Background

The total territory of Georgia measures approximately 6.5 million hectares. Forest fund land, managed by the Georgian Forestry Agency, occupies around 3 million hectares and includes bogs, wetlands, and other non-forested areas. Pure forest land occupies approximately 2,700 hectares. The information has not been updated through a forest inventory for more than 10 years. Georgian forest resources are estimated to be 450 million cubic meters.

Georgia’s forests are threatened by unsustainable forest practices and climate change. Some examples of these unsustainable practices are illegal logging and grazing. The factors which cause the degradation and loss of Georgia’s forests are intertwined in a complex system. International and domestic markets in Georgia focus mainly on profit, and stakeholders pay little or no attention to the environmental and social impacts of their activities. Due to the lack of alternative energy supplies, people in forest dependent communities are forced to cut trees illegally. National forestry policy is poorly developed while legal frameworks are weakened by gaps and conflicts in the legislation.

The Program

The main objectives of the Program in Georgia are to contribute to establishing legal and sustainable forest management and practices, strengthening the rule of law, and enhancing local livelihoods. To achieve these goals, the country work plan includes four sets of activities:

- Raising awareness of the Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG) process, public involvement in decision making and strengthening communication capacities of key institutions;
- Increasing national ownership and improving FLEG planning and monitoring by national institutions;
- Training and capacity building of decision makers and specialists from stakeholder authorities for improved forest governance and law enforcement;
- Regional/cross country collaboration and knowledge sharing.

The ENPI FLEG Program has recently started working with the Forestry Agency on the preparation of a communication strategy for the Agency, including a communication action plan, brand book, and website.
Experts from the Vasil Gulisashvili Forest Institute, a partner of the Program, conducted a study on the economic and social impact of unsustainable forest practices in Georgia. An initial phase of the study looked at analyzing key legislation such as the Georgian Forest Code; the Georgian Law on Licenses and Permissions; and the Law on Self-government and Adopted Forest Management Plans. The outcomes of the study concluded that forest legislation requires improvement in order to achieve an effective mechanism to ensure the sustainable use of forest resources. In addition it was concluded that the decentralization of the forest system is needed; responsibilities and duties of local forestry units in the decision-making process need to be identified; and procedures for forest usage permission must be simplified.

Civil journalism – which by definition is independent from political or economic pressures – has become a very popular concept because it is seen as a main prerequisite for building civil society and improving law enforcement and good governance. On the basis of this trend, the ENPI FLEG team in Georgia has organized training for journalists. A first training session in Environmental Civil Journalism took place in Abastumani. Nineteen journalists (selected from 80 applicants) representing national and regional media, including newspapers, radio, TV stations, internet portals, news agencies and media related organizations were selected and took part in the training. Another training was held in Telavi and involved journalists from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Russia. Numerous video clips, blogs and articles which can be found at www.enpi-fleg.org resulted from the meetings.

A regional workshop on Trans-Boundary Timber Trade was held in Tbilisi, Georgia. The main objective of the workshop was to assess the current situation of transboundary timber trade in the countries of the ENA Region (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, the Russian Federation and Ukraine) plus Turkey. Existing problems and capacity gaps that could induce wood smuggling and other illegal activities were identified and mitigation strategies were discussed. The workshop contributed to the creation of one of the seven major outputs of the Program: improved regional and sub-regional collaboration and knowledge sharing.