



BARE LABOUR

Non-dominant ethnic groups in agriculture



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Non-dominant ethnic groups in agriculture

Social Justice Center

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Table of Contents

Preface	4
Research methodology and limitations	7
International legal and human rights framework	7
Research findings	10
Inclusion policy in the implementation of services and programs	10
Language policy in relation to representatives of minorities	14
The issue of redistribution of agricultural lands	15
Irrigation systems, infrastructure and agricultural technologies.....	18
Sharing new knowledge with the population	19
Special programs and local needs.....	20
Conclusion and recommendations	22

Preface

In recent years, the Georgian state has been significantly investing in the development of agriculture. The strategic visions of developing Georgia's agriculture, both in the previous years and in the new 2021-2027 cycle, - based on the principles of sustainable development, - envisage the creation of environment that will contribute to the increase of competitiveness in the agro-food sector, the stable growth of the production of high-quality products, the provision of food security and food safety and to overcoming poverty in rural areas. According to the 2021-2027 State Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development, "Since 2012, the Government of Georgia has taken significant and unprecedented-for-the-country steps for enhancing agricultural and rural development"¹, achieving sustainable development and inclusive economic growth. Even though the state invests hundreds of millions of GEL in agriculture every year and provides sizable subsidies, several experts doubt whether this sector can be profitable.² One of the angles in this criticism is that despite the increased support, economic growth in the agricultural sector is still ten times lower than the overall economic growth rate.³ It is worth noting that, based on the principles of welfare state and equality, and considering the need for stable economic development, the support of agriculture by the state and proactive work on its development is fundamentally important, as 41% of the population of Georgia is still employed in agriculture, and for some regions, it is still the leading sector of the economy,⁴ while 80% of the country's consumer basket are imported goods.⁵

When discussing the intersection of agriculture and poverty, it is important to consider the deep economic disparity between the center and the regions. In terms of the standard of living, there are significant differences between rural and urban settlements. For example, in 2018, compared to rural households, the average monthly income of urban households was 19.0% higher. In the same year, absolute poverty in rural areas reached 23.1%, while in urban areas, it amounted to 18.0%.⁶ The disparity between the centre and the regions can be seen in the quality of basic infrastructure development, which has a heavy impact on the development opportunities of the regions. For example, faulty roads, public transport, electricity and other energy means directly affect the daily life of peasants and farmers involved in agriculture.

At the same time, economic disparities within agriculture still remain a significant challenge. Except for cooperatives, the Ministry of Agriculture does not define what it means to be a 'small and family farming' or a farmer.⁷ Women, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities are seen as particularly vulnerable groups in agriculture, who often do not own land or benefit from existing programs. According to the 2019 FAO report, it is necessary to better understand the needs of these groups and take special steps to address them.⁸ According to the 2021 Human Development Index (HDI), despite the pandemic crisis, Georgia has a very high index (0.802). However, as a result of considering inequalities attributed to different social groups and regions, the indicator decreases by 12 points and comes down to 0.706 points.⁹

In recent years, as a result of the support of international organizations and the agreement with the European Union on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, agricultural support programs have become more structured, unified and transparent.¹⁰ The Rural Development Agency, created within the framework of the

¹ Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development 2021-27 <https://mepa.gov.ge/Ge/Files/ViewFile/27243>

² Georgian agriculture is a part of the social policy of the state <https://forbes.ge/saqarthvelos-sophlis-meurn/>

³ Main trends of Georgian agriculture 2012-2019
https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/sakartvelos_soplis_meurneoba.pdf

⁴ Ibid..

⁵ Georgian agriculture is a part of the social policy of the state <https://forbes.ge/saqarthvelos-sophlis-meurn/>

⁶ Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development 2021-27 <https://mepa.gov.ge/Ge/Files/ViewFile/27243>

⁷ <https://www.fao.org/3/ca9822en/CA9822EN.pdf>

⁸ Ibid..

⁹ Georgia ranks high on Human Development Index <https://www.undp.org/georgia/press-releases/georgia-human-development-index>

¹⁰ In-depth interview with an expert, interview N1.

Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, has to some extent integrated all programs and services related to the state's efforts to create real prosperity in rural areas.¹¹

The purpose of this document is to ask critical questions and look at government programs and investments in agriculture through a lens that the Ministry and relevant agencies may overlook. One such issue is the needs of non-dominant ethnic groups employed in agriculture.

The active work of the Center for Social Justice in regions inhabited by non-dominant ethnic groups demonstrates that peasants representing ethnic minorities often do not benefit from existing agricultural programs and projects. They often talk about the experience of unfair and discriminatory distribution of land resources in their villages, which is the result of the fragmented and uncontrolled process of privatization in the 1990s and also in recent years. Irrigation water systems in ethnic minority villages are often faulty and severely burden the locals. Access to new agricultural programs and knowledge is also limited for these groups. Despite all this, the representatives of the minorities continue to self-organize their own labour and traditional farming methods and even lead the country in producing a number of products. For example, according to the data from 2018, the largest producer of potatoes in Georgia is the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, while the most productive region in terms of dairy products and animal husbandry was Kvemo Kartli.¹²

Based on all this, it is important to ask questions: How do agricultural agencies work to support ethnic groups? How are state and international investments distributed by region? How does the state help the industries in which ethnic minorities are involved? It is equally interesting mainly which social groups receive support from the state - small farmers or big businesses; How priority areas are formed in agriculture and how decisions are made about financing certain programs.

Against the backdrop of increased support and investment in agriculture, it is imperative to observe how fairly, inclusively and equitably these resources trickle down to peasants and farmers in various regions and how accessible these programs and projects are to different groups.

Research methodology and limitations

The document has been created through qualitative research methodology - and 21 in-depth interviews have been conducted within its framework. Five interviews were conducted with agricultural experts, 4 meetings were held with representatives of Marneuli, Bolnisi, Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki consulting centers. Each additional meeting was held with the representatives of the Rural Development Agency and the Scientific Research Institute of Agriculture; Lastly, meetings were held with ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian peasants/farmers - five meetings to each community. In addition, the authors of the document conducted desk research: the websites of the Ministry of Environment and Agriculture, Rural Development Agency, Agricultural Scientific Research Center, National Agency for Sustainable Land Management and Land Use Monitoring, Reclamation of Georgia and other agencies were studied. Also, Georgia's agriculture and rural development strategy 2021-2027 was studied. Public information about existing programs and projects in agriculture was also requested. The document is mainly focused on evaluating the state's policy in terms of supporting minorities in agriculture and does not envisage evaluating the content of agricultural support. At the same time, it should be said that this is the first attempt to evaluate the field from the perspective of the challenges of ethnic minorities and insert it on the political agenda.

International legal and human rights framework

Before discussing the needs and challenges of minorities in agriculture, it is important to review the

¹¹ Rural development agency <http://www.rda.gov.ge/ge/static/chvenshesakheb>

¹² Georgia's National Statistics Bureau <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/93/regionuli-statistika>

international legal framework in relation to land and water access rights.

It should be noted that often the only means of making a living for representatives of ethnic minorities is farming and animal husbandry. Therefore, it is important to find the legal order by which the representatives of the minorities will be considered as legal subjects in the consolidation of the land. In this regard, the United Nations Declaration on Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas is relevant. The subjects of the declaration are those who, individually or through association in the community, are involved in small-scale agricultural production and who experience a particular attachment and connection to a specific land.¹³

Given that the main and often the only source of income for farmers is agriculture, the declaration, based on its objectives, underlines the rights to land. In particular, according to Article 17, Part 1 of the declaration: “Peasants and other people living in rural areas have the right to land, individually and/or collectively ... to achieve an adequate standard of living, to have a place to live in security, peace and dignity and to develop their cultures”.¹⁴ The term, “achieving an adequate standard of living”, implies the possibility of using the resources obtained from equally distributed lands, which is unconditionally connected with the improvement of the standard of living of the peasants living in rural areas.

On the other hand, in order for the farmers to have the right to access the land, the state is obliged to create an inclusive, individualized, legal arrangement that, on the one hand, will make it easier for the peasants to legalize the land and ensure legal recognition of the land, and on the other hand, will prohibit the illegal interference of the use of the land by the farmers.¹⁵ As one of the effective ways to achieve these goals, the declaration refers to the existence of lands for common, collective benefit and use, the management and distribution systems of which should be established by law.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that peasants and other persons working in rural areas have the legal right to be protected from the confiscation and alienation of lands that may not be their legal property, although they are their permanent residence and are used by them for their activities and living conditions.¹⁶

If necessary, one of the additional legal levers for the protection of the rights of peasants is the mechanism of giving them specialized priority. With this mechanism, it is established that: “Landless peasants, young people, small-scale fishers and other rural workers should be given priority in the allocation of public lands, fisheries and forests.”¹⁷ This provision, by its content, represents an important legal protection mechanism for the peasants and at the same time, it underlines the social nature of land and property ownership.

One of the legal prerequisites for the fair consolidation of land is the non-discriminatory redistribution in small settlements. According to the declaration, the actor responsible for this is the state itself, since according to Article 17 of the declaration: “States shall take appropriate measures to remove and prohibit all forms of discrimination relating to the right to land”.¹⁸

On the other hand, the lack of awareness of the state auctions and services of the peasants representing the ethnic minorities is related to discrimination with regard to land rights. Farmers in regions inhabited by non-dominant ethnic groups often worry about unequal land distribution. This is mainly because representatives of ethnic minorities working on the land do not have information about the programs and services planned by the state. This, on the other hand, is in contradiction with international law, which stipulates that “states shall take appropriate measures to ensure that peasants and other people working in rural areas have access to relevant, transparent, timely and adequate information in a language and form and through means adequate to

¹³ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, Article 1 (1), Available at: <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman:files/UN%20Declaration%20on%20the%20rights%20of%20peasants.pdf>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, article 17-1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, article 17-3

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, article 17-4

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, article 17-6

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, article 17-2

their cultural methods so as to promote their empowerment and to ensure their effective participation in decision-making in matters that may affect their lives, land and livelihoods”.¹⁹ Therefore, the state's indifference to the difficulties faced by ethnic minority peasants due to the language barrier in the process of land division and redistribution is clear.

It should be noted that Georgia has ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Therefore, it has the obligation that in the areas inhabited by ethnic minorities, in case of real need, the administrative bodies should use the minority languages.²⁰ This, logically, should be similarly extended to the cases of alienation of lands used by the minority peasants by auction. Thus, lack of awareness of the farmers about the announced land auctions, language barrier and the non-inclusive policy of the state are directly related to the deterioration of the living conditions and legal status of the farmers.

When discussing just consolidation of the land, it is important to observe the issue from the broader lens of land's social significance and purpose, as indicated by the international guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure on land, fisheries and forests. According to these guidelines, the land and water resources owned by the state should be utilized with consideration of the wider social purpose and context, the most effective way of which is for the state to create systems of collective use and management.²¹ Additionally, before alienating public land, the state must take into account the land's purpose and role in the existence of the local community and individuals. Thus, the state, together with non-state actors, should understand the importance of particular land and natural resources for particular community.²²

Along with the fair distribution of land, one of the most important prerequisites in the farming process is access to irrigation water for farmers, which also remains an acute problem for ethnic minority farmers. To the extent that the role of irrigation water is vital for agronomy and farming, it is necessary to define separately what the state's legal obligation is in terms of the availability of irrigation water. According to the Declaration on Peasants: "Peasants and people working in rural areas have the right to access drinking and irrigation water, since water is a necessary prerequisite for a dignified life."²³

The declaration prohibits any kind of discrimination in the process of water distribution. Paradoxically, those most acutely in need of water, including the most vulnerable groups such as nomadic herders and farmers working in fields, face discrimination in water allocation. That's why, in the declaration, a target group was deliberately singled out, with a separate reservation, stating "States shall respect, protect and ensure access to water, including in customary and community-based water management systems, on a non-discriminatory basis and shall take measures to guarantee affordable water for personal, domestic and productive uses".²⁴ In addition to this, it is established that the commercialisation of water resources is not allowed when the country faces the challenge of unequal water distribution.²⁵

In order to better see the relevance of the problem and the importance of fair consolidation of land and natural resources, it is necessary to note that in the 2030 agenda of the United Nations, equal access to natural resources, land and water was set as one of the main goals.²⁶ Special attention was paid to the goal of doubling

¹⁹ *ibid*, article 11-2

²⁰ Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, article 11-2, available at: <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/1244853?publication=0>

²¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Voluntary Guidelines on the responsible Governance of Tenure on Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context on National Food Security, Article 8.1, ხელმისაწვდომია: <https://www.fao.org/3/i2801e/i2801e.pdf>

²² *ibid*, Article 9.1 and 9.2

²³ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, Article 21.1

²⁴ *Ibid*, article 21-3

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ UNITED NATIONS, THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, Goal 1.4, ხელმისაწვდომია: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>

the productivity of ethnic minority farmers involved in agronomy. Equitable access to local community land, awareness and additional financial benefits have been identified as effective means of achieving this goal.²⁷

Thus, with international legal mechanisms and institutions increasingly focusing on the importance of fair consolidation of land and other natural resources, it is critical that the state does more to address the challenges and barriers faced by ethnic minority farmers.

Research findings

Inclusion policy in the implementation of services and programs

Desk research and public information requested from the Rural Development Agency, as well as interviews with farmers/peasants, reveal that ethnic minorities generally do not benefit from major agricultural programs and projects. According to the study of social exclusion of ethnic minorities prepared by the Institute of Social Research and Analysis in 2022, ethnic minorities and/or their family members in most cases did not benefit from the programs/projects offered by the state.

Specifically, the respondents did not participate in the following programs/projects: the state program "Produce in Georgia" (85.2%), the program "Plant the Future" (89.6%), the agro-insurance program (90%), preferential agro-credit (80.8%), modernization of the dairy industry and Market access program (91.1%), farm/farmer registration project (89%). Respondents report little activity in the direction of two projects: preferential agrocredit (8.5%) and the state program "Produce in Georgia" (5.2%).

²⁸The public information received from the Rural Development Agency does not allow us to directly calculate the rate of participation of representatives of ethnic minorities in state programs and projects. However, based on these data, we can conclude how these programs and projects are distributed in regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. It should be noted that a number of programs and projects are equally spent among different regions, including minority regions.

For example, about 10 percent of the beneficiaries of the Agro-insurance program throughout Georgia (35,586 beneficiaries) come from Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli (3,302 beneficiaries). Also, more than 15 percent of the total number of beneficiaries of preferential agrocredit programs (18,194) also come from Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. However, in the case of more substantial and larger projects, support from minority regions is almost always below 10 percent. For example, only 13 projects out of the total number of "Processing and Storage Enterprises Co-financing Program" (128 beneficiaries) are implemented in minority regions, but none in the municipalities of Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda, Marneuli, or Dmanisi. It is interesting that 9 out of 13 enterprises were opened in Gardabani municipality, where the share of ethnic minorities is less than 50%, and 2 enterprises were opened in Akhaltsikhe municipality, where also the total number of minorities is 35%. Also, in the case of the "State Program for the Promotion of Agricultural Production" and the "State Program for Co-financing of Agricultural Mechanization", the support of the regions inhabited by minorities is much lower than 10 percent.

During the interviews conducted with the population, almost all participants stated that they have no information about the programs and services planned by the state. The population often does not know the

²⁷ Ibid, Goal 2.3

²⁸ Institute of Social Research and Analysis, the study of social exclusion of ethnic minorities, 2022, Tbilisi

location of counseling centers and is not familiar with their activities. It should be noted that universal programs, such as free fuel, financial support for small land farmers, are available to farmers from non-dominant ethnic groups. However, according to the population, such programs as "Plant the Future", support of cooperatives, co-financing of processing and storage enterprises and information about other projects are unknown to them. It should be said here that the agro-insurance and cheap agro-credit programs are known to the population, although they often refrain from using these services.

"I don't know where to go if I need any information. I don't know who to turn to, the state doesn't provide us with information" (in-depth interview with farmer/peasant from Bolnisi, 49 years old);

"They help us, but there are very few programs, they give us diesel, they give us a card, but they seem to give us only as much so that we don't crush completely and don't give up on this work. However, Bolnisi is the richest municipality" (in-depth interview with a farmer/peasant from Bolnisi, 67 years old);

"I have heard about the agricultural insurance program, but I don't use it, because I don't have enough money or crops to insure" (in-depth interview with farmer/peasant from Bolnisi, 49 years old).

According to agriculture experts, the state does not use diversity and inclusiveness lenses when designing policies and programs. Some experts believe that this is a valid approach and that the main starting point in agriculture should be agricultural issues and not other factors. However, according to a number of experts, focusing on the special status of minorities and taking their needs into account when planning policies may be more effective in increasing the productivity of these groups.

"It doesn't seem that diversity has been thought about; the most important thing for the ministry is to help the industry rather than whom it will help. They did not consider which field they would go to and which region. A specific culture is followed by help rather than anything else" (in-depth interview with an expert, interview N2);

"I have been working in this field for 13-14 years. It is difficult to have programs focused only on minorities. But if the program is regional or product-oriented - for example, if it is about potatoes, ethnic Armenians cannot be left out, or if you work on tomatoes in Kvemo Kartli and do not include minorities, then it will be a violation of the law" (in-depth interview with an expert, interview N3).

Regarding how decisions are made about the support or financing of this or that program, some experts have critical opinions. According to them, there are three main factors based on which certain industries are financed. The primary factor is traditional and historical crops such as vines, citrus and, more recently, Georgian tea. Second, often the basis of government support programs is the desire to increase exports, although there is a relatively weak focus on reducing imports. The third factor is public opinion and the so-called PR. At the same time, almost all experts state that there is no real research on which to base programs and support projects, which remains a significant challenge in the agricultural system.

"Programs and services are created according to needs. Considering climate, soil, environment and [according to] what can be successful in Georgia. There aren't any official studies - or that I haven't come across - but it's all being planned from the field. At the same time, the focus is mainly on export products" (in-depth interview with an expert, interview N2).

"For example, wine was historically financed, citrus and tea were in the Soviet Union. That's why they continue to fund. All this is considered traditional Georgian production and therefore we support it. Also, export potential is taken into account in all of this (in-depth interview with an expert, interview N1);

There are programs that are unpromising but are carried out from a PR point of view, for example, the Georgian tea program is doomed, but they still help (in-depth interview with an expert, interview N5).

In addition, according to experts, the inclusion of minorities in programs and services also requires work on building trust and connections, as non-dominant groups often do not believe that such support programs may be available to them.

"There is sometimes low confidence in the competition. People think that they will not finance me anyway. This may have an effect. My experience was that it had a significant impact at the time" (in-depth interview with an expert, interview N5).

According to representatives of the Rural Development Agency, all services and programs are planned and implemented by the agencies taking into account local needs. They say there is a need to teach the national language to minorities so that they can benefit from agricultural programs.

"We don't have a separate component for ethnic minorities, but everything is open and accessible to everyone. We had [components] for youth and women, but not for ethnic minorities" (interview with representatives of the Rural Development Agency).

It should be noted that the representatives of the agency state that the agency regularly conducts information campaigns about its activities in the regions inhabited by minorities. However, they also point out that support is needed from the local government, as the agency does not have enough resources.

"In the process of spreading information, the local government has a lot of resources and they should help us. We don't have the resources, because we are few, and the mayor's representatives should help us" (interview with representatives of the Rural Development Agency).

According to the employees of the agency, meetings with the population are an additional motivation for learning the Georgian language - they share with the population information about the existing programs that they would benefit from if they knew the Georgian language.

"These meetings are held to learn the language. They know that services exist and if they learn Georgian, then they will have these services" (interview with representatives of the Rural Development Agency).

According to the employees of the agricultural consulting centers in the municipalities, meetings with the population living in rural areas and familiarising them with existing programs and services are actively underway. However, according to them, minority peasants/farmers often resist innovations and continue to work with traditional methods and approaches.

"If their parents used to sow potatoes, they also sow potatoes, they don't change anything. They don't listen to us either" (employee of the Marneuli counseling center).

The employees of the counseling centers state that their main activity is the production of statistics and delivery to the center, however, they do not produce statistics with ethnic markers. There are also stereotypical attitudes towards minority peasants/farmers among the employees of the center. Opinions such as "minorities have the best land", "they are richer", etc. are strong.

An even more dire situation exists in terms of the needs of ethnic minority women. A report from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), called "Gender, Agriculture and Rural Development", notes that the work of 59% of self-employed women engaged in small family farming remains unpaid.²⁹ In Kvemo Kartli, the share of women representing ethnic minorities in agriculture is the highest compared to men.³⁰ However, both throughout Georgia and in regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, the rate of land ownership by women is significantly lower than that of men.³¹ The rate of temporary poverty is high among women. Due to the underdevelopment of infrastructure in the regions, especially in villages densely populated by ethnic minorities, women must spend much more time on household chores. And this happens

²⁹ The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Gender, agriculture and rural development. Series of countries' gender assessment. Rome. 2018

³⁰ Gender Impact Assessment of the State Program "Plant the Future". <https://georgia.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/Danerge%20Momavali%20Geo.pdf>

³¹ Smallholders and family farms in Georgia <https://www.fao.org/3/ca9822en/CA9822EN.pdf>

in conditions where the burden of domestic labour falls on women (according to a new study prepared by the UN Women's Project, women spend about 38.4 hours of unpaid work per week, and men 11.5 hours. In addition, 98.3% of women and 70.2% of men participate in unpaid work).³² The high workload of women in households makes their life way more complicated.

Despite the declared gender-sensitive policies in the country, a particular focus on the needs of women from ethnic minorities is not explicitly visible in the state's policies. One of the pilot programs for women launched by the Rural Development Agency together with UN Women, which is implemented in the municipalities of Marneuli and Lagodekhi and aims to support women in setting up greenhouses, should be positively evaluated.³³

With the support of UN Women, in 2020, a team of researchers assessed the gender impact of the Rural Development Agency's program, Plant the Future, and found that the following problems exist: (1) gender roles and stereotypes; (2) unequal access to resources, (3) access to training and knowledge, (4) data limitations and lack of analysis of existing data from a gender perspective.³⁴ These challenges are common to ethnic minority women, compounded by state language policies that further discourage ethnic minority women from participating in such programs.

Language policy about representatives of minorities

A 2022 Institute for Social Research and Analysis study shows that [poor] language skills continue to challenge ethnic minorities.

63% recognize Georgian letters poorly or very poorly and poorly or very poorly read words. 60% of the ethnic minorities living in Georgia, according to their own assessment, can communicate very poorly or poorly with a person who speaks Georgian, and an even larger part (84%) can very poorly or poorly read Georgian literature and understand the content of the text. It was found that the age of the respondents affects the quality of knowledge of the Georgian language: the older a person is, the less likely it is that he knows Georgian.

The population and some experts say that the main reason for the lack of information for peasants/farmers from non-dominant ethnic groups is the lack of information in a language that minorities can understand. Almost all interviewed farmers/peasants state that not knowing the language is an essential barrier for them not only in using agricultural programs but also in the process of communicating with other agencies. They are not able to communicate with the employees of the counselling centers, they are not able to use the website of the Rural Development Agency and often, they themselves are not registered on the portal, my.mepa.gov.ge. This is a website where farmers/peasants can participate in state support programs and receive benefits based on registration. It should be said here that even though minority farmers cannot register themselves on the mentioned portal, they are often helped by bank employees, public service employees and other persons to register.

The age profile of people involved in agriculture should also be taken into account. The distribution of family farms according to the age of the farmers shows that farmers under the age of 35 (38,090 people) constitute only 6 percent of the total number (639,963 people). The main activity is observed in the age group of 35-64 years, which is 59 percent of the total number (377,588 people). The share of farmers over 65 is 35 percent (224,285 people).

³² UN Women, Time to care: Unpaid work and gender inequality in Georgia, 2022. Available at <https://georgia.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/GTUS%20thematic%20brief%20GEO%20for%20web%20%283%29.pdf>

³³ A pilot program for women <https://rda.gov.ge/programs/women-pilot-program/27cb55d4-2788-4db5-8bde-92c03b842aef>

³⁴ Gender Impact Assessment of the State Program "Plant the Future".

In addition, language policy is implemented in different regions with different practices. In contrast to Kvemo Kartli, in Javakheti, information is provided orally to non-dominant ethnic groups, including in the Armenian language. However, written communication is only in Georgian.

"I wouldn't say there is a problem with translation during oral communication, they speak a language we understand. The employees of the local agency are Armenians and communication is not a problem. The problem is that the literature and the grant competition are only available in Georgian." (Interview with a farmer from Ninotsminda, 62 years old).

According to some agricultural experts, it is important to provide information about existing services in minority languages as well, which would increase access to and use of these programs by minorities. Experts say that there is often talk about the need to translate information about programs and services.

"I do not know. They wanted brochures translated in the ministry; however, I cannot say how systematic this is." (In-depth interview with an expert, interview N3)

However, according to the employees of the Rural Development Agency, providing services in the language of minorities will reduce the desire of these groups to learn the Georgian language, which in their opinion, is problematic.

"Language barrier is a serious problem, if the state translates all this, with booklets and flyers, then the population will no longer learn Georgian." (Interview with representatives of the Rural Development Agency).

The employees of the counselling centers share the opinions of the employees of the Rural Development Agency. In addition, they say that when they meet farmers/peasants from the minority community, they often use the mayor's representatives in the villages as interpreters, although in the case when the representative does not know the state language, they are forced to use Russian.

Unlike the central agencies, the representatives of the counselling centers say that they translate part of the information brochures into minority languages. However, the translated materials are only about the agro-insurance and agro-credit programs, which are prepared by the respective banks and insurance organizations and delivered to the counseling centers and the population.

It should be noted that young people perceive employment in agriculture as unpromising work. According to one of the young people from Bolnisi, employment in agriculture is not productive and it is often impossible to get a return for the labor invested. That is why a significant part of young people are not involved in agriculture. In both regions, young people often emigrate for seasonal work, and those young people who continue their studies in Tbilisi's higher education institutions choose jobs such as store consultants, online services (based on language skills), etc.

[The issue of redistribution of agricultural lands](#)

The issue of land redistribution is problematic throughout Georgia. Based on interviews conducted with agricultural experts regarding this issue, it can be said that the reform implemented in the 1990s was characterised by many challenges. Almost all experts talk about the problem of land fragmentation. According to them, small land farmers cannot compete with products produced in other countries. Therefore, there is a need to expand and consolidate land where average and above-average farmers can become competitive with imported products. The Ministry of Environment Protection and Agriculture of Georgia share this opinion of experts.

According to the 2021-2027 strategic document of agriculture and rural development of Georgia, the main part of farms in Georgia is small land. 93.7 percent of farmers have less than 2 ha of agricultural land, and only 1.5 percent have more than 5 ha of land.

This, according to the SWOT analysis of the strategy document, is the weak point of Georgian agriculture and requires concrete steps to be taken.³⁵ The area of agricultural land in use, according to land use forms, shows that 48 percent is occupied by arable land (377,445 ha), 38 percent by natural meadows and pastures (300,004 ha), and 14 percent by perennial crops (109,567 ha).³⁶ If we look at the distribution of land in the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities from this perspective, we will see that a large part of the agricultural land is in the hands of a small amount of people, and the population often talks about the shortage of land. In the Kvemo Kartli region, local farmers are forced to lease agricultural land from the so-called "arrendators" in order to support their families and earn a minimum income. According to locals, the annual tax for one hectare of land ranges from 500 GEL to 1500 GEL. Peasants claim that a large part of the land ended up in the hands of "arrendators" as a result of the land reform in the 90s, while the broader population could not get the land.

"The land is distributed asymmetrically, because those who had influence and close connections with the commission members got the biggest and best plots of land. These influential persons, who worked in the state sector at that time, not only own large parts of the land, but also the infrastructure left by the Soviet legacy is in their hands (in-depth interview with farmer/peasant from Ninotsminda, 58 years old);

"A large part of the pastures and mowing lands of the villages in Dmanisi is in the hands of one person. Kakha Okriashvili's father owns all the lands of Dmanisi. And we have nothing" (in-depth interview with a farmer/peasant from Dmanisi, 61 years old).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the process of land privatization was indeed characterized by significant shortcomings. On May 7, 1992, on the basis of the 10th resolution of the Supreme Council, a restriction was introduced into the land privatization law - restriction on land privatization of the 21-kilometer corridor in the border regions. It should be noted that this restriction was not extended to other regions except Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe Javakheti regions.³⁷ The lands in the mentioned corridor in Kvemo Kartli were soon unofficially owned by the "Merab Kostava Society", which was replaced by the Diocese of Marneuli and Hujabi in recent years. There is no official information about this, although in conversation with the population, locals often raise this issue. In 2021, during the confrontation between the locals and the cleric of Marneuli and Hujabi Diocese in Second Kesalo village of Marneuli municipality, the representative of the diocese said that the diocese had the right to use these lands (despite the fact that these lands are officially on the balance sheet of the Ministry of Economy), and the land of the ethnically Azerbaijani population The state was on the other side of the border.³⁸

In regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, the process of land registration is still problematic. The best example of this is the latest study by i-Fact, a union of investigative journalists. According to the research, Mukhtar Ismailov, the representative of the mayor of Duzagram village of Sagarejo municipality, owns the village lands. According to i-Fact's journalistic investigation, Ismailov, by abusing his position, has registered up to 90 hectares of land, which was the collective property of the village for years.³⁹ The Center legally examined the issue for Social Justice in 2021. The organization revealed the circumstances that created a reasonable assumption about possible crimes committed by the mayor's representative in the village of Duzagrama of the

³⁵ Agriculture and rural development strategy, 2021-2027 <https://mepa.gov.ge/Ge/Files/ViewFile/27243>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Gvaramia, Alexander, 2013, Land Ownership and the Development of the Land Market in Georgia https://www.eda.admin.ch/content/dam/countries/countries-content/georgia/en/archive/resource_en_219898.pdf

³⁸ TDI on the clashes with ethnic Azerbaijani citizens in Kesalo <http://tdi.ge/ge/statement/tdi-kesaloshi-etnikur-azerbaijanelebtan-dapirispirebis-shehexeb>

³⁹ The Oligarch of Uzagrama - how a representative of a mayor took over the village lands <https://www.ifact.ge/duzagrama/>

Sagarejo municipality, which required an effective investigation to be conducted immediately. On the basis of which, the Center for Social Justice applied to the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia with the request to conduct an effective investigation on this matter, to give an adequate legal assessment and to suspend Mukhtar Ismailov's authority.⁴⁰

The system also knows the need for proactive involvement of the state in the process of agricultural land registration. For this purpose, in 2020, the Agency for Sustainable Land Development was established. Its main responsibilities include land registration, production of statistics, a compilation of a unified database, developing and monitoring the policy of rational and targeted use and protection of land resources, developing and implementing the policy of the state program for sustainable management of agricultural land, determining the category of agricultural land and making a decision on its change, Preparation of thematic maps related to agriculture and etc.⁴¹ One of the powers of the agency is to lease agricultural plots of land owned by the state. The agency already performs this activity, although the information is available only in the Georgian language, which puts the citizens of Georgia who do not know the state language in unequal conditions.

During the meetings held with the population in Sagarejo municipality, a significant part of the population involved in agriculture and cattle breeding expressed dissatisfaction with the way pastures are leased. According to them, since the majority of farmers do not fully speak the state language, they are often forced to lease land from second and/or third parties at a higher price, while the state has leased these lands to the population through an auction.

"We don't know Georgian or work with a computer, so we can't participate in auctions. And we are forced to buy pastures more expensively from those close to the system and know all this" (in-depth interview with a farmer/peasant from Sagarejo, 47 years old).

Ethnic Azerbaijani farmers who pursue cattle breeding often lease pastures in Javakheti from third parties. However, these third parties are mostly not local residents. The ethnic Armenian population often expresses dissatisfaction with non-local farmers leasing land resources.

"At that time, the resources in the hands of the state were used by the locals, some for mowing, some for grazing. And now, in most cases, the state leases pastures to farmers from Kakheti" (in-depth interview with a farmer/peasant from Ninotsminda, 48 years old);

"The confrontations take place every year for the **Yaylas**. During the Soviet Union, every village had its Yalaghi - a huge area where the livestock was kept during the summer. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a result of land reforms, the Yaylas were distributed according to the population [size] of the villages. Today these Yaylas are state property. In recent years, the state either auctions it or leases it to different people/farmers. The local population remains without land. Also, the people working in the government are registering these properties by fraudulent methods. Then they justify themselves by saying that they have a cooperative, or say, "If I don't buy them, they will be given to the nomads who came from Kakheti". In a word, this issue is problematic. The state should first think about whether the peasants living there have enough land, or why they go abroad to work, and study this issue, come to us and talk about this issue" (in-depth interview with farmer/peasant from Ninotsminda, 62 years old).

Irrigation systems, infrastructure and agricultural technologies

⁴⁰ The practice of illegal appropriation of peasant lands in Yormuganlo calls for a timely response <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/iormughanloshi-glekhebis-mitsebis-ukanono-mitvisebis-praktika-droul-reagirebas-itkhovs>

⁴¹ Sustainable Land Management Agency - a new LEPL to be financed with 800 thousand GEL <https://bm.ge/ka/article/miwis-mdgradi-martvis-saagento---axali-ssip-romelic-800-atasit-larit-dafinansdeba/30454>

Regarding surface and underground water resources, Georgia is one of the richest countries in Europe. Georgia has 14,000 cubic meters of fresh surface water per capita, while the European average is only 9,300 cubic meters. Despite this reality, access to irrigation systems remains a significant challenge for people living in rural areas.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the irrigation system of Georgia was significantly disrupted. According to the Amelioration Service of Georgia, during the Soviet Union, the area of water-supplied land in Georgia was 278 thousand hectares. However, by 2012, this figure had dropped to 45 thousand hectares.⁴² According to the Amelioration of Georgia, today, this data has tripled and amounts to 138,700 hectares. In addition, according to the organisation's strategic organisation area of water-supplied land should reach 200 thousand hectares.⁴³

Unfortunately, the mentioned data are not detailed according to regions and municipalities. However, fieldwork shows that irrigation systems in the Kvemo Kartli region remain among the most pressing challenges. In addition, during the interviews conducted with the population, the issue of irrigation and drinking water was named as one of the critical issues. Interviewees from Kvemo Kartli often say that their work and crops are "burning" due to a lack of water.

Nevertheless, the Amelioration Service still charges them irrigation water fees. The price of irrigation water per hectare is 75 GEL and 75 Tetris. Failure to pay this amount to the peasant/farmer is associated with appropriate fines and sanctions based on the agreement. However, if the amelioration service fails to supply the required water despite the contract and the farmer suffers losses, and their crops are destroyed, the amelioration service is not responsible for compensation for the farmer's damages. This situation increases mistrust of the Amelioration service on the part of the farmers and increases the number of cases when farmers refuse to sign a contract with them.

"There is a problem of water, irrigation water. Everything burns with dehydration - cucumbers, tomatoes, bell peppers. During the Soviet Union, there was irrigation water. But we don't have it today. We pay the state 75 GEL for one hectare and then we fight each other for water. Water is unfairly distributed to us and the reclamation service is responsible for this. Irrigation water is not enough and people are waiting in line. Still, then I see that while my 1 hectare is burning, someone who has 20 hectares or bigger land, and who is stronger, solves this problem" (in-depth interview with farmer/peasant from Marneuli, 57 years old).

The trend that large farmers find it easier to deal with irrigation water issues than small farmers/peasants can also be seen in other municipalities.

"Those who have large lands have separate water. They irrigate for the first time, they respect those responsible for the distribution of water. Even when it's my turn, I can't water my field" (in-depth interview with Bolnisi farmer/peasant, 49 years old).

The issue of irrigation water and irrigation systems is also acute in Javakheti. Residents complain that they are forced to depend on the weather and only get the results if it rains.

"The success of a farmer - and not only a farmer but everyone - is connected with the appropriate infrastructure. Here, we don't have infrastructure. Our whole hope is real. If there is rain in season, there will be a harvest. If not, nothing will happen. We don't even have anti-hail devices, there are; there are villages where hail has already destroyed crops. They do not try to correct these errors. In Ninotsminda, there is nothing more than water resources, but we don't have irrigation systems (in-depth interview with farmer/peasant from Bolnisi, 62 years old).

In 2021, residents of three villages in Bolnisi - Savaneti (Imirhasan), Chapala (Goclu) and Samtredo (Jafarlo) - held protest demonstrations demanding irrigation water. Part of the irrigation system in these

⁴² Mission of Georgia's Amelioration <https://www.ag.ge/Ge/Mission>

⁴³ Achievements of Georgia's Amelioration <https://www.ag.ge/Ge/Statistic>

villages is privatized to a private individual who has an unfair advantage over the allocation of irrigation water and can decide on his own when to share irrigation water with local farmers.

The local government of Bolnisi Municipality confirmed in a conversation with the Social Justice Center that the irrigation systems in the above-mentioned villages were privatized to a private person and therefore, the local government could not intervene in this process.⁴⁴ The problem of irrigation water appears every year in Marneuli municipality, in the village of Dashtafa, where the inhabitants hold demonstrations demanding irrigation water almost every year.⁴⁵

Sharing new knowledge with the population

One of the main questions during the conversation with the population was the issue of new knowledge and support for counseling centers. The employees of the advisory centers say that they are constantly working on the issue of sharing new knowledge with the population and that they have a close relationship with the farmers, but the population says that they do not receive the necessary new knowledge from the relevant agencies.

"Lack of human resources is a problem. For example, I am self-taught. I have more practical knowledge than theoretical knowledge. Through the Internet, I look at what kind of care plants (potatoes, wheat) need and use it in practice. The Internet is also inaccurate, one user says something else, another says something else. Therefore, vocational educational institutions are needed at the municipal level" (in-depth interview with a farmer/peasant from Ninotsminda, 39 years old).

Some experts critically assess the work of the Scientific-Research Center of Agriculture. According to them, the center does not provide proper help and often they have a minimal role in the process of producing new knowledge in agriculture.

"[The center] does nothing to create new knowledge. This is a place of employment. Nothing of value is created here. That's why they have nothing to share." (In-depth interview with an expert, interview N1)

The representatives of the Scientific-Research Center of Agriculture, however, claim that the center is actively working on producing new knowledge. According to them, this activity is based on the requests farmers' requests center is relatively new, operating since 2014, and its main areas of work are (1) animal husbandry, (2) horticulture, (3) soil, and (4) storage/processing. The center is actively working on the breeding of unique grape varieties, seeds of annual crops, standardization of wheat seeds and other seedlings, breeding of cattle and poultry. In addition, the center works with the population through counseling centers.

"The counseling center calls me for thematic training, organizes people, and we hold meetings with locals. A field day is organized and demonstration works are created" (in-depth interview with a representative of the center).

It should be noted that there is really important material on the issues of agriculture on the center's website. One of the main pages on the center's website is **agricultural advice**, where detailed information on the technology of potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers and other crops and specific advice is posted. However, the information is available only in the Georgian language and is not accessible to farmers/peasants who do not know the state language.

Facilitating access to new knowledge and technologies is directly linked to the idea and right to safe food. Therefore, this issue is not only aimed at making farming easier for peasants and farmers - along with the goal of time economy - but is more related to food security and the wider interests of the population. It is paramount that in the process of providing new knowledge, methods and techniques, the challenges observed

⁴⁴ Three villages in Bolnisi municipality are left without irrigation water <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/bolnisis-munitsipalitetis-sami-sofeli-sartsqavi-tsqlis-gareshea-darchenili>

⁴⁵ Daştəpə sakinlərinin məhsulu susuzluqdan məhv olur - əhali suvarma suyu tələb edir <https://www.marneulifm.ge/az/xeberler/article/45439-dastepe-kendinin-ehalisi-suvarma-suyu-probleminden-sikayetlenirler>

in rural areas and the difficulties faced by the farmers in the background of climatic changes are taken into account.

Special programs and local needs

Observing the existing agricultural programs and strategic documents demonstrates that most of the state programs are focused on the integrated development of agriculture, and almost all programs include multiple crops. However, there are three crops - Georgian grapes, tea and citrus, - which the state focuses on helping. In 2008-2021, grape subsidies reached 286.6 million GEL. And in 2022, the direct subsidy for the purchase of grapes by the state will be 60-70 million GEL.⁴⁶ On the other hand, within the framework of the tea plantation rehabilitation program, the state covers 70% of the costs for the rehabilitation of plantations.⁴⁷ As part of the citrus subsidy program, the Ministry of Agriculture of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara spent more than 1 million GEL in 2021 (subsidy amount for one kilogram of mandarin is 0.1 GEL).⁴⁸

Neither the 2021-2027 strategy nor other documents describe in detail why these crops are being exclusively supported; It is not explained why there is no support for other crops and farms alongside the above-mentioned ones, especially while, for example, the peasants from Javakheti often talk about problems connected to potato storage, sale and etc.. In addition, there are often cases when farmers are forced to simply throw away the harvest.⁴⁹

Local farmers/farmers share their observations and questions about how existing programs in agriculture are distributed by region and why there are no special programs and projects to support the crops that their region produces.

"There is a good opportunity for the development of agriculture in Georgia. I was visiting one of the winegrowers in Kakheti. In fact, there are the same problems as with us. I mean small land, lack of labor or infrastructure. But one thing was noticeable: there are more people in the process of receiving integrated government services. We can connect this event with the historicity of wine culture. Or maybe there are just more resources being put into the sector. Our potatoes don't have a historical past, just everyone knows that Javakheti is the corner of potatoes and cheese, and our potatoes are really tasty" (in-depth interview with a farmer/peasant from Ninotsminda, 58 years old).

Programs and services in the Ministry of Agriculture often overlook the challenges in the regions. Peasants/farmers who have information about various programs often fail to take advantage of these programs due to various factors. One of the farmers/peasants from Marneuli municipality states that the majority of small land farmers cannot benefit from the "Plant the Future" perennial crops development program, because for them, growing annual plants is related to their daily livelihood and they cannot participate in such programs.

"Annual crops are not funded by 'Plant the Future' programme. So, People say they might starve before they make advancements in perennial crops development. Therefore, the only way is to continue the existing activities, rather than participating in the "Plang the Future" programme and waiting for profit for 10 years" (in-depth interview with a peasant/farmer from Marneuli, 53 years old).

Peasants living in Ninostsmida have a similar opinion. According to one farmer/peasant:

"Almost every year, the state announces the purchase of equipment (tractors, combines) with co-financing, where 60 percent is paid by the state, 40 by the owner, or 50-50 percent. It depends on the

⁴⁶ Subsidizing grapes – a brand, not just wine <https://netgazeti.ge/business/627223/>

⁴⁷ Rehabilitation programme of tea plantations <https://rda.gov.ge/ge/programs/482160-chais-plantatsiebis-reabilitatsiis-programa/52ac0a48-3bac-4516-8b6f-733bce3f907c>

⁴⁸ A report from the ministry of agriculture of Adjara Autonomous Republic <http://adjara.gov.ge/uploads/Docs/2206bf789344ea844a358ae0fb0fad1e.pdf>

⁴⁹ 700 tons of potatoes only in Alastani – farmers are unable to sell potatoes and are planning to throw them away in front of the city hall <https://bit.ly/3RZCO3x>

program. I own 2 hectares of land, 6-7 cows and I am also busy growing potatoes. If the equipment costs 100,000 GEL, 40 percent of it is 40,000 GEL. I won't have that much income for the whole year. I don't have enough assets to afford taking a loan from the bank. So, this equipment will be purchased by a large farmer. Maybe a big farmer doesn't even need that equipment, but he buys it with the help of the state at half price and then sells it to others at his own price (in-depth interview with a farmer from Marneuli/Ninotsminda, 49 years old).

One of the most pressing challenges in the conversation with farmers is the issue of markets.

Often, locals say that they do not see the state's support in the key process. In Javakheti, there are frequent cases when farmers/peasants are forced to throw away their crops, which puts an additional burden on the population. And in reality, when an organized, well-administered and stable key market (including through storage refrigerators) does not exist at the local or national level, it is difficult to talk to farmers/peasants about export development and import substitution.

According to farmers, one of the biggest challenges is the market. Often, the locals say that they do not see the support of the state in the sales. In Javakheti, there are frequent cases when farmers/peasants are forced to throw away their crops, which puts an additional burden on the population. In a reality where an organized, well-administered and stable sales market (including through storage refrigerators) does not exist at the local or national level, it is difficult to talk to farmers/peasants about export development and import substitution.

Conclusion and recommendations

Against the backdrop of the current geopolitical crisis, the Covid pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, the world has once again seen that the states must take care of the development and strengthening of their agriculture in the long term. This issue is also an important challenge in Georgia because, as already mentioned, 80 percent of Georgia's consumer basket is imported goods. Thus, investments in agriculture by the state and international organizations play a critical role. However, fair, equitable and inclusive distribution of these resources, programs and services is a significant challenge, especially in regions populated by ethnic minorities.

Considering this, we would like to present our recommendations to the Government of Georgia and the Ministry of Environment Protection and Agriculture, as well as international donor organizations:

1. The Ministry should evaluate the 2021-2027 state strategy of agriculture and rural development of Georgia and the corresponding annual action plans in terms of diversity and inclusion and through comprehensive research and the creation of participation-focused, consulting platforms; take into account the needs of the self-employed people and farmers from ethnic minority communities involved in the field of agriculture;
2. During the development, planning and implementation of agricultural programs, the state should take into account the interests and needs of self-employed persons with small land and encourage their activities;
3. The relevant agencies of the Ministry should start evaluating the accessibility of services and projects by evaluating the results of the participation of ethnic minorities in them;
4. The Ministry should provide information about its own services and programs, as well as the proceedings related to it (application acceptance, oral communication, etc.) in the languages of the minorities, and provide unrestricted access to the aforementioned services for citizens of Georgia who do not know the state language. In parallel with the translation process, agencies should develop a special strategy to promote awareness and participation of ethnic minorities;
5. The Ministry and relevant agencies ensure the organization of storage infrastructure, including refrigerators; counselling
6. The Ministry and relevant agencies should ensure the creation/development of local/national markets to give farmers/peasants a sense of stability in the agricultural economy;
7. The relevant agencies of the Ministry should study the shortcomings of the land reform process in the 1990s and later and, based on the needs of farmers living in these regions, develop policies to eliminate and/or mitigate the shortcomings above, including by transferring other lands belonging to the state to them through legal mechanisms;
8. The National Agency for Sustainable Land Management and Land Use Monitoring should take specific steps in the process of tendering state-owned lands for lease and take into account the needs of ethnic minorities;
9. The Ministry and Georgia Amelioration LLC should review their activities in the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities and prioritise the development of irrigation systems. In addition, if the farmer pays the number of financial resources stipulated in the contract, the state should provide compensation to the farmer in case the Georgian Amelioration LLC fails to supply water;
10. The Ministry and its subordinate agencies should work on changing the attitudes of their employees towards ethnic groups, which will increase their knowledge, sensitivity and motivation to increase the support of the peasants involved in agriculture based on their needs;
11. The Ministry and the Rural Development Agency should increase the number of employees who know the language of ethnic minorities in the counseling centers in the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities.
12. The Scientific-Research Center of Agriculture should actively start studying the challenges and opportunities in the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities and provide new knowledge in agriculture to the self-employed and local farmers.
13. In the process of supporting Georgian agriculture, international and donor organizations should request the Georgian government to evaluate the relevant programs in terms of diversity and inclusion.