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Transforming Conservation Landscapes: Participatory Approaches and Community Belonging in Restoration Projects in Georgia

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of conservation practice, community participation, and belonging through a case study of SABUKO (Society for Nature Conservation) in Georgia. Drawing on documentary analysis of multiple conservation initiatives, including grassland restoration in the Kakheti steppes, landscape connectivity planning, and youth empowerment initiatives, the study explores how environmental organizations can either reproduce or challenge existing power structures that determine who belongs in conservation spaces. The findings reveal recurring relationship between expert-driven and community-centered approaches, and highlight the importance of creating genuinely inclusive governance mechanisms. SABUKO's evolving practice, shifting from species-focused interventions to integrated landscape restoration with socio-economic dimensions, offers insights for conservation organizations seeking to balance ecological and social equity objectives.

Keywords: conservation governance, community participation, biodiversity restoration, youth empowerment, place attachment, social capital

1. Introduction

The question "Who gets to belong?" resonates deeply within contemporary conservation practice, where decisions about land use, resource access, and environmental governance carry profound implications for human communities and non-human nature alike. In post-Soviet Georgia, where decades of centralized resource management have given way to new conservation paradigms, this question

takes on particular urgency. The Society for Nature Conservation, SABUKO, as Georgia's BirdLife International partner, provides a compelling case study for examining how conservation organizations navigate power, place, and participation in biodiversity protection.

SABUKO operates in a complex socio-ecological context characterized by degraded landscapes resulting from Soviet-era resource exploitation, ethnic and linguistic diversity in project areas, traditional pastoral livelihoods under pressure from climate change and economic transformation, and evolving governance structures. The organization's work spans multiple scales, from species conservation to landscape restoration in the Kakheti steppes, to capacity-building initiatives that empower youth and local communities.

This paper examines SABUKO's portfolio of conservation initiatives to understand how participatory approaches can transform relationships between conservation organizations and communities. The analysis reveals tensions between technical expertise and local knowledge, between organizational efficiency and inclusive decision-making, and between conservation priorities and livelihood needs. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing conservation models that promote both ecological integrity and social equity.

1.1 Research Questions

This study addresses three interconnected questions:

- How do SABUKO's conservation interventions shape experiences of belonging and exclusion for different stakeholder groups in Georgia's rural landscapes?
- What mechanisms does SABUKO employ to facilitate community participation and youth empowerment, and how effective are these in challenging existing power structures?
- What insights does SABUKO's multi-project portfolio offer for developing more inclusive and equitable conservation practice?

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This research synthesizes three bodies of theory. First, it draws on political ecology (Robbins, 2019), which examines how power relations shape human-environment interactions, and environmental justice frameworks (Schlosberg, 2007), emphasizing distributive, procedural, and recognition-based dimensions of governance. The concept of "belonging" is analyzed through Yuval-Davis's (2011) framework distinguishing between belonging as emotional attachment and the politics of belonging as boundary-setting processes that determine rights of access.

Second, the paper integrates social capital theory (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986) and place attachment theory (Lewicka, 2011; Scannell & Gifford, 2010) to analyze how conservation interventions affect community cohesion, trust networks, and emotional bonds to landscape. Place attachment, specifically the tripartite framework

of person, place, and process, provides analytical purchase on how pastoralists and youth relate to the Kakheti steppe as a site of identity and livelihood, and how that relationship is altered by conservation management decisions.

Third, participatory conservation literature (Berkes, 2004; Armitage et al., 2009) highlights the importance of local knowledge, adaptive management, and power-sharing in achieving conservation and development objectives simultaneously. Drawing on Cornwall's (2002) distinction between "invited spaces" and "claimed spaces," the analysis examines whether SABUKO's engagement mechanisms enable genuine co-production of knowledge and decision-making or remain within expert-governed frameworks.

1.3 Socio-Ecological Context

Georgia's position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia creates exceptional biodiversity (BirdLife International, 2021; Georgia Today, 2023). However, this natural wealth faces multiple pressures including habitat fragmentation, unsustainable resource extraction, overgrazing, and climate change (Berkes, 2004; Robbins, 2019; West et al., 2006).

The Kakheti region in eastern Georgia, where much of SABUKO's conservation work is concentrated, illustrates the intertwined ecological, social, and historical challenges facing biodiversity restoration (SABUKO, 2020, 2023; Georgia Today, 2024). The Georgian steppe between the Iori and Alazani rivers forms a mosaic of grasslands, semi-desert habitats, and gallery forests, hosting a remarkable assemblage of fauna that includes Palearctic raptors, Indomalayan migratory birds, and even Afrotropical species that reach the region along migration corridors (Bluwstein, 2017; Harris, 2004). Historically, these ecosystems were shaped and maintained by centuries of semi-nomadic transhumance pastoralism, in which livestock movements across summer and winter pastures prevented overgrazing, promoted vegetation regeneration, and maintained habitat heterogeneity (Ostrom, 1996; Undeland, 2005; Leach et al., 1999).

Soviet-era interventions profoundly disrupted these systems. Construction of the Dali Reservoir altered hydrological regimes, while collectivization removed local control over grazing territories and restricted seasonal mobility, leading to widespread steppe degradation, soil erosion, and fragmentation of ecological corridors (Ioras & Abrudan, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Post-Soviet economic transitions further complicated the picture: land privatization introduced new conflicts over resource access, while market integration incentivized intensive grazing in accessible areas and abandonment of marginal lands (Robbins, 2019; SABUKO, 2024).

Conservation interventions in this context must navigate complex socio-ecological dynamics. Ethnic diversity matters: Kakheti hosts both Georgian and Azerbaijani pastoral communities with distinct cultural practices and environmental knowledge (Armitage et al., 2009; Berkes, 2004). Generational differences are also significant, as

older herders might hold ecological knowledge while younger people may have migrated to urban centers (Lewicka, 2011; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Gendered patterns of resource use and decision-making further influence who can access pastures, participate in conservation discussions, or benefit from livelihood programs (Cornwall, 2002; Arnstein, 1969; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2018), treating SABUKO as an instrumental case that illuminates broader dynamics of participation and belonging in community-based conservation. The case study methodology is appropriate here because the research questions require contextual, in-depth analysis of how organizational strategies interact with social and ecological conditions over time, a task for which quantitative approaches would be insufficient.

Data were collected through systematic documentary analysis of publicly available sources published between 2019 and 2025. The corpus comprised: (i) SABUKO project reports, annual reports, and program documentation; (ii) peer-reviewed publications and technical reports on ecological outcomes; (iii) media articles, capturing interviews with organizational members; and (iv) documents related to Georgia's conservation governance framework. Triangulation across these source types strengthens the internal validity of findings (Patton, 2002).

Operationalization of key concepts followed established frameworks. "Community participation" was operationalized along a four-level typology adapted from Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation: information-sharing, consultation, collaboration, and co-governance. Evidence for each level was coded from project documentation describing decision-making processes, forum structures, and benefit-sharing mechanisms. "Community belonging" was operationalized using Scannell and Gifford's (2010) tripartite framework, examining person-level emotional attachment, place-level significance, and process-level engagement with landscape management.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure: familiarization with data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Three overarching themes emerged inductively: (1) mechanisms and quality of participation; (2) dimensions of belonging and exclusion; and (3) relationship between expert-driven and community-centered conservation. These themes structured the findings and discussion sections.

The analysis focuses on two major SABUKO initiatives: (1) Restoring Gallery Forest and Grasslands in the Iori River Valley (2019-2022); (2) Kakheti Steppes: A Fragile Balance between a Living Landscape or a Future Desert (2022-2027). Together, these represent SABUKO's evolution from site-specific ecological restoration to integrated, multi-actor landscape governance.

2.1 Limitations

This analysis relies on publicly available information, which may not fully capture community perspectives or internal organizational dynamics. Future research would benefit from direct interviews with diverse stakeholders including pastoralist families, youth participants, and local officials

3. Findings: SABUKO's Conservation Portfolio

3.1 The Iori River Valley Project: Grounding Conservation in Livelihood

SABUKO's flagship landscape restoration initiative, Restoring Gallery Forest and Grasslands in the Iori River Valley (2019–2022), represents a shift from species-focused conservation to ecosystem-level intervention (SABUKO, 2020, 2024). Launched with support from Cambridge Conservation Initiative's Endangered Landscapes and Seascapes Programme, the project addressed severe habitat degradation in Chachuna Managed Reserve and surrounding territories (BirdLife International, 2021; Georgia Today, 2024).

Key ecological interventions included rotational grazing systems to improve pasture conditions, establishment of eight watering ponds and a well to reduce pressure on gallery forests, grassland restoration experiments using hay clippings and controlled sheep manure application, and scientific monitoring of habitat recovery (Berkes, 2004; Armitage et al., 2009; Bluwstein, 2017). Community engagement was operationalized at the consultation level: SABUKO conducted socio-economic surveys with 82 farmers to assess how rotational grazing affected economic outcomes and to understand farmer needs (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2002; Patton, 2002). This data collection grounded conservation planning in community realities (West et al., 2006; Robbins, 2019).

The project also introduced the DOVLATI umbrella brand for traditional Guda cheese production, hypothesizing that higher prices for authentically produced cheese would motivate farmers to reduce livestock numbers while maintaining income (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986). This market-based conservation mechanism reflects an attempt to align economic incentives with ecological sustainability, though its effectiveness depends on farmers' willingness to adopt new production models and on access to premium markets (SABUKO, 2021; Bluwstein, 2017). From a social capital perspective, the brand initiative also has potential to build bonding capital among participating farmers and bridging capital connecting them to urban consumer networks (Putnam, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

3.2 Kakheti Steppes Landscape Restoration: Connectivity and Co-Management

Building on the Iori Valley work, the Kakheti Steppes project (2022–2027) scales restoration efforts across approximately 25,000 hectares of pastures (SABUKO, 2024). Rather than concentrating on single-species protection, SABUKO adopted a landscape approach integrating habitat restoration, sustainable pasture

management, and collaboration with local land users to support multiple species simultaneously (Berkes, 2004; Armitage et al., 2009; Bluwstein, 2017).

Restoration actions consequently moved beyond demonstration plots. In degraded steppe areas, temporary rest from grazing allowed vegetation recovery, while rotational grazing schemes redistributed livestock pressure and created recovery windows (SABUKO, 2020; Putnam, 2000). Importantly, ecological interventions were closely coordinated with livelihood-focused actions: rotational grazing was framed as a productivity tool rather than a restriction, and the Dovlati brand linked sustainable land use with income opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Georgia Today, 2024).

The project language increasingly reflects rights-based conservation principles, explicitly referencing the "rights of local communities," "shared management," and "active involvement" of pastoralists and municipal stakeholders (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Rotational grazing systems are negotiated with herders through consultations and joint pasture planning rather than imposed externally (Armitage et al., 2009; West et al., 2006). Socio-economic surveys and regular meetings inform where restoration activities can occur without undermining household livelihoods (Patton, 2002; Bluwstein, 2017). However, meaningful inclusion requires more than consultation meetings. It depends on whether communities influence priorities, co-design interventions, share responsibility for outcomes, and retain a sense of ownership (Ostrom, 1996; Robbins, 2019). The degree to which local communities act as co-managers rather than beneficiaries will determine whether restoration outcomes are durable beyond project timelines (Berkes, 2004; Armitage et al., 2009).

3.3 Youth Engagement and Intergenerational Capacity Building

SABUKO incorporated youth engagement as a complementary strategy to strengthen long-term environmental governance (SABUKO, 2021; Georgia Today, 2024). Recognizing that sustainable rangeland management requires continuity across generations, the organization supported youth-led learning and advocacy initiatives designed to build local capacity for conservation participation beyond the lifespan of individual projects (Berkes, 2004; Armitage et al., 2009).

Activities included training workshops for students and youth workers, and establishment of local hubs in Kakheti as informal spaces for coordination, education, and community action (Cornwall, 2002; Bluwstein, 2017). Through these hubs, young participants organized field trips, school outreach, and public information events linked to steppe restoration, addressing an often-overlooked dimension of conservation: whose voices shape future land-use decisions (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Lewicka, 2011). In rural areas of Kakheti, where young people frequently migrate for education or employment, creating meaningful local involvement may contribute both to environmental stewardship and to community resilience (Putnam, 2000; West et al., 2006).

However, youth participation does not automatically translate into meaningful influence over project priorities or governance (Arnstein, 1969; Yuval-Davis, 2011). While educational initiatives, including training courses, created spaces for young people to learn, network, and propose initiatives, these activities primarily reinforced awareness-building and advocacy skills rather than formal authority in landscape-level planning (Patton, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Questions remain about whether youth engaged through clubs and workshops transition into substantive roles shaping conservation agendas and resource management decisions (Ostrom, 1996; Robbins, 2019).

3.4 Awareness-Raising, Education, and Epistemic Inclusion

Across all projects, SABUKO invests in awareness-raising and environmental education, including the development of educational materials, engagement with schools and eco-clubs, public campaigns, and animated films in Georgian and Azerbaijani about sustainable practices (SABUKO, 2021; Georgia Today, 2024). The multilingual approach demonstrates attention to Georgia's linguistic diversity and cultural responsiveness, and from a social capital perspective, it builds bridging capital across ethnic community boundaries, potentially strengthening inter-community cooperation in shared landscapes (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986).

Bird ringing activities combine scientific data collection with public education, making scientific processes visible and inviting public participation in knowledge production, which potentially democratizes conservation science (Berkes, 2004; Armitage et al., 2009). Critical analysis, however, raises questions about whose knowledge and values are privileged in educational materials, and whether educational initiatives create space for questioning existing power structures or primarily build support for expert-designed solutions (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2002; Robbins, 2019).

4. Discussion: Participation, Power, and Belonging

4.1 Mechanisms of Participation: Invited vs. Claimed Spaces

SABUKO's portfolio reveals multiple mechanisms of stakeholder engagement, ranging from information-sharing and consultation to more collaborative approaches. Using Arnstein's (1969) typology, most initiatives occupy the consultation and collaboration rungs, with limited evidence of co-governance. Socio-economic surveys and awareness campaigns represent consultation: they gather community input but ultimate decision-making authority remains with the organization. Joint pasture planning and participatory mapping represent movement toward collaboration, where communities influence decisions within organizationally defined parameters.

Cornwall's distinction between invited and claimed spaces is instructive here. Most SABUKO initiatives operate within invited spaces, where the organization defines agendas and then incorporates community participation within those parameters. This arrangement is not inherently problematic, as conservation organizations must

retain certain boundaries to effectively pursue their objectives. However, the relationship is not purely one-directional. While institutional frameworks shape the terms of participation, community engagement can also influence organizational priorities and practices. This dynamic raises a central question: does participation mainly enhance the implementation of pre-determined solutions, or does it meaningfully shape which problems are identified and addressed? True co-production, following Ostrom's conception, would position communities as equal partners in defining problems as well as implementing solutions.

Compared with similar initiatives, SABUKO's approach shares characteristics with community-based natural resource management programs in Eastern Europe analyzed by Bluwstein (2017), where participatory rhetoric often exceeded participatory reality in early project phases but deepened with organizational learning over time. The Kakheti case suggests a similar trajectory: early projects relied heavily on expert-led surveys, while later initiatives incorporate joint planning sessions and community-initiated monitoring, suggesting genuine learning and adaptation.

4.2 Dimensions of Belonging: A Multi-Level Analysis

Drawing on Yuval-Davis's (2011) framework alongside Scannell and Gifford's (2010) place attachment model, SABUKO's work can be analyzed across four dimensions of belonging:

Physical belonging: Conservation interventions directly affect who can access particular landscapes and when. Rotational grazing systems determine which pastoralist families use specific pastures during the season. From a place attachment perspective, these interventions alter the "place" dimension of belonging, the physical characteristics of the landscape that anchor community identity. Restrictions, even if ecologically justified, can weaken the emotional bonds that motivate long-term stewardship.

Economic belonging: Project interventions influence who benefits from conservation. The DOVLATI brand could create new income opportunities for traditional cheese producers, though participation may be uneven based on access to resources and markets. Here, Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding capital (within-group ties) and bridging capital (cross-group links) is relevant: the brand initiative may strengthen bonding capital among participating herders while providing bridging capital to new market networks, but risks excluding households lacking social or economic capital to participate.

Political belonging: Participation mechanisms determine whose voices count in environmental governance. Hubs and awareness campaigns potentially expand the conservation decision-making constituency. However, structural barriers including education levels, language proficiency, gender norms, and ethnic hierarchies may limit effective participation even where opportunities formally exist.

Epistemic belonging: Conservation practice involves questions about whose knowledge is legitimate. SABUKO's scientific approach brings valuable technical expertise. Yet if local ecological knowledge and traditional practices are treated merely as data to be collected rather than as equally valid knowledge systems, epistemic exclusion persists. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital is applicable: herders and women with traditional ecological knowledge may possess high cultural capital that goes unrecognized within scientifically framed conservation frameworks.

4.3 Gender, Ethnicity, and Intersectionality

Critical questions remain: How do conservation interventions affect women and men differently in pastoral households? Do participation mechanisms account for gendered constraints on mobility, time, and public speaking? Are women's traditional ecological knowledge and livelihood priorities actively incorporated into project design?

Applying Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional lens highlights how gender intersects with ethnicity, class, age, and other dimensions to shape conservation experiences. Young Azerbaijani women in pastoral families face compounded barriers compared with older Georgian men in the same region: gendered restrictions on mobility, minority language barriers to formal participation, and age-related exclusion from decision-making fora. Effective inclusion requires understanding and addressing these overlapping forms of marginalization. Studies from comparable contexts in Central Asia (Harris, 2004) suggest that gender-responsive approaches require not only inclusive design but sustained attention to how participation opportunities are communicated and whether women's contributions are valued and acted upon.

4.4 Comparing SABUKO with Broader Conservation Trends

SABUKO's approach aligns with broader shifts away from exclusionary "fortress conservation" models toward collaborative landscape governance (West et al., 2006). Comparative analysis with conservation initiatives in the wider post-Soviet space reveals both convergences and divergences. Like community-based conservation programs in Kazakhstan (Undeland, 2005) and Romania (Ioras & Abrudan, 2006), SABUKO navigates the tension between internationally funded conservation priorities and locally grounded livelihood needs. A distinguishing feature of SABUKO's approach is the integration of market-based mechanisms (DOVLATI brand) with habitat restoration, a combination less common in Eastern European conservation programs, which tend to separate livelihood support from ecological work.

The organization's evolution also reflects lessons from adaptive co-management theory (Armitage et al., 2009): earlier, more technocratic project designs gave way to more collaborative frameworks as organizational learning accumulated. The institutional trajectory from the 2018-2022 Iori Valley project to the 2022-2027

Kakheti Steppes initiative demonstrates measurable movement along Arnstein's participation ladder, from consultation toward collaboration, though the ceiling of co-governance remains aspirational rather than achieved.

What makes the Georgian case distinctive is the intersection of post-Soviet land tenure fragmentation, ethnic diversity within pastoral communities, and an active civil society conservation sector operating within a rapidly evolving regulatory environment. These conditions create both opportunities, high social capital in pastoral communities, strong indigenous knowledge systems and constraints legacy distrust of state institutions, inconsistent land governance that differ substantially from conservation contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia where much participatory conservation theory was developed.

5. Implications and Recommendations

5.1 For Conservation Practice

SABUKO's experience offers several lessons for conservation organizations seeking to promote both ecological and social outcomes:

- Multi-scalar approaches: Linking species conservation to landscape restoration to policy advocacy creates synergies but requires substantial organizational capacity.
- Economic integration: Market-based mechanisms like the DOVLATI brand can align conservation and development goals; equity implications require explicit monitoring.
- Generational perspectives: Youth leadership, not just education, brings innovation and sustained community engagement.
- Cultural responsiveness: Linguistic inclusion should extend to substantive participation, not just information translation.
- Scientific rigor with social awareness: Scientific expertise should complement rather than override local knowledge and community priorities.

5.2 For Policy and Governance

Georgia's evolving conservation governance framework could benefit from:

- Formalizing participatory mechanisms: Institutionalizing community participation in protected area management beyond project-level consultation.
- Rights-based approaches: Explicitly recognizing community rights to traditional territories, resources, and cultural practices.
- Gender mainstreaming: Requiring gender analysis and women's meaningful participation in all conservation programs.
- Knowledge pluralism: Formal mechanisms for incorporating traditional ecological knowledge alongside scientific expertise.

- Transparent benefit-sharing: Clear frameworks for equitable distribution of conservation benefits including ecotourism revenue and employment opportunities.

6. Conclusion

This examination of SABUKO's multi-faceted conservation work reveals an organization navigating complex questions about who belongs in the co-creation of environmental futures. The evolution from species-focused interventions to landscape-level restoration with explicit attention to community rights and youth empowerment demonstrates conceptual movement toward more inclusive conservation models. SABUKO's integration of scientific research, livelihood support, capacity-building, and engagement reflects understanding that biodiversity conservation requires addressing ecological, economic, and social dimensions simultaneously.

Projects must balance scientific expertise with local knowledge, manage the organization's need for efficiency alongside the slower pace required for meaningful community participation, and align ecological goals with the needs and priorities of local people. These challenges are not unique; they reflect broader trends in conservation, where traditional top-down approaches are increasingly questioned. The experience in the Kakheti Steppes illustrates how conservation efforts are evolving, combining scientific and community perspectives to achieve more effective and inclusive results.

Viewed through the lens of social capital and place attachment theory, SABUKO's work has the potential to strengthen both bonding capital within pastoral communities and bridging capital connecting those communities to broader conservation networks. However, realizing this potential requires moving from consultation to genuine co-governance, where communities influence priorities, co-design interventions, and share responsibility for outcomes.

The question "Who gets to belong?" remains complex, yet SABUKO has made notable strides in opening multiple entry points for participation. The organization actively engages communities, youth, women, and ethnic minorities, fostering spaces where diverse voices can influence conservation efforts. While the full realization of equitable power-sharing is an ongoing process, SABUKO demonstrates a clear commitment to integrating different knowledge systems, negotiating conflicts transparently, and allowing community priorities to inform conservation goals. Its approach illustrates how participatory and just conservation is not only possible but actively evolving, positioning SABUKO as a model for collaborative and inclusive landscape stewardship.

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