

# LEARNING FROM GOOD PRACTICES

**Spatial development,  
local economy and governance  
in Dusheti and Chiatura (Georgia)**

**Manana Vardzelashvili  
Rusudan Mirzikashvili (Advisor)**

**ST21**  
MOOC



# INITIATOR OF THE PROJECT

**COMUS** was instigated in Georgia a result of decades-long cooperation in the field of heritage-led development, involving local, national and international partners, led by the Ministry of Culture of Georgia and the Council of Europe.

COMUS was built on the Council of Europe “Pilot Project for Rehabilitation of Cultural Heritage in Historic Towns (PP2)”. PP2 was one of the first programmes in South-East Europe and the South Caucasus specifically designed for small and medium-size historic towns, with the aim of tapping into the value of the heritage of these often-forgotten places, inspiring professional interest, augmenting communities’ self-esteem, and local governments’ awareness of heritage-sensitive development. To a great extent, the positive experience of PP2 sparked the interest of historic towns in Georgia

to compete to become a COMUS pilot town. Two of them – Dusheti and Chiatura – were selected as participants, based on their motivation and human resources as well as the distinctive character of their local heritage.

The National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia (NACHPG) was key in putting the project into motion, with the support of the Council of Europe secretariat, local staff in the Tbilisi office and international experts.

These efforts were complemented by the local authorities and stakeholder groups of participant towns, as well as different ministries and public agencies, all brought together within the inter-ministerial Steering Committee.

Dusheti



# MOTIVATION

Sustainable social and economic development as well as the provision of a quality living and working environment for the citizens of Georgia are among the national priorities of the Georgian government. However, there are a great shortage of human, technical and financial resources to achieve these goals. The decades-long disintegration of the state planning apparatus, including the spatial and strategic planning framework, has resulted in the loss of the major integrative force to address spatial and socio-economic problems of historic towns.

COMUS was, therefore, welcomed as an opportunity to assist historic towns to fill the existing strategic planning gaps through an inclusive process of understanding and building on the value of resources, planning, and decision-making; achieving balanced and heritage-sensitive development; voicing the needs of local communities; improving the capacity and professional resources of local authorities; and streamlining bottom-up communication from local to national authorities.



Chiatura

Through exploring and testing innovative planning models, COMUS offered important instruments to respond to the following challenges in historic towns:

- (a) preservation of cultural heritage and increasing liveability*
- (b) balancing preservation and development through strategic planning and inclusive management, and*
- (c) increasing citizen participation in local decision-making*

COMUS invited local communities into the process of developing a strategy for the use of local resources. This inclusive approach echoed a broad spectrum of actions of all three components of Strategy 21: the promotion of social participation and good governance (S1, S6, S8), economic and territorial development (D1, D2, D4, D5, D6, D10), and increasing knowledge and education (K2, K4).

# METHODOLOGY

The COMUS methodological approach was in line with the strategic framework offered by the Council of Europe conventions and recommendations. Its special feature was the partnership with the Organization of World Heritage Cities, which provided international expertise, training, and networking opportunities for the participant towns.

The project employed the “learning by doing” method – guiding each participant town through step-by-step brainstorming, planning, and decision-making.

A distinctive element of this process was the collaborative platform of the local authorities and citizens – the local stakeholder groups – which played a key role in proposing and validating strategic development actions based on local heritage resources. The international partners assisted the process by offering expertise, on-the-job training, and study visits, improving the skills and competencies of local professionals and awareness of elected representatives.

Through a holistic approach to local sustainable development, the project contributed to:

- 1/ *voicing social demands, enabling public debate and participatory heritage identification (S1, S6);*
- 2/ *raising public awareness, training, and sensitizing young people on the values of local heritage (S8, K2; K4);*
- 3/ *realising the value of cultural heritage and promoting it as a key resource for sustainable development (D1);*
- 4/ *promotion of heritage as a stimulus for creating local jobs (D2);*
- 5/ *putting in place strategic plans for the rehabilitation of priority heritage sites, which are considered as having the potential to trigger local development (D4);*
- 6/ *promoting the sensitive reuse and adaptation of local heritage assets to new public functions (D5);*
- 7/ *bottom-up strategic planning to identify and validate medium and long-term objectives across the themes such as housing, public spaces, visitor management, cultural and educational development, and equipping local authorities with locally designed tools for stimulating investments (D6, S6, S1);*
- 8/ *the popularisation of participant towns within the country, as well as internationally and stimulating professional interest (D10).*

# OBSTACLES AND BARRIERS



An important challenge to the process of identification and realisation of the value of local heritage was the reconciliation of conflicting interests, particularly, when it came to powerful industrial corporations or national institutions. The project management team had to steer the process towards consensus while upholding local community interest as a priority.

One of the key challenges to the successful implementation of COMUS was gaining trust and credibility among the local communities of the participant towns. Persisting social-economic difficulties, traditionally top-down decision-making, and entrenched distrust towards authorities make local citizens passive and less adept at volunteering and collaborating on issues that do not directly relate to their immediate needs. Achieving trust and respect from the local community was an ultimate condition for an open and frank dialogue, which was made possible thanks to the efforts of the project's local teams.



A substantial challenge in terms of the realisation of the priority actions, identified and validated by local stakeholder groups, was a very poor state of conservation of local heritage vis-à-vis the lack of public and private funds. The majority of actions required substantial investment, which made it difficult to cover them from extremely limited local budgets. It took considerable efforts to negotiate access to international funds at the national level, thus filtering the proposed actions through national priorities. While some actions have been included in larger development programmes, the funding for the remaining actions is still pending. This situation risks amplifying the community's passivity towards proactive strategic planning in the future.



# IMPACT AND CHANGE

Through consolidating local, national, and international efforts, COMUS created an opportunity for the participant towns to voice local needs and priorities and emerge as active agents on political and professional plains.

On the community level, COMUS left a lasting legacy of hope, awareness, and interest in cultural heritage, particularly among young people.

The town Reference Plans highlighted local heritage assets, not as expert-validated elitist masterpieces but as people's heritage, in the context of their potential contribution to the local community's well-being. Official listing, technical assessments, and feasibility studies elaborated for these assets make it realistic to readily integrate them into various sectoral development/rehabilitation programs.

The steering and coordination platform established at the national level facilitated the inclusion of Dusheti historic town into the comprehensive regional development programme funded by the World Bank. As a result, in 2017-2018, the Dusheti historical park was renovated.<sup>1</sup> The refurbishment of the central part of the town will be completed in the forthcoming years.<sup>2</sup> COMUS outputs enabled the local community to voice concerns about some

1 Municipal Development Fund, retrieved from: [http://mdf.org.ge/?site-lang=en&site-path=tenders/completed\\_tenders/&id=3868](http://mdf.org.ge/?site-lang=en&site-path=tenders/completed_tenders/&id=3868)

2 Municipal Development Fund, retrieved from: <http://mdf.org.ge/?site-lang=en&site-path=news/&id=2749>

top-down decisions and demand the safeguarding and re-use of the former municipal tractor depot.

COMUS triggered transformative change for Chiatura, by highlighting its industrial and engineering infrastructure as invaluable national heritage. The project contributed to the increased attention of Georgian heritage professionals to 20th-century heritage as well as engineering and industrial heritage in Georgia. This discourse today occupies the

agendas of top architecture studios and lifestyle brands in the country.<sup>3</sup>

COMUS also supported the process of listing the most distinguished assets: the enrichment plant, cable-car line #25, and the former pioneer palace and made it possible to produce the technical assessments and feasibility studies for their

rehabilitation.

In 2018, the Ministry of Culture, becoming increasingly aware of the vast scale of deterioration of Chiatura's engineering and industrial heritage, particularly the unique system of aerial cableways, and the pervasive risks to these heritage assets, nominated the Aerial Cableway Network in Chiatura to the Seven Most Endangered Sites program of the Europa Nostra. The site was selected among the 12 shortlisted candidates which once again, demonstrated the importance of Chiatura's heritage at the national but also European level.<sup>4</sup>

3 Tbilisi Architecture Biennial 2020 <http://www.biennial.ge/en/project/industrial-heritage-tbilisi/30>

4 Europa Nostra <http://7mostendangered.eu/sites/aerial-cableway-network-in-chiatura-georgia/>



# IMPACT AND CHANGE

Regrettably, the necessary funding for Chiatura's selected priority actions has not been possible to mobilise to date. The subject emerges regularly in the portfolio of local elected officials as well as the national heritage authorities, however, without international assistance, it is unlikely to achieve a positive resolution in the future years. It would be extremely helpful to utilise the European experience in revitalising former mining towns to achieve high-quality physical rehabilitation of Chiatura's heritage, as well as ethical branding of the increasingly trendy local image.

COMUS has left a solid legacy setting the methodological standard for the heritage-led regeneration projects in Georgia- steering local and national stakeholders in the process of identification and realisation of the value of heritage resources, as well as the elaboration of development strategies based on cultural heritage values. The community-based approach is increasingly used in other heritage projects in Georgia which serves to harmonise heritage protection with the communities' needs for modernisation and achieving quality of life<sup>5</sup>.

---

5 Improvement of Management of Vardzia -Khertvisi Cultural Landscape implementing within the USAID Zrda Project in Georgia in cooperation with the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia <https://www.facebook.com/zrda.ge/posts/1053995388119439/>

Chiatura



# LESSONS LEARNED



## Chiatura

COMUS has been instrumental in operationalising the conceptual frameworks offered by the Council of Europe conventions, particularly the Faro framework convention. The project has opened new perspectives on the challenges of grassroots mobilisation in the context of peripheral towns in developing countries, where the persisting socio-economic needs make it difficult to position heritage among local priorities and to achieve high-quality rehabilitation – similar to those presented as role models from other European countries. On the other hand, it is also challenging to achieve ethical use of heritage in regeneration and re-branding, to avoid gentrification, cultural homogenisation, and touristification. COMUS has demonstrated the value of a place-based approach, where each solution is unique and rooted in local character and specificities. It also demonstrated the immense power of individual effort and enthusiasm in igniting collective action and transformative change.

COMUS has manifested the value of cultural heritage for society, although it has also highlighted the social stratification in realising the value of heritage. Heritage has the power to bond communities together, however, it also defines boundaries or “otherness” among social groups. The ultimate difficulty of managing heritage-based regeneration projects is in enabling all of these actors to have a voice while creating access for everyone to the common good.

The implementation of COMUS in Georgia has had a very positive impact on the empowerment and motivation of local authorities and communities, the development of professional skills, and the growing interest of donors in heritage-sensitive development. Both participant towns have gained recognition and respect. The COMUS methodology, through a proactive participation approach, and harmonisation of the heritage and sustainable development objectives, is a valuable achievement that has the potential to inspire heritage communities for a better future.



