries locally, and other activities. Nevertheless, the Russian Empire did not allow Georgia to create an environment where civil society could flourish, limiting both national and civic liberties, including the local/municipal self-government.

Right after re-gaining independence in 1918, the new national government implemented self-government reforms dedicated to the development of civil society and encouraging public engagement in local decision-making (Kvadagiani, 2018). Unfortunately, this development was halted by the Soviet occupation in 1921, and for the next 70 years, the Soviet centralized government structure left room neither for civil society nor for self-government.

Therefore, until 1990 Georgia had little chance to experience how self-government or self-mobilization could work in practice. Thus, when it comes to community development and community resilience, independent Georgia had to start almost from the scratch. From the 1990s, the early years of independence were accompanied by political instability, poverty, armed conflicts, and corruption which did not create sufficient conditions for democracy to flourish: both individuals and communities were struggling to survive. At that time, citizens coped with extreme hazards and difficulties by relying on mutual help, and new forms of cooperation also emerged. However, such practices were more of a temporary survival strategy that failed to institutionalize in more sustainable forms of solidarity. Lack of community resilience and atomization of communities became apparent in the 2000s: due to the struggle for political power, every attempt towards decentralization was accompanied by waves of re-centralizations (Gorgodze, 2016).

Consequently, the sense of community could not be developed, and citizens were also alienated as they were left out of the local decision-making process (Losaberidze, 2012).

In Georgia, international organizations supported and still support the development of civic organizations to boost community development in rural and/or urban areas and to improve the quality of life and political and social participation. Most of these interventions focus on strengthening the youths and women of these communities rather than the whole population as such. Throughout this period – from the first years of independence till today – the creation of the CBOs in Georgia was mainly a top-down process rather than a result of bottom-up initiatives. The studies confirmed that most of the civil organizations and CBOs were founded because of external reasons – such as international or local NGO projects, grants, and donor funding (Margvelashvili, 2021). Self-organized and voluntary groups were and are rare exemptions. As a result, once such support programs are over, with no/limited additional funding, many such organizations cease to exist. Consequently, currently, could be only around 160 CBOs in over 3,500 villages (Vasadze & Datuashvili, 2011; Margvelashvili, 2021). Hence, the intrinsic alien character of the civil society sector in general and CBOs in particular from the first days of creation rather creates mistrust among the local population (CRRC, 2019) as also evidenced by our research. Till today, the majority of existing CBOs in Georgia were and are dependent on external initiatives and funding.

### **Current context**

Despite the fact that Georgian economic growth during the last decades mostly had been positive (GeoStat, 2023) (if we do not take into account the recession during the COVID-19 period), it also remains quite uneven throughout the country. Most of the benefits of the development concentrate in urban areas, specifically, big urban areas, while Georgian rural communities, particularly those located in remote areas, face a myriad of challenges that often hinder their development and progress. For instance, in 2021 the nominal monthly income of employers as calculated by the National Statistics Office of Georgia was almost 2 times and, in some cases, more than two times higher in Tbilisi, the capital, than in most of the Georgian regions (GeoStat, 2021). These communities grapple with limited access to essential services from infrastructure to healthcare, and education. Geographical remoteness, underdeveloped transportation networks, and a lack of reliable communication systems further exacerbate the difficulties faced by the residents of rural communities in Georgia. Employment opportunities, specifically, well-paid and offering a decent quality of life are in dire demand and shortage in rural communities. Agriculture at large remains subsistence one, limiting developmental opportunities for local residents be it access to capital or technological innovations.

Thus, local community-based organizations operating in these remote communities encounter a multitude of quite unique obstacles on a number of levels. They not only often confront limited resources and funding, making it challenging to ensure the sustainability of their interventions aimed at improvement of quality of life but first, need to work on trust-building and the creation of community solidarity. An additional challenge is the

scarcity of skilled personnel and motivated volunteers in these remote areas mostly caused by both internal and international migratory flows. This, on the one hand, makes it more challenging to effectively deliver services and implement community-led initiatives, and, on the other hand, ensure high quality and sustainability of the delivery. And yet another challenge is the lack of linkages between the governmental bodies, be it local or national with the local communities, and their openness and willingness to engage with CBOs and to create sustainable programs of cooperation where the local self-government would have its own and CBOs – their own – share of responsibility. Without such cooperation, it would be naive to believe that only CBOs would be able to build trust and contribute to resilience-building in the communities.

### **Theoretical framework**

The present paper’s theoretical framework is the societal resilience concept developed within sociology. While initially the term and concept of resilience were developed in psychology (including social psychology and psychiatry) and ecology, and mainly focused on “the ability of an entity (person, ecological system, companies, etc) to cope with adverse events and then bounced back and returned to its functional state” (Surjan et al., 2011, pp. 11-12, as cited in Trkulja, 2015, p. 49), „sociologists use the term ‘resilience’ to explain the human ability to return to its normal state after absorbing some stress or after surviving some negative changes” (Surjan et al., 2011, pp. 17-18, as cited in Trkulja, 2015, p. 49) through transforming them “into relational and collective growth, by strengthening the existing social engagements and by developing new relationships, with the creative collective act” (Cacioppo et al., 2011, p. 44, as cited in Trkulja, 2015, p. 49).

Thus, the theoretical significance of social resilience undoubtedly provides an opportunity to understand resilience as an adaptive process, as some researchers expanded its conceptualization, through recovery, sustainability, and growth (Murray & Zautra, 2012, pp. 337-338). It is important to note, however, that both individuals and communities could be successful in one area and unsuccessful in another, and that both peoples and communities might recover from stressful events without achieving growth or sustainability, or not recover at all.

The study focusing on community resilience should take into consideration two levels of social resilience – individual and community levels. These types of resilience are intertwined, and different scholars define them differently; hence, these concepts require specific attention in this paper, and both should be clarified separately.

### **Individual resilience**

Individual resilience often seems like a heroic effort of an individual to respond to traumatic events. However, this response may not be necessarily “social” in its character – on the contrary, as Estêvão and his co-authors argue, “the biggest problem with the “heroic” notion of resilience is its non-social character” (Estêvão et al., 2017, p. 13). In this framework, resilience is an internal attribute of an individual, something like hidden psychological resources. The problem is that this approach does not take into consideration social relations with others (Estêvão et al., 2017).

Societal resilience theory does not dismiss an individual and his/her role in the process of dealing with risks and crises, but it further acknowledges that even individual resilience is shaped and formed during interactions with the wider community – with neighbours, groups, institutions, and the environment. Therefore, scholars argue that “resilience should thus not be understood as an attribute that is inherent to some families or individuals but as a process in which several features of the natural and social worlds are called into play” (Estêvão et al., 2017, p. 17).

The following table sums up the features of individual resilience that crosscut social and natural worlds:

Table 1: Features of Individual Resilience from a Sociological Perspective

Distinctive social manners	Agreeableness, trustworthiness, fairness, compassion, humility, generosity, openness.
Interpersonal resources and capacities	Sharing, attentive listening, perceiving others accurately and empathically, communication care and respect for others, responsiveness to the needs of others, compassion, and forgiveness.
Collective resources and capacities of individuals	Group identity, centrality, cohesiveness, tolerance, openness, management rules, self-confidence, and self-realization.

Source: The table is based on Trkulja’s summary and adapted by the authors (Cacioppo et al., 2011, p. 44, as cited in Trkulja, 2015, p. 49).

Thus, from the sociological perspective, the resilience of individuals should be substantiated on the community level. To find out whether positive social change takes place or not, recovery, sustainability, and growth of individuals should be compared and discussed in contrast to changes in social structures and community reconfiguration. Hence, changes on the individual level do not necessarily lead to changes on the community level.

### Community resilience

When it comes to community resilience, keywords are participation, engagement, self-organization, and motivation of community members to proactively come together and make a collective action. However, this requires the community to be self-aware and its members should have a sense of belonging, responsibility, and collective identity. Resilient communities learn and unlearn together to prepare, face and overcome difficulties with mutual effort (Trkulja, 2015).

Estêvão and his co-authors (2017) distinguished two main dimensions of community resilience: the *mobilization of resources* and the *shifting of risks*. Resilient communities endure mobilizing all their economic, social, cultural, and environmental resources to mitigate mutual hazards. The authors also suggest classifying risks into the categories summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Classification of risks

Types of risks	Examples
Socioeconomic	Unemployment, labour precarity and poverty.
Physical	Hunger, physical and psychological violence and physical and mental health decline.
Political	Organized discrimination of social groups.
Environmental	Pollution, erosion of arable land, lack of water and climate change.

*Source: Adapted by authors based on Estêvão and his co-authors' classification (Estêvão et al., 2017, p. 19)*

Communities' ability to efficiently use all forms of capital and resources for primary and secondary risk mitigation is crucial for their resilience. However, it should be noted that "mobilization of resources frequently entails the shifting of risks... [and] the ability to shift risks often entails the mobilization of resources" (Estêvão et al., 2017, p. 20). Therefore, the responsibility is not only on individuals or external agencies, but it should be shared within the community. Certainly, it requires trust and strong social cohesion between the members of the community.

To sum up, 'resilience' is a metaphor indicating to flexibility and adaptability of individuals as well as communities, but there is a complex relationship between the two. Without resilient individuals, a community cannot recover, be sustainable, and grow during times of hazards. Nevertheless, individual effort is rarely enough: there should be a united effort to mobilize all the available resources for good. It means that, in a stressful situation, individual resilience does not guarantee community resilience and vice versa: one might succeed, while another fails (Norris et al., 2008; Trkulja, 2015).

### Methodological approach

The mixed-method methodological approach has been used to test our hypothesis that in the Georgian rural context, resilience could be rather achieved at the individual than at the community level. In 2021-2022 we conducted a quantitative survey of 66 community-based organizations in Georgia, mainly rural communities (Table 3), covering all the Georgian regions. The sampling base was developed using the 2020 Community organizations' mapping results (Margvelashvili, 2021) which identified 110 active CBOs in the country. We used the contact information of actively functioning CBOs (emails/phones) to reach out to all of them and ask to participate in a phone survey (due to COVID-19 restrictions it was not deemed feasible to conduct face-to-face interviews at the end of 2021). The regional/geographic distribution of Georgian CBOs is uneven throughout the country, one of the reasons being mostly the activity of local and international NGOs operating in the particular regions that often are the drivers of community-based activism and foster the creation of CBOs. We contacted all the organizations mapped by Margvelashvili (2021), out of which 66 agreed to participate in the survey. In other cases, either it was impossible to get in touch with the contact person, or the organization already stopped being operational, or they refused to participate in the survey. Thus, our respondents were those CBOs that were continuing to actively operate in their communities by the time of the fieldwork. (Table 3).

Table 3: Regional distribution of CBOs surveyed in the quantitative component (frequencies and %)

Region	Number of Organizations	%
Guria	2	3%
Samtskhe-Javakheti	3	4%
Imereti	4	6%
Mtskheta-Mtianeti	4	6%
Kvemo Kartli	10	15%
Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti	11	17%
Shida Kartli	11	17%
Kakheti	21	32%
Total	66	100%

Source: own source

In the qualitative component, we conducted fieldwork in 20 Georgian rural communities, where an active CBO is operational. During the qualitative fieldwork, we conducted in-depth interviews with the CBO leaders (20 interviews), focus-group discussions with the active beneficiaries of the CBO's activities (19 focus group discussions), and observed the activities of the organizations. We also conducted expert interviews (25 interviews) with the representatives of respective local self-governments with experience working with these specific communities and CBOs, and with local and international NGO community representatives working on community resilience building, mobilization, and development.

Table 4: Number of qualitative interviews and focus group discussions conducted

# of in-depth interviews with CBO leaders	# of focus groups with beneficiaries	# of in-depth interviews with local self-government representatives	# of expert interviews, local and INGO representatives
20	19	16	9

Source: own source

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, some qualitative interviews were conducted online, and not all the communities were visited in person.

## Findings

### *Individual resilience*

Individual resilience was manifested at two levels:

Individuals, directly involved in the operational part/running the CBOs;

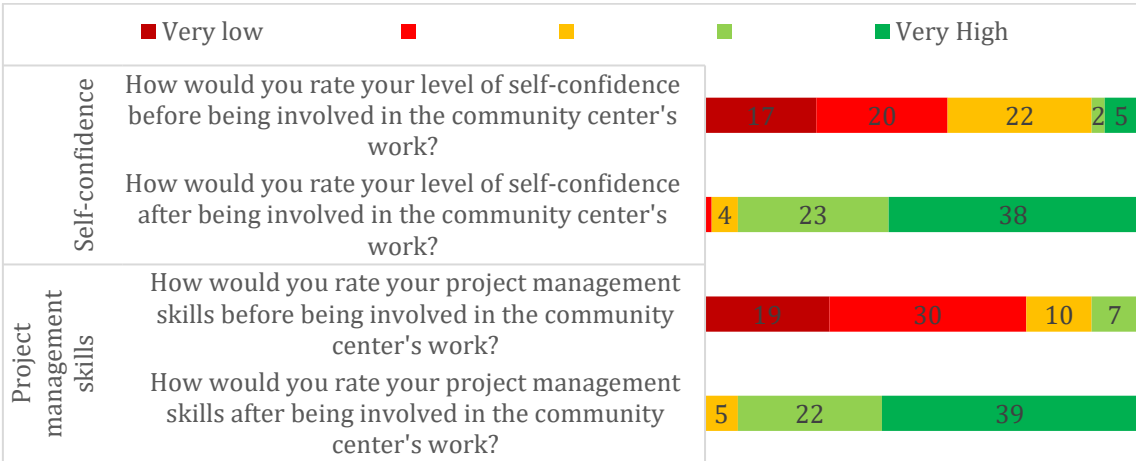
And

Individual beneficiaries of the activities, implemented by the CBOs.

Based on the analysis of all the available data, we identified the following types of resilience-building:

- 1) Increased level of self-esteem and self-confidence: the leaders of the organizations and the beneficiaries specifically indicated that thanks to participation in the CBOs’ activities on different levels, they became more confident in engaging in new activities, more aware of what they are able and capable of doing, in trying new things and being confident that they can achieve the planned results. The impact of being involved in the activities of the CBOs on increasing self-confidence was visibly demonstrated in the quantitative survey – 38 CBO leaders stated that their level of self-confidence is very high now that they are involved in the activities of the CBOs, compared to only 5 respondents, that felt the same way before joining the CBO activities.

Figure 1: Self-Confidence and Self-assessment of project writing skills before and after being involved in the CBOs’ work (Frequencies)



Source: own source

- 2) Increased sense of self-realization: both groups stressed that they feel more self-realized by engaging in activities that bring a change even if it is on a rather small scale. Seeing the fruits of their work and the impact that they can make on the individual and community levels boost their motivation and determination to move forward. Only 7 out of surveyed leaders of CBOs in the quantitative survey, stated that they felt self-realized before engaging in the activities of the CBO. To compare, 48 CBOs’ leaders stated that now that they are engaged in CBOs’ activities, they feel fully self-realized.

Figure 2: Sense of self-Realization before and after being involved in the CBOs' work (Frequencies)



Source: own source

- 3) Improved/development of skills and knowledge: Both quantitative and qualitative component results showed that community leaders improved their practical skills through participation in various capacity-building activities organized by various donor organizations. Specifically, community leaders mentioned learning /developing organizational management techniques, improving project-writing skills; learning how to effectively implement the projects, and how to conduct monitoring and evaluation or needs assessments. The main progress has been highlighted in improving and/or acquiring effective communication and presentation skills, which are crucial when it comes to working with different stakeholders, donors, and partners, and especially, local self-administrations in municipalities, which are not always open and welcoming towards the activities of the non-governmental organizations. Also, non-formal and informal learning opportunities provided by the CBOs positively affected the individual resilience of beneficiaries. Our findings demonstrate that the CBOs helped community members to improve their knowledge in various fields by attending learning events and workshops. Community members learned new skills and improved existing knowledge in various fields such as tourism, agriculture, ecology, art, and handicraft. More importantly, some reported that they used new knowledge and skills in practice: some of the beneficiaries found a new job, some became entrepreneurs, and some applied to universities or colleges.
- 4) Increased social capital: The CBOs established safe and open spaces where individuals can meet and not only engage in various activities but also simply network and exchange ideas. The offices of community organizations often are the only meeting points in the communities. Hence, they also contribute to the increased social and cultural capital of the beneficiary community members.

To conclude, activities of donor organizations aimed at strengthening and building the resilience of local communities through strengthening local CBOs contributed to increased resilience on the individual level: leaders, staff members, volunteers, and beneficiaries have an improved sense of self-confidence – knowing what they can do, how they

can do, whom they can engage in when faced with different types of challenges. They exhibit a high level of agency and resilience to effectively address and mitigate the crises both on individual and community levels.

### **Community resilience**

Our findings however confirmed that increased individual resilience is not directly translated into increased resilience on the community level. Rather, communities at large remain passive recipients of the work that CBOs undertake and, in many ways, benefit from their activities. Some of the areas where communities benefited from the CBOs are improved infrastructure, technological innovations, and increased economic and learning opportunities. Also, in those communities where CBOs work, direct beneficiaries of the CBOs had higher social capital and stronger social and intercultural cohesion: participants also reported that community organizations encouraged them to engage in social activism.

Nevertheless, the communities are still vulnerable and they are far from being resilient communities as they are dependent on the ‘heroic’ effort of individuals. Our findings indicate that communities themselves could not manage to generate an agency to act, learn, recover, and grow. The main challenges can be summarised in the following obstacles:

- 1) Lack of pro-active involvement and engagement: Communities, while benefitting from the activities of CBOs, remain disengaged when it comes to active involvement in the project activities, even when these activities are of the direct benefit of the population. In many cases, CBO leaders spoke about difficulties finding volunteers or in-kind contributors or securing additional funding from the local population to implement certain activities. Men’s inclusion and involvement remain even more problematic in some cases.
- 2) Limited outreach due to limited resources – both financial and human: on average, the number of full-time CBO employers is around 3 individuals, and the number of volunteers is 10 individuals. On average, CBOs’ funding was about 17,200.00 GEL annually (4,526 EUR) (Margvelashvili et al., 2022) – and sometimes, with the limited focus, CBOs are unable to effectively engage some parts of community members. One of the specific gaps in this regard is also connected with the limited information outreach and visibility: CBOs are unable to effectively disseminate information neither about their activities and initiatives nor about the results they achieve. This creates a vicious circle when relatively few individuals in the community know about the existence of the CBOs as such, and their activities, consequently. This also often means that community members lack a sense of ownership on the one hand and that CBOs are rather associated with their leaders as such and the activities implemented referred as to implemented not by the CBOs, but by the leaders on the other hand. Sometimes even beneficiaries could not recall the names and basic details about the organizations, and they also used the leaders’ names to refer to the CBOs. The same was true in the case of local self-government officials. The interviews with the local self-government representatives illustrated

that public officials better knew the leaders than the organizations themselves. This practice is similar to the above-mentioned heroic understanding of the leaders which was criticized by societal resilience theories (Estêvão et al., 2017).

- 3) Certain ingenuity of CBO resilience building approach: The majority of community organizations we surveyed are not bottom-up projects as they were mostly established by the donor organizations and were and continue to be dependent on donor funds. Their main source of income remains international and local donors: even agendas and activities often come from the donors and not from the communities, although they do conduct annual local needs assessments, they still work within the agenda set by the donor organizations. In other words, CBOs and the communities in these settings are rather reactive and not-proactive agents of change and lack the ability to self-mobilize to make a joint action.
- 4) Outmigration of the agents of change: One of the unintended consequences of CBO activities that we observed is that as a result of increased self-motivation, self-confidence, and capacities, some of the beneficiaries of CBOs' activities tend to, later on, leave their communities to continue their studies at the universities/VET schools, or find better jobs, eventually, leaving their communities, that often provide fewer and more limited development and employment opportunities than bigger urban centers. Not being able to retain existing human capital in the communities then further limits its opportunities for building up on already existing resources and increasing its resilience.
- 5) Weak organizational structures of CBOs: A strong leader is an important asset for an organization, but only if the CBO has a strong and sustainable organizational form. Many of the CBOs we surveyed lack a strong institutional set-up and they need to be strengthened institutionally to better contribute to building community resilience. Otherwise, often, when the leader leaves the CSO, the organizations also cease to function.
- 6) Lack of trust: This challenge seems to be one of the most important ones for the Georgian context, and presumably, still connected with the soviet-type legacies. The level of trust in various organizations and actors both on national and local levels, especially in NGOs and the government remains quite low (CRRC, 2019) throughout the country. Also, our quantitative survey results indicated that at the beginning when the CBOs were established, attitudes towards the CBOs among community members were not positive. Although they changed with time, the need to first build trust and bridges and then maintain them with different groups of the community could be a challenging, and not always a successful task to achieve.

## Summary

Our findings suggest that in the Georgian context, community resilience is not simply a matter of having resilient individuals. It is not always a matter of having strong organizations in place either. We argue that social resilience can also be influenced by economic, political, and historical legacies. In the Georgian case, the 30 years after independence proved to be full of different types of crises and conflicts, political instability, and security threats that impacted the level of social cohesion in the country. Thus, no wonder that building social resilience is a greater challenge here, than in the communities that exhibit strong cultural and social cohesion.

Obviously, not all the reasons discussed above are present in all the communities we surveyed – however, in all the 20 communities that we investigated in-depth, we could not detect the capacity of the communities themselves to effectively identify the challenges and being able to mobilize themselves without the leadership and guidance of the CBOs and their leaders.

There is an interplay between individual and community resilience. One of the ways how individual resilience could contribute to community resilience is through the process of social learning and the formation of social support networks. In the first case, community members observe and learn from the experience of others and adopt similar strategies when it comes to coping with challenges. In the latter case, individuals, with strong resilience may serve as reference points and reach out to others to provide support to those who are struggling.

However, our general conclusion holds that the lack of social capital, poor economic development, the constant struggle to retain qualified individuals and increase community competencies due to both internal and international migration, and lack of access to the latest information and communication technologies – all these factors contribute to the difficulties of community resilience-building processes in Georgia (Norris et al., 2008). We argue that at the same time, lack of cooperation between the local self-government which also stems from the limited success of the decentralization reform in Georgia, is one of the major obstacles that hinder community resilience-building in Georgia. Unless the local self-governments take their share of the responsibility to perform the competencies and roles of the local self-government, CBOs alone with as much donor and/or community support as possible will not be able to achieve sustainable results. Only the unified and coordinated efforts from both the government and civil society organizations to invest in and maintain infrastructure development, local capacity development, trust-building and social cohesion, and economic/employment opportunities can become forces for development and prosperity for Georgian rural communities.

Thus, although our conclusions remain the same, and with our study being the first attempt to look at the individual and community resilience in the Georgian context, we believe that more in-depth research needs to be done to define the strategies and modalities of interventions at the community levels that could be implemented to not only contribute to the increased individual but community resilience as well.

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