



# The Effects of Covid-19 in Samegrelo, Shida Kartli, and Mtskheta-Mtianeti Target Communities



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## Introduction

Vulnerable groups are often being neglected for a long time. As a result of Covid-19, their situation has worsened. The goal of this survey is to discover more information about vulnerable groups and inform state representatives about the ways of dealing with those problems that will contribute to inclusive development.

The following report discusses a number of important matters concerning issues related to public awareness of Covid-19 related information, education, the economic situation of the population, access to groceries and goods of primary consumption, healthcare, and other important issues. To obtain data, quantitative (conducted surveys in target communities) and qualitative (focus group and in-depth interviews) components were used in the survey.

Population awareness is one of the most important issues during a pandemic. On the one hand, it concerns protection mechanisms and hygiene of Covid-19, which should slow down the spread of the virus and reduce the burden on the healthcare sector. On the other hand, it is also necessary to disseminate information widely on various regulations and restrictions, which will justify the need of the population and enable them to prepare in advance. In Georgia, including the target communities, information is mainly spread by television, although social media, radio, and newspapers are also frequently used. Part of the population prefers to receive information through personal contacts - from relatives, government officials, women's groups, and other acquaintances. These sources spread both credible news and misinformation. Therefore, the population has a mixed attitude towards Covid-19. Part of the population thinks that it does not exist at all, or the information about its danger is exaggerated. Another part of the population considers the danger posed by it as real. It is therefore important that all parties, including the government and the non-governmental sector, are actively involved in increasing awareness, especially among schoolchildren.

The education sector has faced major challenges as a result of the pandemic. First of all, it has to do with the online learning process. In the target regions, especially in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, the population has difficult access to the Internet and many do not even have the necessary equipment to be involved in the educational process. The latter is a significant challenge especially in families with several children and overlapping lessons. Prior to the pandemic, the quality of education was positively assessed by about half of the respondents in all three regions. Although, the transition to online teaching, according to respondents, has worsened the quality of education, due to teachers' insufficient skills, unadapted teaching materials, and, in general, relatively less effectiveness of online teaching. Also, many issues remain unclear for the next academic year. Although schools in the target communities are mostly located in either the same settlements or within a five-kilometer radius, the issue of transportation is often unresolved. In some cases, rented micro busses that take students to school from several remote villages have to bring some of the children to school almost an hour earlier and then transport others. Also, a major challenge is the disarrangement of transport. For that reason, some teachers and students from other villages have to walk long distances and endanger themselves, due to their close location to the administrative boundary line and sometimes even wild animals. School infrastructure is also often unregulated - water supply and adequate sanitation facilities and medical cabinets are still a problem in many schools, and small classrooms do not provide the necessary distance. Therefore, it is important to regulate both infrastructure and transportation to and from schools. If learning cannot be restored in classrooms, then it is necessary to adapt the material for the online learning process and improve teachers' necessary skills. It is also important to provide students and teachers with Internet and devices that can be contributed by the governmental, private, and non-governmental sectors.

The economic situation in all three regions is challenging. The number of people dependent on social assistance and pensions was high in 2019, however, this number has increased even more after the pandemic. The sums of remittances from family members abroad have also decreased as Covid-19 has had a negative impact on the economy globally and many who have gone abroad lost their jobs. The pandemic has also affected employment and

reduced income from the sale of agricultural products. Additionally, prices for food, goods of primary consumption, and services have increased. Agrarian markets were closed due to restrictions imposed by Covid-19, some stores could not withstand the financial pressure and closed. The challenging economic situation, difficult access, and rising prices have worsened the situation and as a result, the people in all three regions require food, medicine, and financial assistance. The coordinated work of the government, non-governmental and private sector would significantly contribute to avoiding these problems and ensure the effective exchange of information, as well as the provision of food and primary consumption products to the population. Training/retraining programs for the population can play a necessary role in overcoming economic problems, which will become one of the factors contributing to their employment. Apart from that, promoting primary producers and processors to enter agricultural markets is a good way to increase the income of the population in the regions. This is especially relevant for such regions where agriculture is the main source of income for the majority of the population (e.g. Shida Kartli).

The pandemic had a negative impact primarily on the healthcare sector. Although the majority of the population in all three regions had access to health services, the quality was largely negatively assessed. The main reason for this was insufficient medical equipment and low qualification of the staff. Following the spread of Covid-19, the availability of medicines decreased and the prices for them increased significantly. These problems were compounded by the increased number of ambulance calls and travel restrictions imposed by the government. As a result, the quality of services and the population's access to them were significantly reduced. Simplifying the process of issuing permits in the event of movement restrictions and equipping local outpatients and hospitals will contribute to solving the problems mentioned above and provide the population with access to health services.

Decreased incomes and increased unemployment often lead to an intensification of the criminogenic situation. Although crime in the target communities is rare, the population often hears about its growing statistics. Difficult economic situation and a growing number of committed crimes invoke a sense of increased danger. Furthermore, increased aggression among the people due to the restrictions imposed by the state leads to an increase of domestic violence. Although these issues are being hidden within families, residents believe that Covid-19 has further complicated the situation. The situation is also tense in the villages near the administrative boundary line, where the fear of recommencement of armed conflict, shootings, and kidnappings worries a large part of the population. Partial easing of tensions can be caused by informing the population about current processes. It is also important for the population to have faith that the state will have a timely response to the incidents.

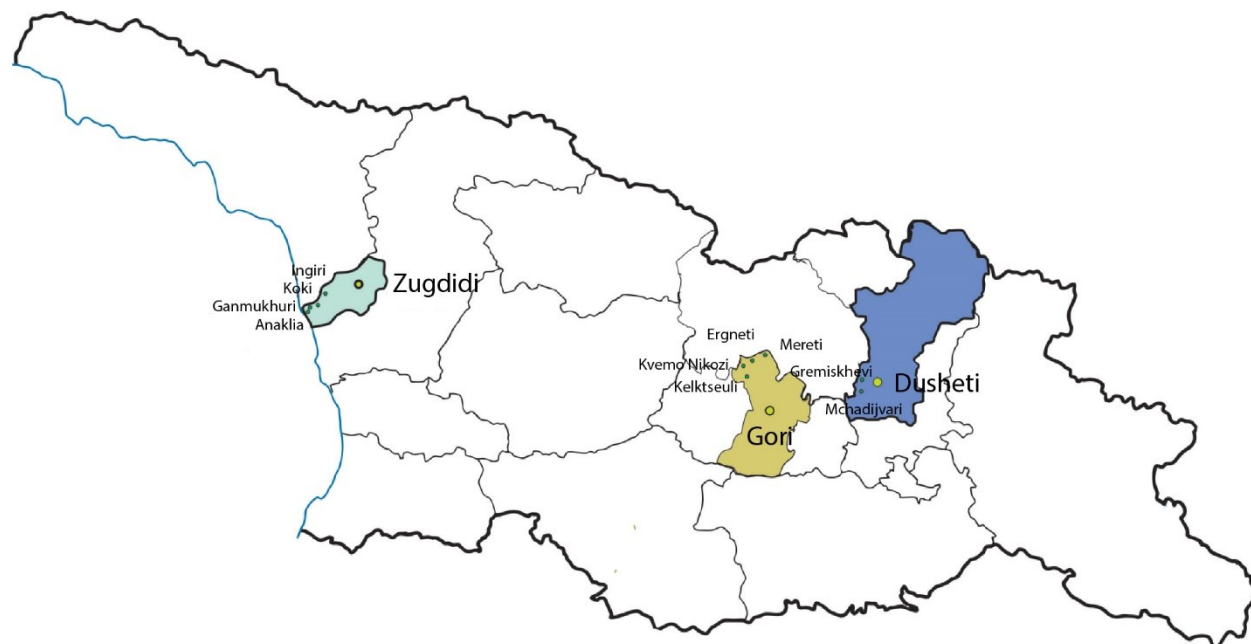
A lack of access to various important services, economic difficulties, and intensified criminogenic situation demonstrates the necessity of social mobilization and active mutual support. Although this kind of support is often informal and is hard to follow, there are many examples of individual and collaborative problem-solving in all three target regions. However, some factors as mistrust of each other, the need for financial resources, and the expectation that others will solve problems hinder the process of mobilization. As a result, some of the initiated projects fail. Therefore, it is important to work more actively with communities, especially with young people, and to support the completion of multiple ideas initiated by them.

The state plays an important role in solving the problems discussed in the report. Therefore, the population evaluated taken measures and their effectiveness within the framework of the survey. For the majority of the respondents, the state has taken adequate measures to cope with Covid-19. However, fewer people believe that their implementation has been effective because it had a negative effect on the population's employment, income, and access to various services. It is also important to note that state assistance to the population was often misdistributed and as a result, many vulnerable families were left beyond the state programs. In order to prevent this, it is essential to develop clear criteria for assistance recipients and invoke stricter supervision of various measures which will increase their effectiveness.



## About the Report

The report was prepared by the Internally Displaced Women Association “Consent”. The organization has more than two decades of experience working with vulnerable communities, also during the first lockdown of Covid-19. Based on the experience of the Association, 10 communities from Gori, Dusheti, and Zugdidi municipalities were selected for the survey (see the map).



The severe challenges existing in the target communities were provoked during the Covid-19 pandemic and were particularly negative for secondary and higher education institutions. One of the main tasks of the project is to analyze the needs of vulnerable communities and bring them to the relevant decision-making institutions and similar organizations, which in our opinion will help to more effectively address the problems facing these communities.

Which, in our opinion, will contribute to a more effective solution to the problems facing more communities.

The survey was conducted in the following key areas:

1. Problems faced by target communities during the Spring 2020 emergency, including access to food and goods of primary consumption, basic services, and infrastructure;
2. State of emergency and problems and challenges created by lockdown;
3. Perception of Covid-19 as a serious challenge in target communities and sources that are most often or least used and trusted to obtain information about pandemic;
4. Existence of social mobilization, coping mechanisms, and relevant practices in the target communities;
5. Trust towards institutions, community members, and community organizations;
6. Perception of safety and security;
7. Opportunity for online learning during Covid-19, major challenges and problems related to getting an education during Covid-19.

We hope that the analysis of these problems and issues, that constitute the main topic of this report, will help to raise the awareness of governmental and non-governmental organizations about the problems existing in the communities and support them to take appropriate measures to respond effectively.

Information on survey methodology and fieldwork is provided in Annex 1.

# The Overview of Target Communities

The project was implemented in three regions - Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Samegrelo, and Shida Kartli. In all three regions, project partners selected 10 communities. Almost all communities are located near the administrative boundary line. In some of them (e.g. Ingiri) there are too many IDPs and conflict-affected persons.

Gori is the largest municipality in terms of population, with 121,053 people living in 2020. It should be noted that this number has been steadily declining over the last 20 years. A similar trend is observed in Zugdidi municipality, where 100,184 people reside according to 2020 data. The smallest is Dusheti municipality, with a total population of 26,199. In addition to municipalities, each target community also differs in terms of both villages and population. The smallest is the Gremiskhevi territorial unit with 409 inhabitants. The largest community is the Ingiri Territorial Unit, with a population of 4,834.

43.1% of respondents in all three regions have secondary education. Most have secondary education in Samegrelo (46.2%) and the least in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (34.9%). 27.8% have higher education. Most of them are in Shida Kartli (30.5%) and the least in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (11.6%).

Poverty rates are high in all three regions. Consequently, there is a large number of people who depend on social assistance. In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, especially in Dusheti municipality, the number of targeted social assistance recipients has increased in recent years. If in December 2019 the number of such people composed 20.5% of the population of the municipality (5,238 residents in total)<sup>1</sup>, by the end of 2020 this number increased to 26.4% (6,765 in total)<sup>2</sup>. A similar trend is observed in the Samegrelo region, Zugdidi Municipality, where in 2019 30.1% of residents (18,746 in total) received social assistance, and in 2020 their number increased to 34.7% (21,626 in total). The target municipality of Shida Kartli, Gori is not an exception. Here, in 2019 19.4% (15,084) people received social assistance, and in 2020 their number increased to 22.2% (17,233 in total).

The number of retirees is also high in the target communities. In December 2019, there were 6,042 people in Dusheti Municipality<sup>3</sup>, and in December 2020, their number increased to 6,143. In Zugdidi municipality, this number increased from 30,247 to 31,085 in one year, and in Gori from 13,807 to 14,315.

The migration of young people is frequent from the target communities of all three regions. Usually, after graduation, they go to Tbilisi or other cities of Georgia to study and work.

## Mtskheta-Mtianeti Region

The target area of the project in Mtskheta-Mtianeti included two communities of Dusheti Municipality - Mchadijvari and Gremiskhevi. The population of both communities consists of 1,400 people. In the community of Mchadijvari, the project included five villages - Kadoeti, Kodistskaro, Shuakhevi, Chilurti, and Tsitsamura, with a population of up to 1,000. 409 people live in 11 villages of Gremiskhevi - Arboeti, Akhali Burghuli, Tkhilovani, Mikeliani, Petriani, Toncha, Karkushani, Kedeloba, Tsigriantkari, Tsikhisubani and Dzveli Burghuli. The target communities of Mtskheta-Mtianeti fall behind the other two regions in terms of population. The community of Mchadijvari is more densely populated than Gremiskhevi and its villages are better provided with utilities.

Public transport runs between the villages of Mchadijvari and the administrative center three times a week. The community is connected to Mtskheta by an asphalt road. As a result, the population manages to get to the center of the region. In Gremiskhevi, transport is private and transports people twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays. The dirt road goes from Gremiskhevi to the municipal center. There is a high risk of avalanches on this road during the winter. The community is very isolated and practically unrelated to the municipal center.

All settlements except Toncha village of the Gremiskhevi community are provided with permanent electricity.

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1. 2019 Information on Targeted Social Assistance Recipients [http://ssa.gov.ge/files/01\\_GEO/statistika/EXCEL/4/2019/4.1.xlsx](http://ssa.gov.ge/files/01_GEO/statistika/EXCEL/4/2019/4.1.xlsx)

2. 2020 Information on Targeted Social Assistance Recipients [http://ssa.gov.ge/files/01\\_GEO/statistika/EXCEL/4/2020/4.1.xlsx](http://ssa.gov.ge/files/01_GEO/statistika/EXCEL/4/2020/4.1.xlsx)

3. 2019 Information on Pension Recipients: [http://ssa.gov.ge/files/01\\_GEO/statistika/EXCEL/1-1/2019/1.1-1.xlsx](http://ssa.gov.ge/files/01_GEO/statistika/EXCEL/1-1/2019/1.1-1.xlsx)

Gas supply is only provided in Mchadijvari villages. Drinking water is supplied to them on a schedule that changes frequently. The situation is more difficult in the villages of Gremiskhevi, which have no gas supply. Drinking water is supplied only to Petriani, Kedeloba, and Tsikhisubani. A dam is located near Gremiskhevi, from where the villages below receive water. However, the water supply in the Gremiskhevi community itself is very expensive, which is why most of them are left without drinking water.

The Mchadijvari school was built in the 80s of the previous century. It is a large building as there were about 1,000 children in the school at the time. Currently, the school has a total of 141 students. Gremiskhevi school with 35 students was built 80 years ago. There have been no major repairs since then. Nevertheless, the building is in good condition. The number of children is small. The bathrooms are outside the building. The water supplying source for the school dried-up a few years ago and this problem was unresolved until the project assisted the school with a water tank.

Migration of young people for education and work is very common among the target communities, which is also facilitated by the close geographical location to the capital.

## Samegrelo Region

In the Samegrelo region, the target area of the project consisted of four communities of Zugdidi Municipality - Koki, Ingiri, Ganmukhuri, and Anaklia. According to the 2014 census, the population of all four communities is 7,600 people. In recent years, however, the population has grown to 9,300. Out of these, 2,000 live in the Koki community, 4,834 in Ingiri, 1,300 in Ganmukhuri, and 1,200 in Anaklia. The number of target villages was one or two in all four communities. Samegrelo exceeds the population of the Mtskheta-Mtianeti and Shida Kartli regions.

All four communities are provided with electricity and gas. Since Anaklia is a seaside resort, the Anaklia community is constantly supplied with drinking water, and the utilities are well developed there. Drinking water is also supplied to the Ganmukhuri community, but according to the population, laboratory analysis is needed for the determination of its drinking suitability.

Transportation is best provided in Anaklia, where the population can use both public transport and private micro busses several times a day. Transport is also available in the other three communities. However, the population of Ingiri and Ganmukhuri villages has to walk 300-500 meters to reach the bus stop.

Among the target communities, young people often migrate to study in different cities of Georgia, as well as abroad.

## Shida Kartli Region

The target area of the project in the Shida Kartli region consisted of four communities of Gori Municipality - Ergneti, Kvemo Nikozi, Mereti, and Kelktseuli. The total population of the target communities of the region is about 6,000 people and exceeds Mtskheta-Mtianeti, but falls behind the population of the target communities of Samegrelo.

Public transport from the villages of Mereti and Kvemo Nikozi communities is available several times a day. Residents of Ergneti and Kelktseuli communities can only use private micro busses, which operate irregularly. There are also frequent cases when micro busses drivers no longer take the last remaining passenger to remote villages and leave them a few kilometers away from their homes, which is especially dangerous in conflict-prone villages. Villages in all four communities have constant electricity and gas supply. Drinking water is fully supplied to the population of Ergneti and Kelktseuli villages, as for Mereti, water is supplied only to the part where the net metering is performed. The second half of the Mereti community is not supplied with water and the population demands net metering. According to the schedule, water is supplied to the population of Kvemo Nikozi until 9 p.m.



The communities of Ergneti and Kvemo Nikozi have been granted the status of highland settlements, which allows the local population to enjoy benefits. This includes a supplement to the state pension, a supplement to the social package, financial assistance in case of childbirth, a salary supplement for teachers, coaches, doctors, and nurses, co-financing of electricity consumption, and exclusion of employees, entrepreneurs, and property land-owners in highland settlements from tax-paying. However, it should be noted that primary production in agriculture is already tax-free, employment opportunities in the target communities are very scarce, and existing taxes are low due to the small size of the land. Therefore, only a small circle of people enjoy the benefits, and granting status to the majority of the population in the target communities does not necessarily ease their situation.

Even though the law does not prohibit granting those benefits to IDPs, several respondents said they could not benefit from them.

## Challenges in Target Communities Before and After Covid-19

The target communities are located along the administrative dividing line, which often complicates the security of the population, living conditions, and access to various services. This is related to the cases of kidnapping of members of the local population by the military forces of the Russian Federation, as well as the borderization of the territory, which may lead to the loss of agricultural land and housing owned by the population living alongside the division line. In some cases, these communities lack infrastructure (e.g. roads, drinking and irrigation water, drainage systems), which makes it difficult to access various services.

The spread of Covid-19 has led to the imposition of various restrictions across the country, which has created problems for the population, especially for those residing in the target communities. Following the first case of Covid-19 on the territory of Georgia, the authorities decided to declare a state of emergency. On March 21, 2020, the Parliament of Georgia approved the Presidential Decree №1 "On declaring a state of emergency on the entire territory of Georgia." The state of emergency in the country lasted for two months, until May 22, 2020. During this period, several restrictions were imposed, including the closure of schools, the banning of transportation without a special permit issued for a short period of time, etc. Restrictions have made it difficult to access food, goods of primary consumption, and various services.

The following chapter discusses access to products and services in project target communities, both before the pandemic and during the state of emergency.

### Population Awareness

The pandemic has put a heavy burden on the healthcare system all over the world, including Georgia. Therefore, the most important task of the states has become to reduce the number of infected people at once and manage the pandemic. The most important precondition for that is to impose keeping the strict observance of hygiene among the population. Awareness of the population and perception of Covid-19 as a real threat play a big role in this issue. Part of the population in Georgia thinks that the threat of Covid-19 is exaggerated, and some take this threat seriously. The share of respondents in the target regions who think the threat posed by the virus is serious is 63.4%. Among the focus group participants, those with chronic diseases (asthma, high blood pressure, etc.) are especially careful. 21.8% think the threat is not so serious, or insignificant. 13.3% of respondents think that Covid-19 does not exist at all. It should be noted that in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli more people think that Covid-19 does not exist (14.7% and 12.2%) than in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (6.8%).

Part of the focus group participants assigned this to the fact that people did not personally know anyone with Covid-19 and had not heard of the complications caused by the virus. It was also noted that the population is unaware of the virus having any devastating effects on human health after recovery. So they could not perceive the authentic danger and were not motivated to follow the norms of hygiene. Many participants mentioned that the population often does not use facemasks in public places, including transport.

Information about Covid-19 is constantly spread in the media. 64.8% of respondents in the target regions are interested in information, while 32.9% are not. Respondents in all three regions are approximately equally interested.

Respondents who are interested in receiving information consider friends and family as a reliable source (65.8%). They are most trusted in Shida Kartli (72.4%) and least in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (36.4%).

62.3% of respondents in all three regions trust television as a source of information. In Samegrelo, 53.8% consider it reliable, in Mtskheta-Mtianeti and Shida Kartli television is trusted more.

A different situation has been observed in the case of radio, which is rarely listened to in Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti to gain information on Covid-19. In Samegrelo, 35% trust the information received by radio, partly because the local population in Zugdidi actively listens to Radio Atinati.

Only 24.2% use social media as a source of information in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, 63.1% in Shida Kartli, and 94% in Samegrelo. Respondents in all three regions follow social media with suspicion or distrust (38.1%), while 36.3% fully trust this source of information. In Samegrelo, where people mostly receive information from social media, half of the respondents find it reliable.

A similar tendency was observed in receiving information from groups of women. 15.6% use this source in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, 58.1% in Shida Kartli, and 93.5% in Samegrelo. A larger number of respondents are skeptical or distrustful towards the information received from these groups (28.7%) and consider it less credible (26%).

Newspapers are rarely used as a means of obtaining information in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, only a quarter of respondents addresses this source of information in Shida Kartli and 91.3% in Samegrelo. 30.3% consider this source suspicious or unreliable, while 22.6% find it reliable.

In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, very few respondents receive information from local government representatives (18.8%) and non-governmental organizations (9.7%). The majority of the population in Shida Kartli and Samegrelo use these sources of information. More than half of the respondents trust the information received from local authorities and non-governmental organizations in all three regions.

Misinformation is also frequently spread from various sources. Consequently, some focus group participants said they would not be vaccinated against Covid-19 because they believe they are being experimented on. Some even think that the vaccine against covid-19 can cure but also cause worse health problems. Others do not trust vaccination at all and think that vaccines are ineffective.

The vast majority of respondents in Samegrelo receive information from a variety of sources. In Shida Kartli, it is possible to get information from many sources, which are used by the majority of the respondents. In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, the population mainly trusts television and relatives and a very small part of it is likely to obtain information from other sources.

## Education

Education is one of the fundamental human rights. Therefore, ensuring quality, accessible education and science system is one of the main priorities of the Government of Georgia and is declared as a cornerstone of the country's development<sup>1</sup>. Along with health and the economy, the pandemic has had a serious impact on the education sector and has posed many other challenges.

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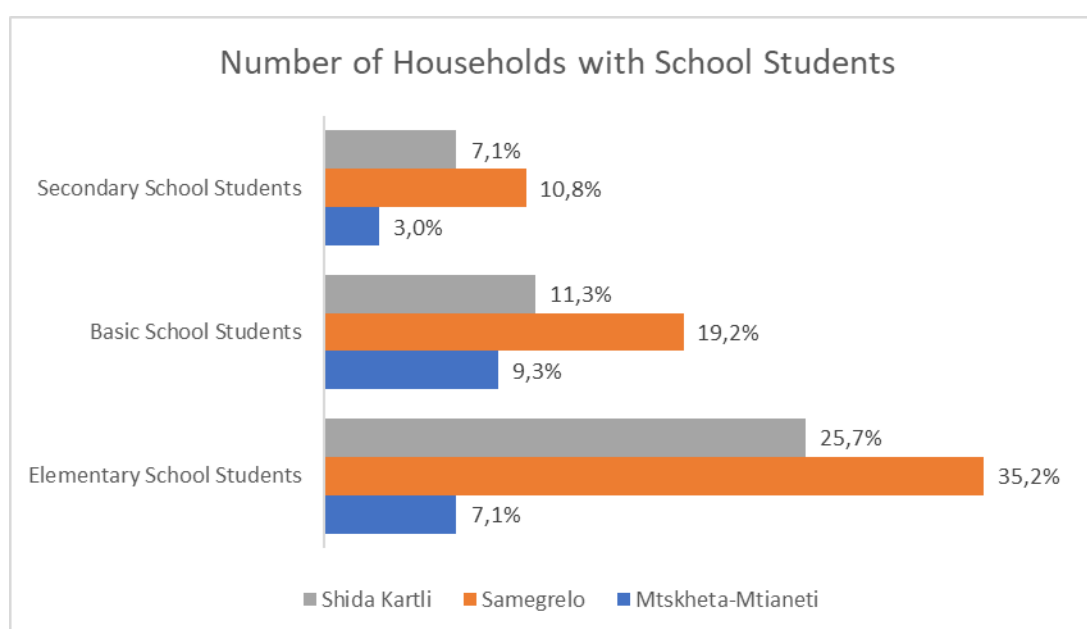
1. Unified Strategy for Education and Science for 2017-2021

## Number of Pre-school and School Students

The population of rural settlements throughout Georgia has been decreasing every year since 2010. Over the last 10 years, the number of people, including minors, has decreased in the target regions as well.

In all three regions, on average, 9.2% of households have minors (0 to 1.5 years) and 16.5% have kindergarten children. The target communities of Mtskheta-Mtianeti Municipality have the lowest number of young children (4.6% of families), followed by Samegrelo (6.8% of families) and Shida Kartli (14.1% of families).

Elementary school students (grades 1-6) live in an average of 29.8% of the households surveyed in all three regions. Unlike Samegrelo (35.2%) and Shida Kartli (25.7%), elementary school students in the Mtskheta-Mtianeti region live in a relatively small number of families (7.1%). A similar trend is observed for students from grades 7-10 and 11-12. Children of basic school age live in an average of 15.7% of households in all three regions. Mtskheta-Mtianeti (9.3%) falls behind Samegrelo (19.2%) and Shida Kartli (11.3%) in this case as well. Similarly, secondary school students live in 6.9% of the surveyed families in all three regions, and in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (3%) their number lags behind Samegrelo (10.8%) and Shida Kartli (7.1%).



## Location and Access to Schools

Schools in the target communities of the Samegrelo region are located in the same settlement for 88% of the students of all three levels. The situation is different in the communities of the other two regions. In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, for about 48% of elementary and basic school students, and about 29% of secondary school students, schools are located in their communities. In Shida Kartli, 48% of primary school students and about 37% of basic and secondary student's schools are situated in their settlements.

The number of school students in the surveyed families is the highest in Samegrelo, followed by Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti. Taking into account these factors, the high accessibility to schools in the same communities is natural in Samegrelo.

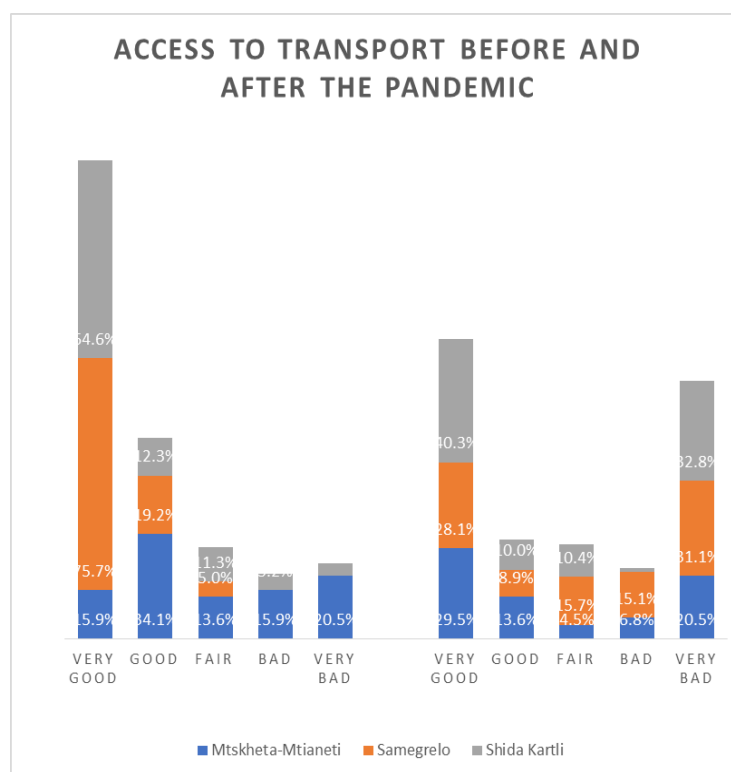
In cases where schools are not located in the same settlements, the vast majority of respondents say schools are within a 5-kilometer radius from their villages. Such cases are mostly observed in Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti. There are only a few cases in Shida Kartli and Samegrelo when schools are located even further.

The proximity of schools has a positive impact on access to education. About 94% of respondents in Samegrelo and 81% in Mtskheta-Mtianeti say that students have always managed to go to school. School access is relatively low in the target communities of Shida Kartli, where 68.9% of primary school students can get to school easily.

However, in the case of upper grades, their number is slightly reduced and in the case of middle school students, it constitutes 63.5%.

Transportation of students living more than two kilometers away from schools is provided by local governments in cooperation with schools. This function was transferred to them by the Ministry of Education several years ago. It should be noted that the state provides transportation for students to the nearest school, consequently, those studying in other schools should be able to manage transportation themselves or use public transport. In order to provide transportation for schools, self-governments mostly sign contracts with individuals. Although, since the micro busses serve several settlements, the driver has to drop off children from particular settlements to school earlier. For that reason, some children have to spend there an hour before and after school, which is especially inconvenient in winter.

If 5.4% of respondents in all three regions before quarantine noted that school transportation was difficult or very difficult, their number increased to 33.3% after quarantine. Similarly, before quarantine transportation to kindergartens was considered problematic by 12.8% of the respondents, but then this number increased to 40.5%. The main reason was access to public transport. A total of 6% in all three regions said it was bad, or very bad before the quarantine. It should be noted that no one in Samegrelo mentioned this problem, while residents of Mtskheta-Mtianeti expressed the most dissatisfaction where 36.4% of respondents named low access to transport. After quarantine, 35.7% of respondents in all three regions named this problem. In Samegrelo, their number increased to 46.4%. The total number is relatively small, however, it still increased in the other two regions. After quarantine, the price of public transport increased, which has also hindered transportation to kindergartens and schools.



Those families that were not able to use the transport provided by the local government considered the disarrangement of public transport as the most challenging issue. Transportation to villages is often provided by individuals who operate in a disorganized manner with an irregular schedule, making it difficult for residents and teachers to relocate. According to the participants of the Shida Kartli focus group, teachers, who are returning from villages to Gori, wait for the public transport on the street in succession and warn the others as soon as it appears.

According to the same focus group participants, the biggest challenge is to transport girls - when by the end of the day the only child is left in the car, instead of dropping her off at home, the driver often leaves the girl on the road, which is very dangerous in conflict-prone villages.

## Quality of Education in Schools

The quality of pre-quarantine education was assessed positively by almost 55% of respondents in all three regions, and by 26% neutrally - neither well nor badly. In Samegrelo, the quality of education was assessed very well by almost a third (32%) of respondents, which is significantly higher than Shida Kartli (17%) and Mtskheta-Mtianeti (14%). By only 4% of the respondents, it was rated as poor or very poor.

Positive assessment of the quality of education after quarantine decreased to 32% and neutral to 24% in all three regions. On the other hand, the negative assessment increased to 29%. This was caused by the transition to online learning and several related problems. According to the teaching staff of Zugdidi and Gori Training Resource Centers, online training is ineffective compared to face-to-face training.

“The role of parents is crucial [in the process of studying]. During spring quarantine, when we all stayed at home, parents had more opportunities to control their children. After going back to work, parents can not manage to still control them, consequently, children often prefer not to attend the lessons at all.”

Head of the Zugdidi Training Resource Center

On the other hand, very few teachers had the skills needed to conduct online lessons. The study materials were also not adapted for online teaching and many materials were not available in electronic format.

These reasons have had a negative impact on the quality of education in schools.

## Ways to Engage in Online Learning

After the pandemic began, schools switched to online education. Lack of access to online education during and after the quarantine was reported by 3.3% of respondents in Samegrelo and about 10% in Shida Kartli. Although this has not been named as one of the main challenges in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, the availability of online lessons everywhere remains a significant problem, especially in the target communities of this region. This was also mentioned by the focus group participants. Education issues did not fall among the two most important problems because of other crucial challenges, including access to health and drinking water, bad roads, and other issues. However, both individual respondents and focus group participants mentioned limited access to both the Internet and necessary devices, which hinders the learning process.

Students need internet and relevant equipment (computer, telephone, tablet) in order to participate in online classes. 64.1% of respondents have fast internet in Samegrelo and 61.3% in Shida Kartli. Internet access is relatively limited in the target communities of Mtskheta-Mtianeti, where only 20.9% of respondents have Internet access. However, it was also noted that several settlements now have internet access and more will be able to use it. Internet is available to more people in Samegrelo (64.1%) and Shida Kartli (61.3%). Those who do not have fiber-optic internet use mobile internet which according to the population, is more expensive and bad-quality.

“If there is no internet, no wonder pupils are not able to attend online classes. They [parents] buy mobile internet, so there are more expenses and the quality of it is low.”

A woman from the Shida Kartli focus group

Nearly a third of the population in the target regions does not have access to Payboxes, which deteriorated slightly during the quarantine period. Therefore, it was difficult for the population to pay utility bills, including internet bills.

For the reasons mentioned above, access to the Internet in the target communities of all three regions remains a



significant challenge, which, according to the population, limits students' ability to participate in the learning process.

93.2% of the respondents in the target communities of Samegrelo and 76.2% in Shida Kartli have the necessary equipment to participate in the online lessons. In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, only half of the families have such devices. Residents mentioned that there are several students in some households and their lessons usually overlap. Sometimes this is compounded by a parent working as a teacher who also needs the device to manage online lessons. In such cases, as a result of using the devices in turn, not all children are equally involved in the learning process, which greatly hinders the educational process and creates a risk of students falling behind the curriculum. According to the Gori Training Resource Center, in two villages, Khurvaleti and Tsiteubani, a private company handed over 187 tablets to school students. However, such cooperation is mostly one-time in nature, unstructured and its potential is still untapped.

In Samegrelo and Shida Kartli, the majority of the population had the opportunity to let their children participate in online education. In both regions, some students also had access to neighbors' Internet connections, which allowed them to be more involved in the learning process (14.9% in Samegrelo and up to 22.5% in Shida Kartli). Students in Mtskheta-Mtianeti did not have the opportunity to do so, which is mostly due to low internet access in the region. Another reason is the distance between the houses, which also complicates the use of neighbors' internet connection. However, helping each other in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli indicates that community members can be organized and provide assistance to families in need.

An important issue that parents focused on was the assimilation of the material during the online lessons. According to the parents, the seniors understood the material easily. However, some subjects (such as mathematics) were difficult for teachers to explain and more difficult for students to understand. Junior students, especially first graders who are neither accustomed to discipline nor reading/writing, found it more difficult to adapt to the online learning process.

When switching to online learning, teachers used a variety of platforms, such as Facebook Messenger and Skype. Uniting students in common groups, asking questions, and sending homework caused too much inconvenience.

“At the beginning of switching to the online schooling both students and teachers were rather confused. Initially, the lessons were held in Facebook Messenger. Children were sending questions to teachers in common chat which was visible to everyone. They did not understand whether to send messages privately or publicly.”

A man from the Mtskheta-Mtianeti focus group

In coordination with the Ministry of Education, schools have selected one application - Microsoft Teams, which has further facilitated communication between students and teachers. For those teachers who did not have relevant proper skills, the Education Management Information System of the Ministry of Education created classrooms in Teams and thus helped to organize the learning process.

It is also noteworthy that 22.7% of students in Mtskheta-Mtianeti did not have the opportunity to participate in online lessons, but still studied at home. The number of such students in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli was relatively low, up to 5%, due to both their own and their neighbors' access to the Internet. But the desire of students and their families to continue their studies despite the difficulties is crucial.

## Learning Process in 2020-2021

Stopping the first wave of Covid-19 in the country should have allowed the government to respond to the pandemic and be better prepared. This includes planning the functioning of schools and the learning process. Survey respondents named possible problems facing schools and the communities that might hinder the learning pro-

cess.

70.1% of respondents believe that schools are prepared for the next academic year and only 10.2% think that schools are not sufficiently prepared or prepared at all. However, during interviews and focus groups, many problems were identified that may interfere with the learning process.

53.6% of respondents believe that lack of internet access for teachers hinders them from conducting online lessons. It should be noted that this issue worries Shida Kartli residents the most.

24.1% of the total respondents in the target regions believe that teachers do not have the necessary skills to conduct online lessons. All the respondents in Mtskheta-Mtianeti named this threat. According to the Gori Educational Resource Center, this problem was experienced by basically all teachers except for those involved in the new schooling model with the integration of digital technologies in the teaching-learning process as one of its directions. In Shida Kartli, 13 out of 73 (there are 67 public and six private schools in total) public schools are involved in the new model, and as a result, the teachers working there have found it easier to switch to online education. In order to support those outside the model, the Ministry of Education has created a team of ICT specialists to assist teachers in Shida Kartli master the Microsoft Teams program and other skills needed for online teaching.

Although access to transport is more or less the same in all three regions, the lack of transportation to schools has been named as the most difficult problem in Shida Kartli only.

It is important to adapt learning materials to online learning. One-third of respondents in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli consider this to be a problem.

The most effective protection against Covid-19 is to comply with norms of hygiene - frequent hand washing and use of sanitizers, wearing facemasks, and following other measures that significantly prevent the spread of infection. The Ministry of Education provides schools with necessary hygienic equipment (according to the Gori Educational Resource Center, this includes disinfection barriers, sanitizers, facemasks) and information related to Covid-19. However, water supply and sanitation facilities of proper standard constitute a problem in some schools of the target communities. Accordingly, more than half of the respondents in Samegrelo and Mtskheta-Mtianeti, and 9.1% in Shida Kartli, believe that this factor may create difficulties for the learning process. It should be noted that according to the Gori Educational Resource Center, many schools in the municipality are currently actively working on infrastructure improvements since last summer. As a result, every school in the municipality will be supplied with water. However, by the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year, repair works have not been completed.

In all three regions, respondents named the lack of information about Covid-19 as less challenging. 94.4% of the respondents do not consider this issue problematic. One of the main reasons for that, according to the Gori Educational Resource Center, is that the Ministry of Education distributed posters and other information materials to all schools, which are publicly available.

Limited access to hygienic equipment can contribute to transferring the virus to teachers. However, this issue was addressed as problematic by only 10% of the respondents from Samegrelo.

The inability of schools in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli to maintain mandatory social distancing was named as quite an important problem. Some classes consist of 30 or more children and, given the small classroom spaces, schools may not be able to provide space for mandatory distancing.

42.4% of respondents in Shida Kartli and 10% in Samegrelo consider the lack of medical/first aid rooms in schools as a problem.

It should be noted that the inability to maintain social distancing and the lack of medical/first aid rooms are not perceived as problematic in Mtskheta-Mtianeti.

Despite the problems listed above, 21.2% of the respondents in Shida Kartli named the postponement of the educational process because of the inability of schools to comply with regulations as one of the possible difficulties.

In addition to schools, respondents also assessed the readiness of settlements for the beginning of the new aca-

ademic year and the challenges faced by their communities.

66.9% of respondents in all three regions think that their community is ready for the academic year, while 13.8% think that they are insufficiently or not ready at all. This is especially a problem in Shida Kartli, where 25.7% think that the population is not prepared at all because of economic problems. Some focus group participants said as a result of the pandemic conditions in their households remained the same or worsened. Therefore, they do not have the opportunity to prepare for online learning.

In all three regions, 81.8% of respondents mentioned the lack of high-speed internet in households as a significant problem. Although almost 80% of respondents in Mtskheta-Mtianeti still face this problem, only half consider it a threat for the approaching academic year. In the target communities of Shida Kartli, where 61% of households have access to the Internet, it is still considered a problem by almost all respondents. Despite the inconsistency of the answers, fast internet constitutes a problem and may limit the access of many students to online lessons.

About a quarter in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli believes that children do not attend online lessons. The head of the Zugdidi Education Resource Center also emphasized this problem. During distance learning, part of those students, who do not want to participate in lessons, use the lack of internet as an excuse and therefore do not get involved in the learning process. During the quarantine, children were controlled by parents, which is impossible now since they went back to work. Therefore, attending classes depends mainly on children's desires. Even though 22.7% of children in Mtskheta-Mtianeti did not have the opportunity to be involved in the online learning process, the target communities do not consider it a problem for the next academic year.

Although the majority of the respondents considered the lack of information about Covid-19 in schools to be the most challenging, this does not concern the issue of population awareness. Only 3.6% of respondents believe that lack of information in communities can be an issue during the new academic year.

68% of respondents in Samegrelo consider the spread of Covid-19 in the communities as a problem. In Shida Kartli, only 10.7% think the same, while in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, no one has mentioned this problem. 24% in Samegrelo say that due to the spread of Covid-19, students do not go to schools. In Shida Kartli, only 7.1% mentioned this problem, while in Mtskheta-Mtianeti - no one. This is partly related to Covid-19 development dynamics. The second wave of Covid-19 started in Adjara, Georgia which soon transmitted to Samegrelo. While conducting the survey, the number of cases of transmitted infection in Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti was still minimal, which may be caused by the population's attitudes towards the Covid-related issues mentioned above.

Lack of equipment for online lessons is perceived as a problem in Shida Kartli (47.2%) and Samegrelo (28%). A more essential problem is the lack of equipment, which is required for all children in the household in order to attend online classes. Such families constitute half of the respondents in Mtskheta-Mtianeti and 64% in Shida Kartli. It should be noted that no one in Samegrelo has mentioned this issue, although it worries almost half of the respondents.

There is also a severe shortage of clothes for students in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, which is problematic for 66.7% of the respondents. 16% of the respondents have the same problem in Samegrelo, and there are a few exceptions in Shida Kartli. Lack of facemasks is notable for 8% in Samegrelo: in general, this issue is less problematic for the target communities.

## Economic Situation of the Population

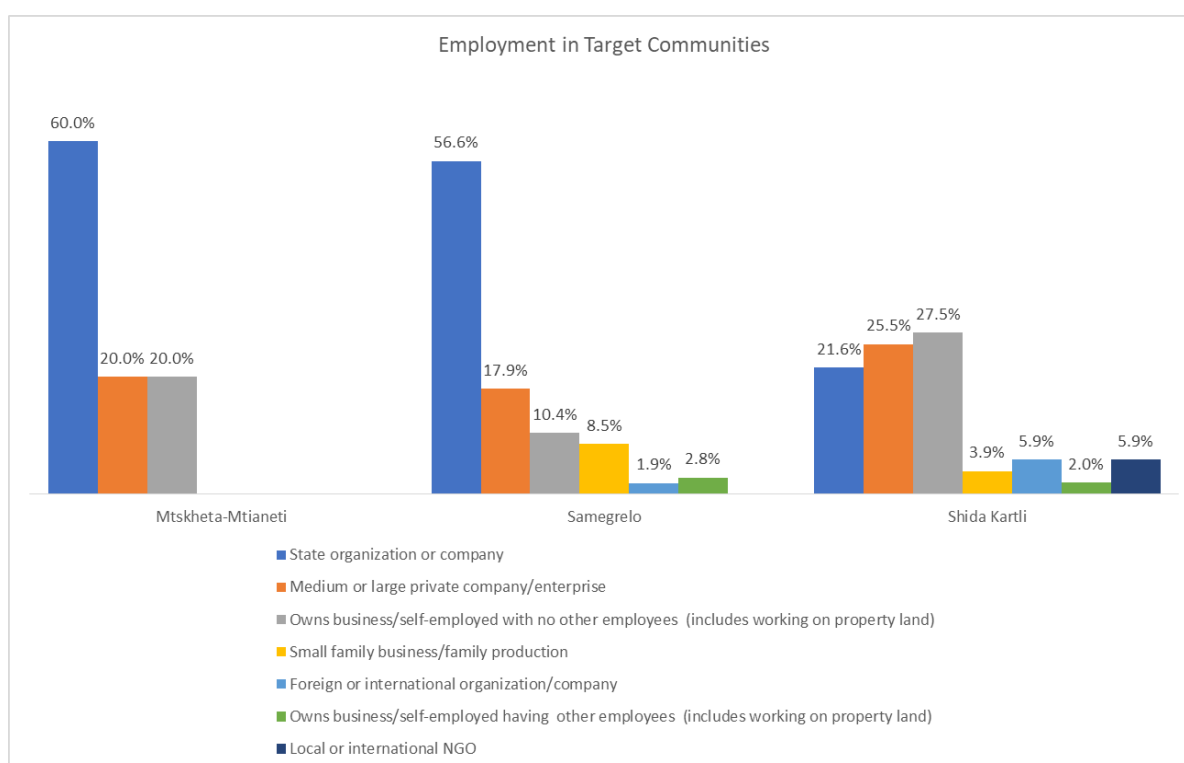
The pandemic harmed the country's economy, which in turn has affected the population. According to the World Bank, 8% of employees lost their jobs in 2020. It is also expected that the Georgian economy will shrink by 6% and the poverty rate will increase by 2.8%<sup>1</sup>.

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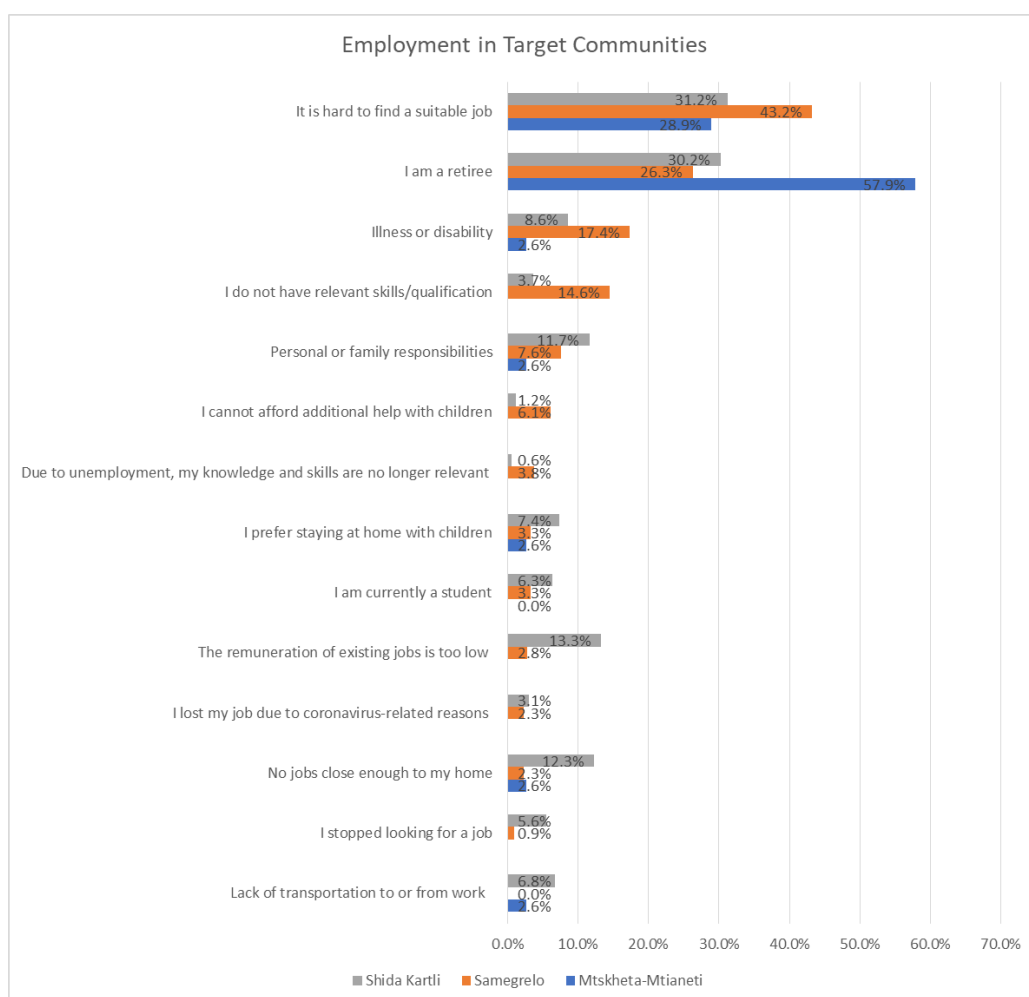
1. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/georgia/overview#3>

90.9% of respondents think unemployment was a significant problem in the regions even before the pandemic. This issue was quite frequently mentioned in Samegrelo (96.7%), and less frequently in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (69.7%). Covid-19 has further complicated the situation. 32% of respondents said the pandemic had a negative impact on their formal employment. This especially concerned Samegrelo (32.7%) and Shida Kartli (36.9%). In most cases, job losses affected women and men in the same manner. 36% of informal workers and self-employed were impacted (this does not include their land cultivation). Respondents believe that this factor has also affected women and men similarly. A lot of people involved in the customer service sector lost their jobs because of the pandemic. For example, due to restrictions regarding the gathering of more than six people, ritual halls, children's entertainment centers, and restaurants were closed and service employees were left unemployed. Currently, 69.9% of respondents in all three regions consider themselves unemployed, while 27.4% consider themselves employed or self-employed. Some of the respondents in Samegrelo refused to answer, which amounted to 2.7%. The highest unemployment rate is in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (88.4%) and the lowest in Samegrelo (63.6%).

The largest employers in the regions are government organizations and companies. Whilst Mtskheta-Mtianeti has a small selection of employment opportunities, diverse opportunities are presented in Shida Kartli. In the latter, unlike the other two regions, the state's contribution to employment is relatively small. The mentioned results are summarized in the table:



Respondents listed many reasons for unemployment including such issues as the difficulty of finding a suitable job, retirement, illness or disability, lack of relevant skills, and personal or family responsibilities. In Shida Kartli, insufficient remuneration for employment, limited access to transportation, and inconvenient location of the workplace were additionally mentioned. Some respondents prefer to stay at home with children. In Samegrelo, additional hindering factors are insufficient finances to afford additional care for children, and lack of knowledge and appropriate skills due to long-term unemployment.



The source of income for the largest number of respondents in all three regions (75.7% in total) are pensions and state assistance.

For 9.3% of respondents, remittances received from family members, relatives, or friends living abroad are crucial. Such assistance is received by 18.6% of the respondents in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, and 6.1% in Shida Kartli. However, the pandemic had a negative impact on the assistance received from abroad as well.

„Local families have a lack of assistance from abroad because everything was closed here as well. A lot of foreign families dismissed Georgian caretakers from work because they could not afford to take care of at least themselves.”

A woman from the Mtskheta-Mtianeti focus group

„We lost our jobs because of Coronavirus. We were left unemployed and had to go back to Georgia. Some of us stayed abroad hoping that something will change for the better in the nearest future, so that they can get back to work, however, a lot of us decided to return.”

A woman from the Shida Kartli focus group

Another reason for dismissing caretakers was the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the fear of transmitting the infection to families. Due to the circumstances mentioned above, both the number and volume of remittances from abroad have been drastically reduced.

Part of the respondents (8.4%) receive assistance from family members, relatives, or friends living in Georgia. The number of such families is highest in Samegrelo (9.8%) and lowest in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (2.3%). Some focus



group participants think that due to the lack of jobs in the regions and the complicated economic situation caused by the pandemic, more and more young people will have to go to work and financially assist their families.

Most of the respondents (78.3%) in Shida Kartli and the least (18.6%) in Mtskheta-Mtianeti receive income from selling agricultural products. Residents noted that often they do not have enough money to manage agricultural activities and have to take loans. Loans are often being paid from the funds received from selling products, which are usually not sufficient. This is caused by high competition in the market during harvest, lack of refrigeration and warehousing farms, high prices, and the fact that imported products are cheaper than local ones. Therefore, although many people are involved in agriculture, the income received is insignificant.

The described situation was further worsened by the spread of Covid-19. According to 23.5% of the respondents, it had a negative impact on farmers' ability to cultivate their land. Residents of Shida Kartli (32.4%) and Samegrelo (20%) communities were especially disrupted.

Another important problem in Shida Kartli was access to agricultural markets. 27.7% of respondents mentioned they faced this challenge even before the quarantine. Access to markets deteriorated slightly during the quarantine due to the closure of agrarian markets.

Collecting firewood for the winter is especially difficult in Mtskheta-Mtianeti and Shida Kartli. Most forests of Shida Kartli are located on the occupied territories - part of this area has wire fences and part of it has surveillance cameras installed. The same concerns Mtskheta-Mtianeti, especially Gremiskhevi, which borders the division line.

About a third of respondents in Mtskheta-Mtianeti note that a large number of single elderly people constitutes a significant socio-economic challenge in the settlements. Restricted access to food and goods of primary consumption, transport and various services including healthcare has made their situation particularly difficult during the quarantine. Many of them depend on neighbors and relatives who already have to take care of plenty of issues.

In all three regions, 42.5% of respondents believe that a large number of vulnerable families is a significant challenge for the region. This problem worries more than half of the respondents in Samegrelo and about 24% in the other two regions. Employees of the Gori Educational Resource Center gave an example of how schoolchildren and their parents sold handicrafts and used the money to provide internet for socially vulnerable families. Similar examples of mutual help were provided by focus group members. However, the pandemic has worsened the economic situation of many families in the target community. Relevant examples are discussed in more detail in the following chapters. After quarantine, the incomes of a large number of households (58.4%) decreased. Residents of Samegrelo (63.8%) and Shida Kartli (58.7%) were especially affected. In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, the income decreased in 15.9% of the families due to the high unemployment rate and the larger number of social assistance recipients compared to the other two regions. Therefore, helping the socially vulnerable was more difficult for community members.

## Grocery Products, Goods of Primary Consumption and Services

Grocery stores are easily accessible in Samegrelo communities. Only 9.5% of respondents of the region assessed the access to shops as difficult or very difficult. In Shida Kartli, this number was 45.5%, while in Mtskheta-Mtianeti it was 53.5%. Availability after quarantine decreased slightly in all three regions. It is worth mentioning that Samegrelo communities include one or two villages, while their number is higher in the other two regions. For example, the Mtskheta-Mtianeti community of Gremiskhevi includes 11 villages. There are only two shops in one of them - Petriani. The situation is similar in Shida Kartli, where there are no shops in villages at all and sometimes residents have to walk 3-4 kilometers to buy grocery products.

The reason for the reduction of access to shops after the quarantine is partly because the number of shops in some settlements decreased, which happened due to the difficult economic situation of the population. As a re-

sult, residents often borrowed products from the stores and then found it difficult to pay back which led to closing community grocery stores. However, according to the respondents, this reduction was insignificant and only a small part of the respondents assessed this fact negatively.

Although the shops are more or less available, residents say there is a limited choice of products on the spot. Some items, such as clothing, are not available in local stores. Also, respondents claim that products in stores are often expired. Consequently, some people from Mtskheta-Mtianeti go to Tbilisi or the town of Dusheti several times a month in order to purchase necessary products. The situation is similar in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli, where the variety of products is limited and the population often travels to Gori or Zugdidi. This issue is particularly raised in highland and remote villages, where such problems as high prices and supply difficulties are present, especially during winter. The population considers opening a network of grocery stores, which will contribute to price stability, as well as the diversity of products.

Respondents of all three regions named the increase in prices as one of the main challenges. If 56.1% considered that the prices in the grocery stores were high or very high before the quarantine, 74.9% emphasized high prices after the quarantine. The same point was stressed by the focus group participants in all three regions, who believe that prices in stores have risen significantly since the quarantine. It is noteworthy that prices also rose for products (such as sunflower oil, buckwheat, pasta), which were subsidized by the Resolution of the Government of Georgia #185 of March 23, 2020, by 10,000,000 GEL in order to maintain stability in prices<sup>1</sup>. The increase in food prices is also confirmed by official statistics. In October 2020, compared to the same period last year, prices for food and non-alcoholic beverages increased by 5.5%<sup>2</sup>.

Access to fuel was assessed as difficult or very difficult by 34.3% of respondents in all three regions. More than half of the respondents mentioned this problem in Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti. However, in Samegrelo, only 15.7% of respondents were bothered by this. This rate has slightly deteriorated following the quarantine. There is a similar situation with fuel prices. More than 70% of respondents believe that prices were high before and after the quarantine.

Access to utilities is different in all three regions. Electricity is available to almost every household except for rare exceptions in Shida Kartli.

The problem of drinking water affected a very small part of Samegrelo. However, one of the focus group members mentioned that the population of Ingiri village experienced some health problems (aching joints, headaches, high blood pressure), which was most likely caused by two internet wires installed near the drinking water basin. 69.8% of respondents before the pandemic had a drinking water problem in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, and 22.1% in Shida Kartli. After the pandemic, the situation slightly worsened in both regions. Residents note that in some cases the water is not suitable for drinking, sometimes the water debit is too small and the population is supplied on schedule. According to the population, net metering and system networking will improve the situation. These activities were planned to be introduced to the village of Koshka in Shida Kartli, however, due to the mistake made by the local government and the producing company drinking water pipes were cleaned which was not necessary. Since the funds allocated for net metering and networking were already spent on the unnecessary activity, the population is still being provided with drinking water for one hour a day. In the second case, secondary pipes were used for system networking which led to providing polluted drinking water to the population.

About a third of the respondents believe the pandemic has had a negative impact on the ability of children and the elderly to receive adequate care meaning the way children and elderly were taken care of during the quarantine. This may be due to economic problems and limited access to services and products. Respondents believe that in most cases it affected both women and men equally. However, in some cases, this fact had a more devas-

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1. Resolution of the Government of Georgia #185: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4832948?publication=1>

2. <https://www.geostat.ge/media/34574/%E1%83%98%E1%83%9C%E1%83%A4%E1%83%9A%E1%83%90%E1%83%AA%E1%83%98%E1%83%90-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%A5%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%97%E1%83%95%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A8%E1%83%98---2020-%E1%83%AC%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A5%E1%83%A2%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9B%E1%83%91%E1%83%94%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98.pdf>

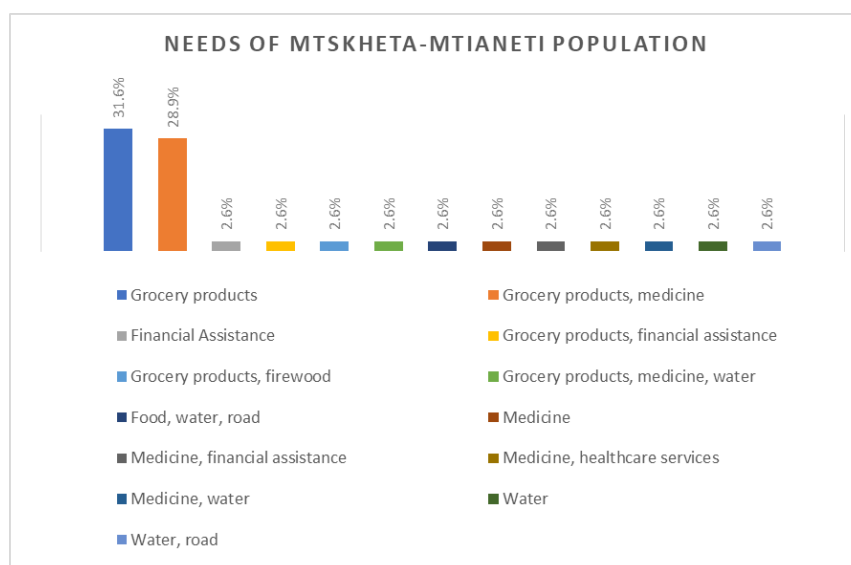
tating effect on women who had to cope with additional tasks.

The lack of public transport was mentioned by the largest number of respondents (9.3%) in Mtskheta-Mtianeti. In Samegrelo and Shida Kartli, the number is less than 3%. However, it should be noted that in some villages this problem is quite critical. Sometimes residents are transported by private companies or individuals with their vehicles who avoid driving on rough roads. For example, several villages in Mtskheta-Mtianeti have dirt roads and drivers avoid driving in such places. That is why the residents sometimes have to walk several kilometers to the neighboring villages. This is especially difficult in winter. In addition to the cold, the population is also bothered by wild animals such as wolves. This problem existed before the pandemic as well and the quarantine has not changed anything. The situation is similar in some settlements of Shida Kartli. This creates particular difficulties for residents in villages with no shops. Consequently, locals have to go shopping to other villages or Gori. It is very hard for the elderly to walk long distances and carry products which makes it problematic for them to buy products and goods of primary consumption. Therefore they mainly rely on the neighbors who own means of transportation.

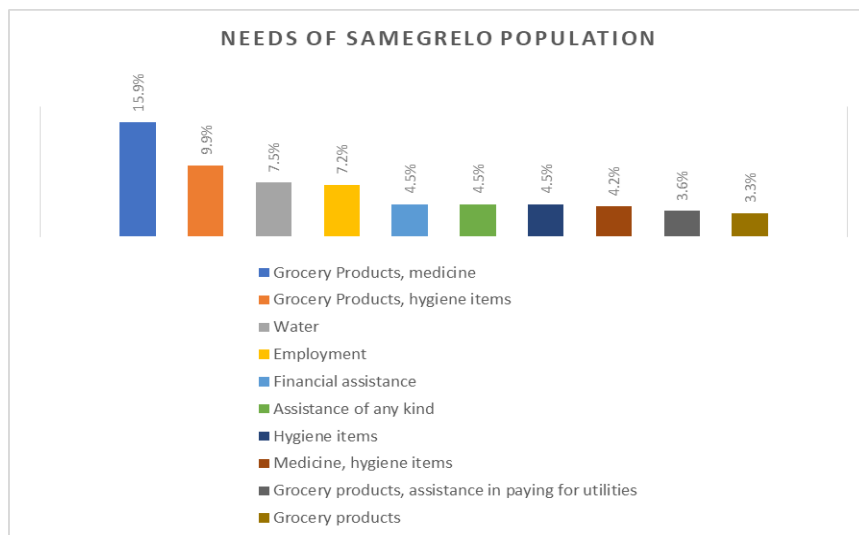
Another challenge related to transport in all three regions is the schedule. Individuals and companies have set an estimated time to leave the starting point. However, this depends on the number of passengers and the micro busses mostly start moving after they are full. Therefore, in most cases, they start moving earlier or later than determined by the schedule. This causes difficulties to the residents, who have to wait on the street for an indefinite period of time and then stand on their feet in overcrowded transport. In Shida Kartli, one of the focus group participants recalled cases when the drivers refused to take the last passengers to distant destinations. In such cases, they had to walk the remaining distance, which is rather dangerous in conflict-prone villages.

For the reasons discussed above, many families need grocery products. As illustrated below, grocery products were named among the most important needs for the population in all three regions. Residents expect further increases in prices in the future, which will worsen their situation.

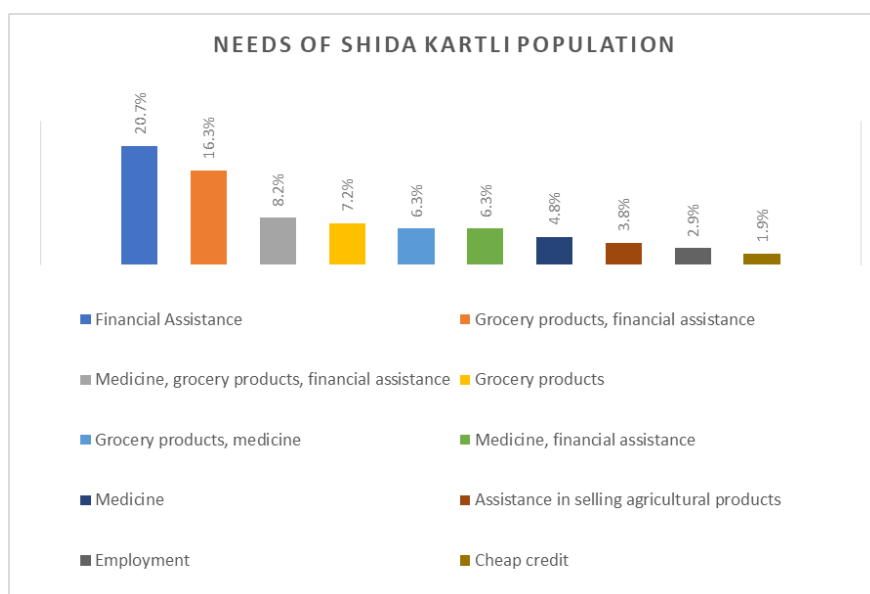
In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, according to the survey, the local population has the following needs:



The following needs were revealed in Samegrelo:



The following needs were named in Shida Kartli:



49.6% of the respondents believe that the government and 14% believe that local government can best help them to satisfy those requirements. However, there is a significant difference between the regions in this regard. Fewer people in Mtskheta-Mtianeti think that the government can provide effective assistance (28.6%). In the other two regions, about half of the respondents share this opinion. On the other hand, more than half of the respondents in Mtskheta-Mtianeti rely on local government, while in the other two regions a small part of the respondents feels positive about the government's effectiveness.

Part of the respondents in Samegrelo (23.8%) and Shida Kartli (18.2%) think that international and local non-governmental organizations can assist them. Positive examples of this exist in all three regions.

## Healthcare

In Samegrelo, more than half of the respondents believed that there was a risk of becoming infected with Covid-19 disease before the quarantine. During and after the quarantine, this issue was mentioned by more than 70% of the respondents. In Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti, relatively small numbers (15.2% and 4.7%) reported this

threat before the quarantine. During quarantine, when the government imposed significant restrictions, including restriction of movement, fear of Covid-19 disease became more prevalent in both regions (23.2% and 16.3%). After the quarantine ended, when most of the restrictions were lifted, those numbers again dropped in both regions (19.8% and 11.6%).

Pre-quarantine accessibility to health services, including ambulances, outpatients, clinics, hospitals, etc. was rated as good or very good in all three regions by 77.6% of respondents and negatively by 3.9%. The total number of all three regions has decreased slightly after the quarantine. The most important problem with an ambulance is arriving late. This is caused by an insufficient number of ambulance vehicles. For example, representatives of one of the communities of Shida Kartli said that their villages are served by only two ambulance vehicles. Often they are on another call and respond to new calls with a delay of an hour, or more.

In addition to accessibility, study participants also rated the quality of healthcare. In all three regions, the population noted that there is no medical equipment in the local outpatients, and only basic services such as doctor's consultations and vaccinations are available. Therefore, the population addresses hospitals located in the regional centers. However, according to the respondents, the qualifications of medical staff in Dusheti, Zugdidi, and Gori are often very low, which is supported by plenty of examples. According to one of the participants of the Mtskheta-Mtianeti focus group, she underwent a caesarean section procedure in Dusheti without anesthesia. Another example was also given when a child had blood poisoning after being bitten by a snake - according to the parent, the doctor insisted there are no venomous snakes in the Mtskheta-Mtianeti region and nothing was wrong with the child. Therefore, those who have enough finances apply to hospitals in Tbilisi and Kutaisi from the Samegrelo region to cope with health-related problems.

Two more important issues were identified - the number of respondents in Samegrelo who assessed the quality of services as very good decreased by more than 11% after the quarantine. On the other hand, the number of people who were satisfied with the quality of services in Shida Kartli also increased by 11%. One of the important reasons for this is the ability to relocate to hospitals and clinics. 49.7% of respondents in the target communities of Samegrelo mentioned that moving around was very easy before quarantine, however after quarantine their number decreased to 4.2%. In the other two regions, this figure has not changed significantly.

Another factor that has affected the quality of healthcare is the choice of medications in pharmacies. In Samegrelo, before quarantine, 35.7% thought that the choice of medication was good, or very good, this number decreased to 25.7% after the quarantine. The numbers in the other two regions did not change in this case either.

A vast majority of respondents in all three regions believed that prices for health services and medicines were high even before the quarantine. After the quarantine this number increased slightly - 76.1% believe that the price of medicines after quarantine is very high. The number of such people before the quarantine was 67.4%. Focus group participants in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli also noted that the increase in prices after the quarantine is quite noticeable and now it is possible to purchase less medicine for the same price. Dissatisfaction with the high prices of health services was noted by 44.4% of respondents. Prior to the quarantine, their number was 41.9%. Price increases are also confirmed by official statistics<sup>1</sup>, according to which prices in the healthcare sector increased by 9% in one year, including medical products, equipment, devices (13.5%), and outpatient medical services (11.8%).

## Security

During the study security was measured according to the following variables:

- 1.Domestic violence;
- 2.The general criminogenic situation in the country;
- 3.The Existing Situation on the Administrative Boundary Line.

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1. Resolution of the Government of Georgia #185: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4832948?publication=1>



In all three regions before Covid-19, 67.4% felt completely, or quite safe. The population of the target community of Mtskheta-Mtianeti felt the safest (75% of the respondents, including 47.7% completely safe). The population of Shida Kartli felt the least protected (42.9% of the respondents).

During and after the quarantine, the percentage in Mtskheta-Mtianeti has hardly changed. During and after the quarantine in Shida Kartli, the feeling of insecurity increased slightly in about 5% of the respondents, while in Samegrelo this figure doubled to 40.5%.

## Domestic Violence

3.9% of respondents believe that quarantine had a negative impact on domestic violence. Due to quarantine-induced unemployment and economic problems, as well as long-term confinement in one space, one focus group participant mentioned isolation leads to aggression among the population and therefore culminates into increased cases of domestic violence. It is noteworthy that nobody has mentioned this problem in Mtskheta-Mtianeti. Among those who believe quarantine has had a devastating impact on the issue, 55.6% believe it has affected women and men alike. 39.1% believe that domestic violence affects only women.

Samegrelo focus group members mention that violence is common in some families, however, it is not mentioned.

„Families are experiencing domestic violence. It is not always about physical violence, but economic, psychological violence as well. People consider this topic taboo, they do not want to mention it outside their families. This will lead us to bad results because these people...they lose a will to live.”

A woman from the Samegrelo focus group

This is why such cases are left beyond people's and law enforcers' scope of attention.

## General Criminogenic Situation

26.8% of respondents in Samegrelo mentioned the criminogenic situation as the biggest security concern before the quarantine. Although crime is not spread in settlements, residents often hear about its growing numbers in Zugdidi and other large cities. People also think that due to the difficult economic situation, an increase in crime is expected throughout the region.

The situation in Shida Kartli is relatively calm and only a few respondents mentioned the issue. Opinions have hardly changed either during the quarantine period or after its completion.

In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, the respondents did not mention these problems, but the focus group participants brought examples of both themselves and their neighbors. One of the families, who has a land lease and grows raspberries and blackberries, stole irrigation system equipment worth about GEL 4,000 from the plots. Respondents also think that cattle theft is quite frequent. The majority of residents claim that due to the complicated economic situation such facts may become more common in the future.

## The Existing Situation on the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL)

44% of Mtskheta-Mtianeti and 31.8% of Shida Kartli respondents feared armed confrontation before the quarantine the most. In Samegrelo, according to the 11.5% of the respondents, the threat was relatively low, since Samegrelo borders the occupied territories with the Enguri River while in Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Russian military forces often appear near the target communities. Therefore opinions during and after the quarantine have hardly changed.

Before quarantine, as well as during the quarantine and after its completion, more than half of the respondents in Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti found it threatening to be close to the ABL, while in Samegrelo about 30%

thought the same way.

Shootings on the other side of the conflict mostly affected a third of Shida Kartli respondents. In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, this problem was mentioned by a very small number of participants, while in Samegrelo it was not noted at all. The reason for this is the close location of Russian military and training bases to the administrative boundary line in Shida Kartli compared to the target villages of Mtskheta-Mtianeti.

The threat of kidnapping from the other side of the conflict was most often mentioned by respondents in Shida Kartli (34.4%) and Mtskheta-Mtianeti (23.3%). In Samegrelo, only a few respondents mentioned this problem. Attitudes did not change significantly either during the quarantine period or after its completion.

A small number of respondents named the lack of police posts in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (7.1%) and Samegrelo (6.9%) as problems. In Shida Kartli, only a few respondents perceived this as a problem. Nevertheless, residents of the target communities are concerned with other security-related problems (armed conflict, kidnapping) more severely than the population surveyed in the other two regions.

## Social Mobilization and Coping Mechanisms

In crises, it is important to mobilize socially and support those members of the community in need of support. Although helping people or families in need by neighbors and the community members is part of Georgian culture, such assistance is usually less organized. Furthermore, despite implemented projects over the last 20 years and the development of the civil society sector, the practice of community self-organization and mobilization to solve common problems is extremely rare. In most cases, mobilization is informal and is difficult to assess. However, the responses of the respondents regarding this issue more or less reflect the views, desires, and mechanisms of the social mobilization.

According to 6.1% of the respondents in all three regions, their settlement took a collective initiative/action to deal with the problems caused by Covid-19. In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, only four small-scale initiatives were implemented by individual members of the community. In Shida Kartli, they helped the elderly and purchased products for other residents of the settlement. In Samegrelo, such examples are diverse - cleaning riverbeds, gas and sewerage repairs, outdoor lighting, providing medicines, etc.

In Shida Kartli, 3-3 people were involved in the implementation of collective initiatives, while in Samegrelo, 70 or more people participated in 70% of such initiatives, 10% or more in 25%, and 30 or more people in 5%.

Despite active participation, the population in Samegrelo gave up working on 84% of the initiatives before solving the relevant problems. The number of such cases in Shida Kartli was 33.3%. Problems were partially resolved in 66.7% of the cases in Shida Kartli and 8% of the cases in Samegrelo. In Samegrelo, common initiatives are still functioning in 8% of the cases.

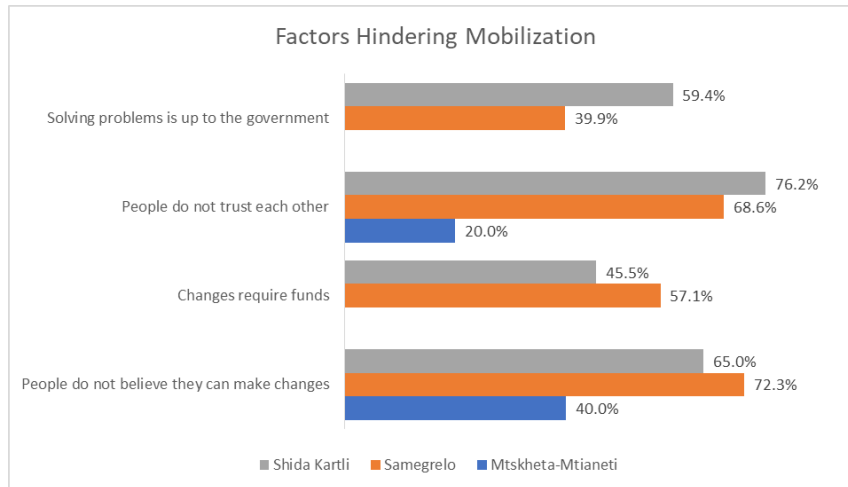
In Samegrelo and Shida Kartli, more than half of the respondents believe that mobilization is difficult or impossible to achieve. The number of people thinking mobilization is easy is about 30% from both regions. The situation is different in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, where 63.6% of respondents think that mobilization is easy and 22.7% think that it is difficult or impossible to achieve. People of all age categories are passive, including young people, who neither take the initiative nor get involved in projects initiated by others.

According to the respondents, mobilization is complicated by several factors. 69.3% of respondents do not believe people can make changes. This was especially noted in Samegrelo (72.3%) and Shida Kartli (65%). Relatively fewer respondents in Mtskheta-Mtianeti shared this point of view (40%).

Another hindering factor to mobilization is the need for funds to make changes in Samegrelo (57.1%) and Shida Kartli (45.5%). According to the respondents in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, the issue of funds is not an obstacle.

The issue of mutual trust is a significant drawback in all three regions, especially in Shida Kartli (76.2%) and Samegrelo (68.6%).

According to 51.9% of the respondents in Shida Kartli and 39.9% of the respondents in Samegrelo, people perceive it is the government's responsibility to solve problems, not the people's. This attitude also plays an important role as a hindering factor for social mobilization. It should be noted that no such answer was observed in Mtskheta-Mtianeti. However, many pointed out that the government is working inefficiently. In one of the communities of Shida Kartli, according to the population, the funds allocated from the state budget was spent on the renovation of the house of rituals for four years, which is still not completed.



Some of the respondents in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli think that mobilizing women is difficult (3.2% and 14.9%). However, they find it more difficult to mobilize men (15.3% and 13.9%). In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, the respondents do not consider it difficult to mobilize any group.

During the quarantine, various organizations assisted the populations of the target communities. Provision of assistance was most often observed in Samegrelo (84%) and Mtskheta-Mtianeti (73.3%), and the least in Shida Kartli (22.5%).

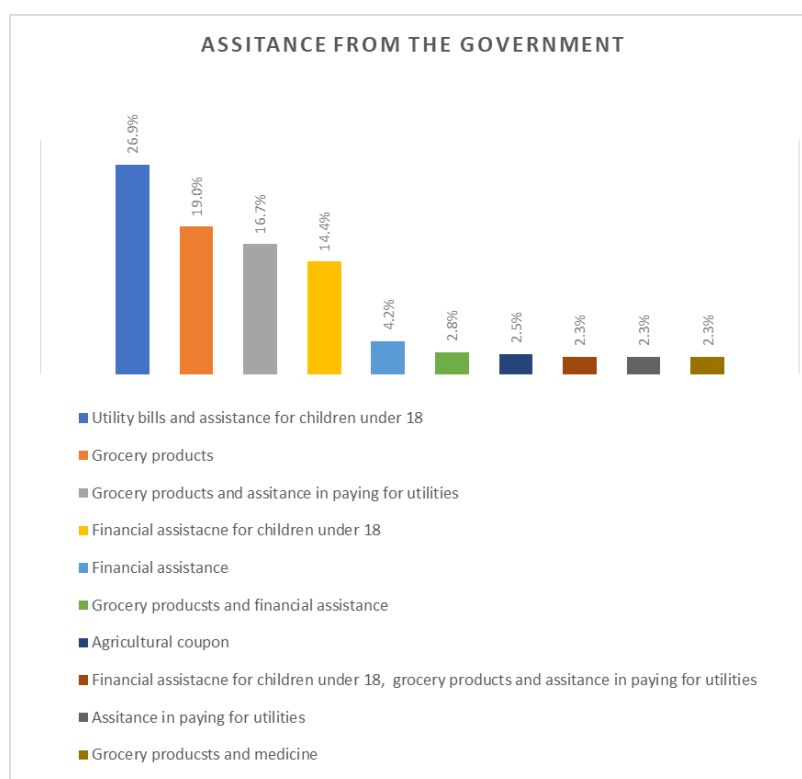
Assistance from non-governmental organizations was mentioned in Samegrelo (44.7%) and Shida Kartli (30%). Most of the respondents were assisted by the Internally Displaced Women Association "Consent". The respondents also mentioned the Charitable Humanitarian Center "Abkhazia", the NEFA Foundation, the TASO Foundation, and the non-governmental organization in Zugdidi - Neogen.

Support provided by international organizations was mostly mentioned by respondents in Shida Kartli (22.1%). In the other two regions their assistance, according to the respondents, was insignificant. Red Cross and UN were present as international organizations in the target regions.

87.6% of respondents in Samegrelo, 75% in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, and 54.9% in Shida Kartli mentioned assistance provided by foreign countries through embassies or other official representatives.

Support from religious and other types of organizations was insignificant in all three regions.

Assistance from central and local governments differed from the support provided by other actors. In most cases, it was a combination of several different types of aid. The table below lists the types of assistance most frequently mentioned by the respondents.



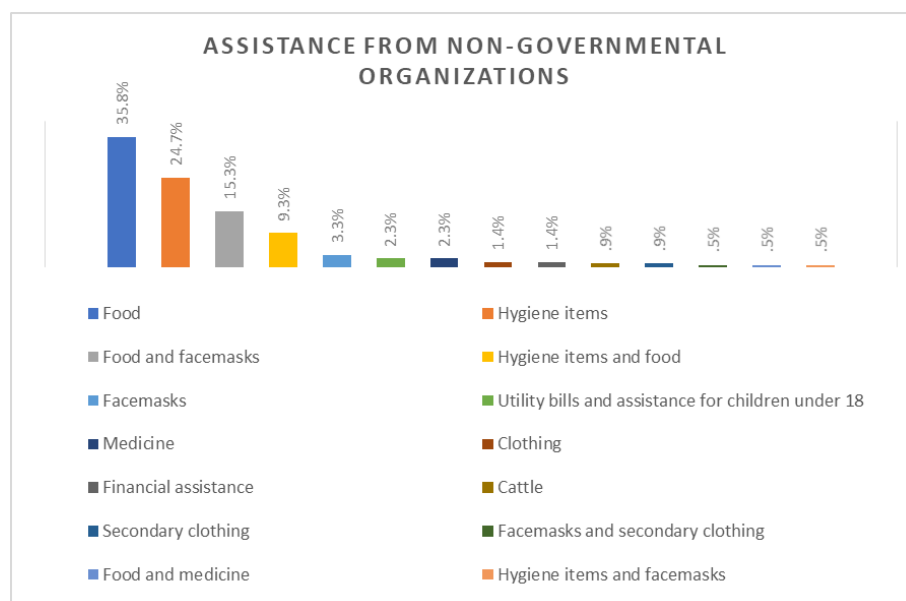
89.9% of the respondents claim that the support received from the government was significant. However, its fair distribution among the population is assessed differently in all three regions. In Samegrelo, for example, all respondents believe that it was fairly distributed. However, several people, including focus group participants, noted that the criteria for providing social assistance were unclear to them.

„Windows and doors should be replaced at my house. Nobody is providing help, however, I am socially vulnerable.”

A woman from the Samegrelo focus group

A vast majority of Shida Kartli participants (83.3%) think that state aid was equally distributed. In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, only half of the respondents note that the distribution was fair and 43.8% claim it was provided disproportionately. Many examples of the latter have been brought in all three regions, which was often due to the very formal use of criteria by organizations. Sometimes a specific type of aid is intended for a certain group (for example, single people, elderly) and is distributed without considering the economic situation of the beneficiaries. As a result, some financially stable families receive assistance only because they satisfy formal criteria, whilst those in need are left without it.

NGOs also provided significant assistance to the population. The types of assistance most commonly named by respondents are listed in the table below:



96.6% of the respondents said that the aid provided by NGOs was significant. 98% believe that the aid was distributed fairly to the population.

Respondents received food, hygiene items, and grocery products from international organizations. 95.9% of the respondents consider this type of assistance important. In Samegrelo and Mtskheta-Mtianeti, all participants agreed that the aid was distributed fairly. In Shida Kartli, 71.7% also admit the fair distribution, whilst 17.4% think it was managed more or less fairly. 6.5% of the respondents in the region think that aid was distributed disproportionately.

Needless to say, the residents need to take care of solving their own problems. However, in some cases, they are not able to deal with all the challenges on their own. Respondents evaluated who they turn to and how effectively various institutions and people can assist them to solve these problems.

87.4% of the respondents said they will address local authorities for help. Half of them consider the assistance effective. This indicator is relatively high in Samegrelo (64.9%) and low in Kvemo Kartli (30.5%).

34.5% of the respondents will turn to the central government for help. It should be noted that this rate is the lowest in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (4.5%), whilst 67.8% in Samegrelo believe that the central government can provide effective assistance. Fewer people agree to this in Shida Kartli (25.8%) and Mtskheta-Mtianeti (23.3%). It should be noted that more than half of the respondents in Shida Kartli believe that the central government can be partly effective and partly inefficient. In Mtskheta-Mtianeti, 23.3% say that the central government does not provide sufficient support to the settlements to overcome the existing challenges.

Although only a small number of Shida Kartli respondents will turn to the police for help (15.7% in total), 45.5% of the respondents in all three regions believe that the police can solve problems effectively. A third believe that they can address friends and relatives for effective assistance.

Respondents in Shida Kartli and Samegrelo find it difficult to mobilize the community. In response to the question of who can help more - men or women living in the community, only 17% in all three regions believe that women in the community are more capable of helping. It should be noted that 39.5% think so in Mtskheta-Mtianeti. A total of 18.3% in all three regions think men can be very supportive. This rate is also highest in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (43.2%).

About half of the respondents believe that international organizations can provide effective support to the settlements. It is noteworthy, that 58.4% agree to this in Samegrelo and 16.3% in Mtskheta-Mtianeti. International organizations in Samegrelo started working actively after the Abkhaz war in the late 1990s, thus locals had frequent communication with them. For the same reason, 66.7% reported the effective work of local NGOs in Samegrelo. Significantly fewer respondents think so in Shida Kartli (28%) and Mtskheta-Mtianeti (9.5%).



27.5% of the respondents think that religious organizations (church) do not provide proper assistance to the population. 20.5% of the respondents believe this kind of organization can effectively help the population to deal with the issues.

Only 9.4% of the respondents in Samegrelo gave a positive answer to the productive assistance of criminal authorities. However, 45.9% in the region believe that they are completely ineffective. It should be noted that 54.8% of the respondents in Mtskheta-Mtianeti do not possess any information about them, whilst 69.9% in Shida Kartli refrained from answering.

## State Response to Problems Caused by Covid-19

Shortly after revealing the first cases of the Covid-19 infection in the country, the government took steps to reduce both the chances of spreading Covid-19 and the economic problems caused by the pandemic.

65.7% of the respondents believe that the government has taken adequate measures in response to threats. 12.3% believe that they underestimated the emerged threats, while 19.9% believe that the government's response was exaggerated.

The population believes that the most important measures taken by the state as a response to Covid-19 were as follows:

- Providing financial assistance to families who lost their income during the quarantine (96%);
- Disinfection of public spaces (94%);
- Social distancing (91.9%);
- Obligation to use protective equipment (facemasks, gloves, sanitizers, disinfection barriers) (91.8%);
- Providing financial assistance to businesses that lost income during quarantine (87.2%);
- Switching to online education in schools (80.2%);
- State border closure (77.3%);
- Introduction of curfew (64.5%);
- Restriction on public transport (62.5%).

(Respondents could choose more than one answer, therefore, the total number of the answers exceeds 100%)

The most inconvenient for the population was the imposed restriction on public transport, which severely affected access to goods of primary consumption, grocery products, and important services, including healthcare. 45.7% of the respondents in Shida Kartli, 29.7% in Samegrelo, and 21% in Mtskheta-Mtianeti do not consider this measure as necessary. Many also criticize the temporary ban on taking a seat next to the driver in the vehicle and the restriction on transporting more than 2 passengers. According to the residents, as a result of this restriction, no positive tendencies were observed, it only prevented families from moving together.

Mtskheta-Mtianeti residents mentioned that introducing a state of emergency had a devastating effect on the economic situation of the population. Most households had difficulty making savings even before the pandemic, and most of those with small savings had to use them during the quarantine.

In addition to the needs, respondents also assessed the effectiveness of the measures taken by the government.

- Disinfection of public spaces (72.8%);
- Switching to online education in schools (59.9%)
- Obligation to use protective equipment (facemasks, gloves, sanitizers, disinfection barriers) (55.7%);
- Providing financial assistance to families who lost their income during the quarantine (47.5%);
- Providing financial assistance to businesses that lost income during quarantine (41.5%).

Based on the results of the survey the efficiency of the measures imposed, especially in the area of providing financial assistance, is quite low. Some believe that this is partly due to nepotism and that aid is mostly provided to those close to the officials. The criteria used to select beneficiaries are also unclear.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Covid-19 has had a negative effect on various areas in the target communities throughout the country including education, health, and safety. It also significantly damaged the economy, which reduced the income of the population and contributed to the growth of poverty. In most cases, countries use population income to measure poverty. Nevertheless, studying multidimensional poverty has recently become more relevant. It should be noted that a similar analysis has not been done in Georgia yet, however, based on the survey results it is clear that the target communities face significant challenges in all three parameters of both income and multidimensional poverty<sup>1</sup>.

The following chapter provides conclusions and relevant recommendations on each of the discussed report topics.

### Population Awareness

People use many different sources to get information from, where along with credible news, misinformation is also widely spread. The main reason for this is Russian fake news sources spreading anti-Western sentiments which influence part of the population<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, despite the active dissemination of information on Covid-19 by various sources, a significant part of the population incorrectly evaluates the threat. No one acknowledges the threat of spreading Covid-19 in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, also the number of respondents in Shida Kartli who consider it a challenge is very low. About a third of the respondents think that Covid-19 does not exist, or does not pose danger, therefore have no interest in obtaining relevant information about it.

People interested in retrieving credible information mostly address television. In Samegrelo, various sources are being used to obtain information, including friends and relatives, radio, social networks, local authorities, and women's groups. The opposite is true for Mtskheta-Mtianeti, where most receive information only from relatives and television. A large part of the population in Shida Kartli, along with other sources, receives news from newspapers. However, very few people in all three regions receive information from local authorities and NGOs.

#### **Recommendations**

1. The local government and the non-governmental sector need to be more actively involved in disseminating information among the population through cooperation with the media so that the information is credible and understandable.
2. Information should be provided to children as well in an appropriate and understandable language. This will contribute to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in schools and to establish an adequate attitude towards Covid-19 within the population, which is crucial to make the right decisions.

### Education

The main reason for schools being the most accessible in Samegrelo is the density of villages and populations existing within the communities. The target communities of Samegrelo consist of one or two villages, consequently, the number of students is relatively high. In Mtskheta-Mtianeti and Shida Kartli most of the communities include several settlements and the population, unlike Samegrelo, is relatively small in each of them. Therefore, in most of the settlements in Samegrelo, the schools are located in the same villages, whilst in the other two regions, some students have to go to neighboring settlements.

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1. The Multidimensional Poverty Index measures education, health and living standards and evaluates access to them of both individuals and families. Detailed information on multidimensional poverty is available on: <https://ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/> and <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-MPI>

2. <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2020-07-23/725.pdf>

Issue of transportation to school was more challenging in Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti before the quarantine, however, due to limited access to transport as a result of the quarantine (shortage of transport, disorder, and increased prices), this problem became relevant in all three regions.

The number of those disappointed with the quality of education has also increased dramatically since quarantine. If only a small proportion of respondents previously thought that the quality was poor, or very poor, in the post-quarantine period almost a third of respondents think so.

Switching to online learning has proved to be difficult for the vast majority due to the lack or inadequacy of the Internet and the necessary devices. This was especially the case in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, where a small number of households have high-speed internet and only half possess necessary devices.

Due to the extensive spread of Covid-19, the schools most likely will switch to online learning in the following academic year and only a small number of lessons will be conducted in the classrooms. However, the transition to online learning, according to respondents, will be difficult. First, the required study materials are not adapted for this. Second, many teachers and students do not have access to the Internet and proper technical equipment. Listed factors may significantly slow down the learning process and limit the access of many students to online lessons. This can be especially problematic for poor families whose children may not be able to participate in the educational process. In the case of these families, falling behind in the curriculum increases the possibility of them remaining in poverty.

Restoration of the educational process in schools is also associated with certain difficulties. Arranging proper water supply and sanitation facilities in many schools has been a problem for years, and coping with these issues has become particularly critical during a pandemic. Due to a large number of students in the classrooms, it will be also difficult to maintain the recommended social distance between them. Ignoring these factors can even contribute to the further spread of the virus in schools.

## **Recommendations**

1. During the pandemic, it is necessary to ensure the transportation of students to schools complies with the requirements. Therefore, it is necessary:

- \*To provide additional vehicles in cooperation with municipalities and ensure social organization of parents and students for mutual assistance (including transportation of children in shifts);

- \*To develop transportation schedules in cooperation with municipalities;

- \*To co-finance municipal transport (if any) for students and families who are unable to use local government-funded school transport. It is also important to co-finance private transport and make appropriate changes to driver licenses to ensure students are transported to the final destinations especially in the evenings.

2. To adapt study materials for online teaching. It is possible to develop a methodology for this purpose so that teachers will be able to modify the material according to the learning process. It is also necessary to train teachers to conduct online lessons. According to the respondents, they do not have the appropriate skills, which hinders learning processes.

3. Various stakeholders and communities may actively cooperate in arranging proper water supply and sanitation facilities in schools. For example, the government and the non-governmental sector can purchase and transfer the necessary inventory and repair materials for the communities, while the population can manage construction/repair activities on its own. In communities where repair activities of sanitation facilities have not been completed promptly, representatives of both central and local governments, school administration, parents, and the non-governmental sector need to be more actively involved in monitoring and responding to them on time.

4. Often both students and teachers do not have the necessary equipment to participate in online lessons. In the case of teachers, this also poses a risk of failed lessons. Therefore, it is very important to support them and supply the schools with the necessary equipment. One of these mechanisms might be a public-private partnership (PPP).

## Economy

The economic situation of the population in the target communities was quite difficult even before the pandemic. However, the spread of Covid-19 further complicated the situation.

Unemployment is high in all three regions and only 27.4% are employed, or self-employed. The largest employer is the state - most of the respondents work either in the public service or in state-owned companies. There are also a lot of self-employed people who work independently. The selection of employment opportunities is more diverse in Shida Kartli and Samegrelo, and less in Mtskheta-Mtianeti.

The pandemic has had a negative effect on both formal employment and the self-employed. As a result, the income of the population in all three regions decreased and many families faced the need for grocery products, medicine, and goods of primary consumption. Some of the respondents believe that the central and local authorities can assist them, while in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli more people believe international and local non-governmental organizations will better help them.

In Shida Kartli, the pandemic especially had a negative impact on land cultivation and access to markets. The latter, according to 27.7% of the respondents, constituted a problem in the region even before the pandemic. Given that 78.3% of households surveyed in Shida Kartli receive part of their income selling agricultural products, limited access to markets may reduce the income of the population.

Employment is hindered by several factors, including difficulty finding a suitable job, retirement, illness, and disability. Another important factor is the lack of relevant skills and qualifications due to long-term unemployment.

### **Recommendations**

1. Due to the increased unemployment caused by the pandemic and the complicated economic situation, it is necessary to satisfy the basic needs of the population. This will greatly facilitate the involvement of various parties (private sector, local NGOs, and international organizations) in both the decision-making process and their implementation. This process will facilitate the transfer of information back and forth from the population to the central government and assist all parties in making informed decisions. It will also reduce the problems of access to basic products and services;

2. Availability of professional training/retraining courses for members of the target communities is one of the main preconditions for their employment and income enhancement after the pandemic. It is important to train them in professions that are highly demanded on the market and thus provide more employment opportunities for the population;

3. The population that grows agricultural products finds it difficult to sell them for various reasons. International and local NGOs and state institutions (for example, the Ministry of Environment and Agriculture, its affiliated Rural Development Agency, the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development Agency "Produce in Georgia") can assist farmers in setting appropriate standards for production and processing as well as participating in various exhibitions and fairs. This is possible through transferring knowledge and skills, as well as providing financial assistance. Such support will increase demand for products. The non-governmental and private sectors can help families involved in agriculture engage in short supply chains (less intermediate links from producer to the final buyer, such as collectors and wholesale traders) which will lead to increased income. To improve market access, central and local governments may impose low quotas on agricultural purchases, allowing small producers to participate in state tenders.

## Grocery Products, Goods of Primary Consumption and Services

Grocery stores and food supplies were available to a vast majority of the population surveyed in the Samegrelo region, either in their own or in neighboring settlements. In Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti, about half of the population had difficulty accessing grocery products and shops. As a result of the pandemic, a small number of shops were closed and access to them was slightly but still limited.

Prior to the pandemic, high prices on grocery products also constituted a serious problem, rising further after the quarantine which is confirmed by the increased number of dissatisfied respondents, as well as official statistics. It is worth mentioning that despite the allocation of 10,000,000 GEL from the state budget, the population still thinks that the prices of subsidized products have risen greatly. Therefore, a majority of the residents (especially the socially vulnerable and families with 4 or more children), was satisfied with the initiative of kindergartens and local governments to distribute grocery products to children.

Electricity, with rare exceptions, is available to everyone in the target communities. Most of the population in Mtskheta-Mtianeti does not have drinking water. The same problem affects 22.1% of the population in Shida Kartli. Almost everyone in Samegrelo has access to drinking water, but in the village of Ingiri, according to residents, its pollution causes health problems for locals. The situation is similar in Shida Kartli, where secondary pipes were used for the drinking water networking in one of the settlements which led to providing polluted drinking water to the population. There are also some cases when the network does not work properly and the population is simply not supplied with water.

Getting proper care for children and the elderly became important during the pandemic. State-imposed restrictions on movement, rising prices for grocery products and medicine, and limited access to hospitals and clinics have put these groups at particular risk. They often depend on other family members. During the pandemic, when most families had problems, the transportation of the residents was provided by state and private companies. Most of the population in all three regions have access to public transport. However, due to rough roads, some settlements are avoided by private companies, forcing residents to walk several kilometers. This problem has been bothering the population for a long time.

### **Recommendations**

1. It is important to provide net-metering and system networking in the villages. It will increase the population's access to drinking water and first of all, the local government can contribute to that. When the government fails to fulfill its obligations due to its faults or indifference, the non-governmental sector can get involved and provide the community with the necessary construction materials, so that the population can manage the construction work on their own. It is important to conduct a drinking water analysis in the village of Ingiri in the Samegrelo region and provide information about it to the population. Both local authorities and non-governmental organizations can undertake this. If water is not suitable for drinking, it is essential to work with the community on this issue. If the water quality is satisfactory, the population will not have to be concerned about it;

2. The state and non-governmental organizations should take more active care of vulnerable groups. The state can provide vulnerable groups with grocery products and basic necessities. There were several cases during the quarantine when the population was satisfied. The non-governmental sector, despite the difficulties connected to this process, is able to mobilize the community and provide physical assistance to vulnerable groups (e.g. provide firewood, drinking water, and grocery products);

3. Installation of new asphalt surfaces on central and internal roads in the villages left without public transport due to rough roads is essential. The government may instruct state-owned companies to arrange transportation of the population in these villages. It is also possible to subsidize private companies.

## Healthcare

The spread of Covid-19 has had a major impact on access to health products and services. Facts of addressing medical facilities across the country increased, which damaged the system. According to the Minister of Health, Ekaterine Tikaradze, on October 21, 2020, ambulance crews had a delay of 2 to 3 hours, which is completely acceptable during a pandemic.

According to the population, the quality of health services in the regions is very low, mostly due to the low qualification of doctors. This is often compounded by the lack of facilities and equipment in local outpatients and hospitals. For this reason, the population of Mtskheta-Mtianeti and Shida Kartli mostly address hospitals in Tbilisi, whilst Samegrelo residents travel to Kutaisi hospitals.

Transporting to hospitals and clinics has become significantly difficult following the quarantine. This especially affected the population of Samegrelo. 49.7% of respondents in the region said that movement before the quarantine was very easy and only 8.9% believed it was difficult. After quarantine, 60.4% noted it was difficult to get to hospitals and clinics.

Prices for medicines and health services, according to a large part of the population, were high even before the quarantine. However, after quarantine, their number increased even more, which is confirmed by official statistics.

### **Recommendations**

1. Because of Covid-19, ambulances find it difficult to deal with increased calls in the regions. The situation is worsened by complicated transportation to clinics and hospitals. In order to provide the population with access to health services, the state needs to ensure unconstrained movement of ambulance vehicles by providing them with simplified permits for restricted movement or public transport;
2. The government assists part of the population by subsidized medicines. However, due to rising prices, especially during the pandemic, the value of allocated funds decreases and the population has to pay more money from their own pockets. Therefore, it is important to fund a percentage of the cost for medicines instead of a fixed amount;
3. To equip outpatient clinics and medical schools and provide basic medicines to increase access to basic health care services.

## Security

A small percentage of respondents believe quarantine has had a negative impact on domestic violence. Some of them think that it affected women and men to the same extent. However, according to some respondents, only women are victims of domestic violence.

The general criminogenic situation was assessed negatively in Samegrelo. 26.8% of the respondents in the region thought the situation was bad even before the quarantine. During and after the quarantine, the number of dissatisfied people increased slightly. It should be noted that the general criminal situation was not mentioned at all among the problems in Mtskheta-Mtianeti, while in Shida Kartli only a few respondents mentioned it.

Close location to the administrative boundary line causes problems to the population. According to the respondents in Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti, there is a high risk of kidnapping from the other side of the conflict. Fear of armed confrontation is quite high in both regions. In Shida Kartli, about a third of respondents were bothered by shootings from the other side of the conflict.



### **Recommendations**

- 1.To strengthen cooperation and communication between the population and "security providers" (police, army) so that the population knows that there will be a rapid response to similar incidents;
- 2.Provide information to the population within the framework of ongoing negotiations, such as the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), in order to prevent dissemination of fake news and give people credible information. This will partially ease tensions for residents living alongside the administrative boundary line.

## **Social Mobilization and Coping Mechanisms**

Although the survey revealed that mobilizing women was easier than men, it was difficult to implement a joint initiative in Georgia, including the target settlements. It is worth mentioning that according to the respondents, women are more prone to mobilize than men. There are several reasons for this. Some people do not believe that they can change anything. Others think that problem-solving is the government's responsibility. Distrust of each other also hinders cooperation. In addition to these subjective circumstances, some reasons go beyond the population's capabilities. The need for funds in order to undertake some changes is one of them.

For the reasons mentioned above, only 6.1% of the respondents in all three regions stated that their settlement had taken a joint initiative or action to address the problems caused by Covid-19. It should be noted that the vast majority of initiatives have either partially or completely failed to solve the problem.

Because community members find it difficult to work together and help each other, they often expect support from others. International and local NGOs, central and local governments actively assisted the population of the target settlements with grocery products, utility subsidies, hygiene items, and more.

Respondents believe that the government, international and local NGOs, the police, and relatives can provide them with the most effective assistance. More and more people feel skeptical about getting any kind of aid from criminal authorities, churches, etc.

### **Recommendations**

- 1.The population needs to acknowledge the importance and consequences of social mobilization and collective working. A short-term solution to this could be the facilitation of the completion of abandoned projects. The governmental, the non-governmental, and the private sector can play a positive role in this;
- 2.A long-term solution is to work with young people and support volunteering. While using neighbors' internet, part of the students realize both the need for each other's support and have a very simple but excellent example. It is important to further encourage this approach from an early age.

## **State Response to Problems Caused by Covid-19**

Authorities have taken various measures to prevent and eliminate the problems caused by Covid-19. A vast majority of the population thinks that most of the taken measures were adequate in response to the threats. However, some decisions have many opponents. For example, in Shida Kartli, 45.7% of the respondents believe that the restriction of public transport was unnecessary and the government's reaction was redundant. The same opinion is shared by a significant part of the respondents in Samegrelo and Shida Kartli.

The effectiveness of the measures was assessed more negatively. According to the population, the criteria for distributing aid are unclear and often extremely poor families are left beyond state assistance programs.

A lot of people lost their jobs due to the announcement of the state of emergency. For others, it made it difficult to sell agricultural products. For these reasons, the income of the population was reduced and the population had to even use their small savings.

## Recommendations

1. Imposing less strict restrictions, for example, admission of people to ritual halls or restaurants in compliance with regulations will restore jobs in villages and generate income for the part of the population.
2. Establishing clear criteria of acceptance for state programs and strictly adhering to them will ensure the proper selection of families in need, provide the necessary support to them, and will destroy the widespread belief that it is impossible to get into state programs without nepotism.
3. Provision of transport during quarantine (if necessary), especially to remote communities that are located far from administrative centers and, at the same time, are heavily dependent on grocery products, goods of primary consumption, and medicine.

## Annex 1: Research Methodology

### Research Methodology

To obtain data quantitative and qualitative components were used in the study. The quantitative component of the study included surveying the population, while the qualitative component consisted of focus groups and in-depth interviews.

### Quantitative Component

The main task of the quantitative component of the study was to collect representative statistical data of the target population. The target population of the study consisted of the adult population living in three areas: Dusheti municipality (Gremiskhevi and Mchadijvari communities), Shida Kartli (Mereti, Kvemo Nikozi, Ergneti and Kelktseuli communities), and Samegrelo (Ganmukhuri, Ingiri, Anaklia, and Koki communities). The results of the study are representative of the adult population of each of these areas, as well as for the adult population of all three areas in total.

Stratified cluster sampling was used as the sampling method in the quantitative study. Selection is stratified at three levels: area (first level stratum), community (second level stratum), and settlement (third level stratum). In each settlement, the interviewers selected households (primary level sampling cluster unit) using the “systematic random wandering” method, during which the step size (interval) was determined from 1 to 5, depending on the size of the settlement. In each selected household, one adult individual was selected based on the last-birthday method. It was determined to conduct 200 interviews in each study area with an approximate response rate of 80%. The number of samples was distributed among the settlements in proportion to the number of households living in the settlements included in the second level stratum. During the fieldwork itself, sampling rates were adjusted in several settlements in accordance with the specification of the number of households actually living in the settlements, as well logistics resources and imposed regulations due to the spread of Covid-19. The sampling distribution, responses, and non-responses are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Sampling distribution**

Stratum			Sample	Nonresponse	Response
1st level	2nd level	3rd level			
Dusheti Area	Gremiskhevi	Akhali Burghuli	12	3	9
		Mikeliani	11	2	9
		Petriani	21	8	13
		Karkushaani	6	0	6
		Kedeloba	16	5	11
		Tsikhisubani – Dzveli Burghuli	17	2	15
	Mchadijvari	Bakakurebi	26	7	19
		Zemo Kodistskaro	12	1	11
		Iltoza	19	6	13
		Odzisi	65	24	41
		Zemo Shuakhevi	38	13	25
		Kvemo Kodistskaro	9	3	6
		Kvemo Shuakhevi	26	6	20
Samegrelo Area	Ganmukhuri	Ganmukhuri	37	0	37
	Ingiri	Ingiri	53	3	50
	Anaklia	Anaklia	65	16	49
	Koki	Koki	50	0	50
Shida Kartli Area	Mereti	Mereti	16	0	16
		Karbi	6	1	5
		Gugutiantkari	8	0	8
		Zardiantkari	2	0	2
		Koshka	12	0	12
		Kere	7	0	7
	Kvemo Nikozi	Kvemo Nikozi	50	0	50
	Ergneti	Ergneti	70	18	52
	Kelktseuli	Kelktseuli	70	11	59

In order to reduce non-response bias, in case of non-response, or failed contact, the interviewers did not have the right to change the selected member or household, and in such case, they had to make up to three attempts to contact the respondent.

The overall response rate was 82% and 595 respondents were interviewed. The response was defined according to the AAPOR standard, according to which a completed interview is considered an interview in which at least 50% of the questions received a valid answer (excluding the "Refused" and "Non-compliant" options). Table 2 shows the absolute number of responses, the response rate, and the average margin of error for the variables completed by at least 90% of the respondents.

**Table 2. Responses and the average margin of error with regard to strata**

Stratum	Number of Responses	Response Rate	Average Margin of Error
Dusheti Area	198	71%	2.5%
Shida Kartli Area	211	88%	5.0%
Samegrelo Area	186	91%	3.8%

Fieldwork was conducted from September 19, 2020, to October 3. All interviews were conducted in Georgian using the face-to-face interview method. The research tool was a structured questionnaire consisting of 57 questions, out of which 43 questions were closed-ended, 7 questions were open-ended and 7 were semi-open questions (with the possibility of choosing the "other" option). The average duration of the interview was 36 minutes. Data entry was performed using CSPro software, which provides logical control over the entered data. The quality of the data was checked during the database cleaning process.

Data were weighted based on each respondent's probability and demographic distribution. The probabilistic component of weight was calculated based on the number of households in the second level stratum and the number of adult members living in the household. Further corrections of probabilistic weight coefficients were made based on the demographic distribution, namely the distribution of the population by sex in each of the second-level stratum. Extreme values of weight coefficients were dropped at levels 1 and 99 percent to avoid extreme weight ratios and, consequently, an increase in errors.

#### Qualitative Component

The qualitative component of the study aimed to enrich the statistical data with an in-depth understanding of the research issues. This component consisted of focus groups and in-depth interviews.

Focus groups were conducted with representatives of local communities and parents of local school students. Each focus group consisted of 5 to 11 adult participants selected by local stakeholders of the IDPWA „Consent” from the respective population groups. Even though it was impossible to achieve a perfect balance among focus group participants, mixed representation by sex, age, and employment status was taken into account in the selection of participants. Additionally, the parents' focus groups were attended by parents of students in grades 1-6, 7-10, and 11-12.

Focus groups were conducted from October 15 to October 25. A semi-structured discussion guide was used as a research tool. The duration of the discussions ranged from 40 minutes to 2 hours. The composition of the focus groups is summarized in Table 3:

**Table 3. The list and composition of focus groups**

Population Group	Community	Number of Participants	Women	Men
Parents	Mchadijvari	8	5	3
Community Representatives	Gremiskhevi	11	8	3
Parents	Gori	9	7	2
Community Representatives	Gori	9	7	2
Parents	Samegrelo	9	6	3
Community Representatives	Samegrelo	10	5	5

In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide.

During Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, audio recordings were made. Also, written notes on key issues were made during the discussions and interviews.



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