

# **Aftermath: Cooperative Boosts Self-Respect Of Displaced Georgian Women**

By Susan Allen Nan

Working Paper No. 306  
July 2000

# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Koka's Development</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Koka's Tangible Accomplishments</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Empowerment Through Leadership</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Empowerment Through Participation</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Empowerment Through Changing Gender Roles</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Roles of Assistance</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Why Koka Succeeded</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>General Lessons</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>7</b>

# Preface

**A**S PART OF ITS ongoing studies on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the societies ravaged by civil wars, USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) undertook a multicountry assessment of gender issues in postconflict societies. The assessment concentrated on three sets of questions:

- What has been the impact of intrastate conflicts on women? How did these conflicts affect their economic, social, and political roles and responsibilities? What are the major problems and challenges facing women in these societies?
- What types of women's organizations have emerged during the postconflict era to address the challenges women face and to promote gender equality? What types of activities do they undertake? What has been their overall impact on the empowerment of women? What factors affect their performance and impact?
- What has been the nature and emphasis of assistance provided by USAID and other donor agencies to women's organizations? What are some of the major problem areas in international assistance?

The purpose of the assessment was to generate a body of empirically grounded knowledge that could inform the policy and programmatic interventions of USAID and other international donor agencies.

CDIE sent research teams to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, and Rwanda. These teams conducted in-depth interviews with key informants, reviewed literature, and conducted fieldwork. They prepared comprehensive reports, which were reviewed by USAID and outside scholars.

This paper, written by Susan Allen Nan, reports on the activities of the Koka Farmers' Union, a grass-roots women's organization that developed in postconflict Georgia. I am grateful to the author for her insightful analysis.

—KRISHNA KUMAR  
Senior Social Scientist

# Introduction

In 1998 a group of Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs) founded Koka Farmers' Union, a credit union and collective farming endeavor with 22 female and 8 male members. Using a French-sponsored grant, they formed the union in an attempt to adjust to displacement and to feed themselves and their families in the aftermath of the war in Abkhazia.

Koka is a grass-roots woman's organization that developed in a postconflict context and benefited from complementary international, national, and local assistance. Members are intent on returning home and envision taking the organization with them when they return. The union's sustainability rests in part on the empowerment of its women members. They have gained economic and social empowerment but not increased political participation. Although women can play an important role in the social preparatory phase that leads to successful political negotiations in postwar contexts (Paqui 1999, 24), Koka's women are concerned foremost with economic and social priorities.

This case study reports on Koka's development, activities, and empowerment of women. It is based on interviews and focus groups with 10 of its 30 members during October 1999. The role of assistance in Koka's development is analyzed to offer guidance in assisting women in postconflict development contexts.



## Koka's Development

The Koka Farmers' Union is named after the 6-year-old son of the founder, Eliso Kakhiani. Ms. Kakhiani is a middle-aged former schoolteacher from Gali whose story, until she founded the farmers' union, paralleled those of many Georgian internally displaced women. Like almost all Georgians living in Abkhazia, she fled Gali with her husband and son during the Georgian–Abkhaz war that raged from 1992 to 1994. They left in October 1993 and have not returned.

After 1994, many internally displaced persons gradually returned to Gali to farm their lands, even though armed formations continued to operate in the area. In May 1998, renewed fighting broke out—the so-called Ten Day War—and 40,000 IDPs fled the Gali region a second time. Those who fled their homes twice form a particularly vulnerable part of the IDP population.

After the May 1998 exodus from Gali, Ms. Kakhiani went to Zugdidi to find acquaintances who were living in horrible conditions. She brought 16 people back to Tbilisi to live with her husband, son, mother, and herself. As a result, 20 people lived in two dormitory rooms with a total space of 430 square feet, including a toilet area. For six months, they survived in this way, worried about the approaching winter. Not surprisingly, Ms. Kakhiani began talking with her roommates about possible plans of action.

Because those living with her were hungry, their conversation turned to the value of land in food production. At home, many of them had owned land, growing personal gardens and small crops of citrus fruits. The group decided to try setting up a collective farm, and Ms. Kakhiani set off to see the minister of agriculture with a draft business plan.

The minister, Bakur Gulua, was unable to offer Ms. Kakhiani land. However, he did have a French-sponsored program of small grants to set up agricultural credit unions. The program granted 5,350 lari (roughly \$3,800) to 30 different groups, each of which needed to include 30 people. The Koka Farmers' Union applied for one of these grants. It formally adopted the statutes of credit unions required by the grant and informally set about its activities as it awaited the grant.

Koka's members quickly began work, managing to find ways around the initial lack of equipment and capital. They located a dilapidated, abandoned house on a small farm in the village of Chitatskari and searched for the owner. The owner lived in nearby Zugdidi and agreed to allow the farmers' union to use his Chitatskari house and rent the surrounding land. Initially, the group paid rent in the form of 8 percent of the corn and nuts it harvested. Now it is paying rent in lari. The group had no farming equipment so it grew seedlings. The money raised selling seedlings allowed the group to rent more

land for crops. The additional land is a half-hour walk from the house, but its three-plus hectares seven-plus acres) yielded a corn harvest of nine tons.

Of Koka’s 30 members, 22 are women and 8 are men. Two members live in the run-down Chitatskari house, while 15 others live in nearby centers for internally displaced persons and commute to the farm by trolley bus. Three others live near Tbilisi in Rustavi, and 10 live in Tbilisi, where they sell the collective’s products. Although they are now geographically dispersed, Koka members feel an almost familial closeness because of their shared ties in Gali and their current agricultural mission.

Because of these shared ties, the group decided to limit the hierarchy within the organization. The group prides itself on its egalitarian structure, which is further reinforced by the varied backgrounds of its members. The members include three former teachers, two former doctors, an agronomist, an agricultural technician, a communications engineer, and an accountant.

Even within this egalitarian structure, traders and farmers have clearly differentiated roles that do not overlap. Other roles also are clearly differentiated. Koka responsibilities break down as follows: 1 bookkeeper, 3 traders in Rustavi, 10 traders in Tbilisi, the chairman (Ms. Kakhiani), the council of observers (one of whom also travels back and forth between Zugdidi, Rustavi, and

Tbilisi as needed), 3 traders in Zugdidi, and 12 farmers in Zugdidi.

Koka members do not receive salaries from the organization. Instead, members share portions of the harvests equally. Members reported that their shared experience of trauma prevented them from restructuring their organization to compensate members differentially.

Means and ends are intertwined in Koka’s mission to better the lot of internally displaced persons through agricultural work. A tenet of Koka’s approach is the embodiment of “human principles,” a term Ms. Kakhiani uses to describe Koka members’ informal way of member interactions. The principles are as follows:

- Believe in your own ability to accomplish honorable goals through honorable means.
- Trust your coworkers and be trustworthy.
- Treat your coworkers like relatives, remembering the shared trauma of being displaced.
- Follow the highest moral standards.
- Provide the younger generation with positive role models.
- Feel responsible for your family by working.

## Koka’s Tangible Accomplishments

Koka members have built on their initial grant to provide food for members and reach resource goals. Based on the original grant, each member held a share of the collective’s holdings worth 170 lari. As these holdings grow, the value of each share grows as well. If members should want to leave the collective, they can take their shares when they leave. Currently, each share is worth 200 lari.

From the original 5,350 lari grant, Koka spent the money as shown in table 1.

The expenses laid the basis for the food that Koka provided members and for Koka’s income. As shown in table 2, Koka’s income derives from both the interest earned on credits lent to its members and the profit on produce sold.

**Table 1. Koka’s Grant Expenditures**

Lari Spent	Purpose
400	Expenses for founding the organization
250	Seeds
1,800	Cows
100	Fuel
250	Transportation
100	Piglets
200	Feed for livestock
100	Tractor rental
2,000	Credit to members
150	Reserves
<b>5,350</b>	

**Table 2. Farming Profits and Interest Earned on Credits**

Activity	Credit Granted (in lari)	Interest Earned Or Profit (in lari)
Greenhouse and seedling sales	200	30
Produce purchase, sales (Rustavi)	800	120
Corn purchase, sales (Tbilisi)	1,000	150
<b>Total credit</b>	<b>2,000</b>	<b>300</b>
Cucumbers and tomatoes		50
Eggplant and peppers		100
Corn		250
Dairy products		100
<b>Total farming</b>		<b>500</b>
<b>Total profit</b>		<b>800</b>

## Empowerment Through Leadership

Perhaps Koka's greatest accomplishment is the increased self-confidence and self-worth that members have gained through their work. This self-esteem can be seen by examining both Ms. Kakhiani's development as the group's leader and other members' stories.

Between 1993 and 1998, Ms. Kakhiani's experience did not differ significantly from that of many internally displaced women. She looks at that time as a tragic period in her life, a time when she managed only to raise her young son amid the fear and worries that surrounded her new situation as an internally displaced person. But unlike most internally displaced women in Georgia, Ms. Kakhiani found a way in 1998 to overcome the fear and paralysis that accompanied her displacement and to make a living for herself and other IDPs. This shift has brought Ms. Kakhiani increased energy, self-respect, and recognition.

Ms. Kakhiani has received national recognition for her work. In May 1999, the minister of agriculture orga-

nized a one-day meeting in the large Philharmonic Hall in Tbilisi, with thousands in attendance. Ms. Kakhiani was asked to speak about her group and its activities because she was the only woman leader among the agricultural cooperatives. President Eduard Shevardnadze, the honorary chairman of the board of credit unions, heard her presentation and later mentioned it in his closing address to the board, wishing her well in her endeavors. When the attendees chose members for the newly formed board of peasant's credit unions, Ms. Kakhiani was nominated and selected as a member. She is one of only three women serving on the 50-member board.

To Ms. Kakhiani, this formal recognition is significant only in that it reflects her renewed self-confidence and sense of purpose. The responsibility she feels to Koka's members and to her family helps her fix her attention on Koka's productivity. She is proud of the initial successes of the Koka team. She is optimistic that the members' endeavors will develop into a successful business.

## Empowerment Through Participation

Other Koka members share their leader's enthusiasm for the personal rewards of working successfully together to provide food for their families. Members have gained skills or begun to practice long-dormant skills. They find the work satisfying, giving them purpose and direction. The work led them to redefine gender roles that were

already changing because of displacement, thereby further empowering women. These changes have extended beyond Koka's membership to the collective centers where IDPs learn from the positive example of their neighbors' accomplishments.

In Koka, women gain skills that go beyond the farming or market sales skills they employ. Although this is their first work on a medium-size farm, members had done agricultural work before. While they did not need to learn how to farm, many members had to learn about transporting and selling food. Most find the jobs are not technically challenging compared with their work before displacement. Indeed, one woman trained as a teacher before the war, although she never worked as one. Instead, her family had their own farm, which included seven cows. With Koka, she finds her work very simple because there are only two cows. In addition, Koka members have divided job responsibilities so that each person's skills are used most appropriately. For example, one former doctor is considered poor at selling produce in the market, so she works the land.

Members find their work satisfying. They are proud to participate in selling the products of their labor and earning an honest living from the land. Both agricultural work and participatory decision-making norms are psychologically beneficial aspects of the work. Interviewees describe the process of working with land as rejuvenating, particularly for traumatized people. One member describes the land as transformative. She puts her "sadness and evil" into the ground and buries it there. Hope then grows in its place within the same land. Other members describe going home from a long day of work feeling tired but peaceful. Because each individual is integral to Koka's success, members feel a sense of accomplishment as Koka develops. Participatory decision-making contributes to their sense of involvement in Koka's activities and their satisfaction with the work.

Many women have improved their self-images because of their work with Koka. One woman, Dodo, recounts how Koka changed first her self-image and then her social status. Before Koka was formed, Dodo was as a baker for a year, earning 3 lari a day in a large factory that she described as impersonal. Employees could not eat any products baked at the factory. Management did not know employees' names and never once said hello to Dodo. She found this work dehumanizing and depressing, but she continued because she had to provide for her daughter and granddaughter.

When Koka was formed, Dodo was enthusiastic about the chance to work with people who cared about each other and shared a stake in their collective accomplishments. Because she saw value in her work, her self-image improved. After working with Koka for a month, she returned to the bread factory to visit some of her former coworkers. For the first time, the factory director approached her, said hello, shook her hand, and asked about her family. Dodo was surprised to see how others now treated her with more respect.

Because of the pride they take in their collective accomplishments, Koka members can reflect on the role of women within Koka and the surrounding community. Alongside their 8 male colleagues, the 22 female members of Koka have developed self-confidence in realms far beyond their traditional roles.

---

## Empowerment Through Changing Gender Roles

It should not be surprising that war and displacement disrupted traditional gender roles. Koka has unwittingly contributed to an increase in women's status in certain realms. Although Koka's primary purpose has been farming, it also has contributed to helping women overcome depression, find jobs they appreciate, and attract more positive attention from those around them. These changes, though, have not noticeably affected the political participation of women or their decision-making authority in the home.

Koka did not set out to be a women's organization, but a combination of factors led to its 11:4 ratio of women to men. First, more men than women died in the war. Second, some men were away from their families to fight as partisans in the Gali region. Therefore, more women were left to do the farming. In addition, the terms of the initial grant from the Ministry of Agriculture required that only one person from each immediate family join the collective. Even in families where men remained, women were considered better at selling products.

Because of these circumstances, Koka became an organization composed predominantly of women, thus empowering them. The men close to Koka, either members themselves or related to women members, see these women in a new light. They see that the women can do things never thought possible, making a living through a combination of new skills. Some husbands now help care for the children while their wives work in Koka.

Gender roles have not changed in all realms or in all ways. Even within Koka, female members sometimes turn to their male colleagues to undertake certain tasks. For example, the women still look to the men to lift heavy weights, such as when moving trucks or buses full of produce from Chitatskari to Tbilisi. In addition, men are considered better able to negotiate lower prices with male truck drivers.

These changes in gender roles have not extended to the home or to political life, and they may not be permanent.

Koka members feel empowered within the community of displaced persons. They are rare examples of people who have made a successful start at development while keeping their sights on returning home. Koka exemplifies *mobile development*, because members are creating a structure that could return to Gali with them if return becomes possible. Koka members believe their neighbors in collective centers respect and admire their work. Other IDPs are excited about this model, but Koka members notice that many interested people want to be leaders of their own efforts and thus are unwilling to band with others.



## Roles of Assistance

From the start, international assistance has been instrumental in shaping Koka. The cooperative would not exist in its present form without its initial French-sponsored grant. But the way in which this assistance has been applied has confused Koka members. According to them, information exchange has been particularly weak.

The founding of Koka illustrates both the crucial importance of assistance and the inconsistent messages that reached beneficiaries. When members considered agriculture as a way to begin feeding themselves, they did not envision a microcredit scheme. However, when Ms. Kakhiani approached the minister of agriculture for help, he suggested she consider taking advantage of a French assistance package. At this stage, Ms. Kakhiani understood that if she gathered together 30 internally displaced persons from separate families for an agricultural business, the group would be eligible for a 5,350-lari grant. Going by that understanding, she formed Koka.

Once the group began farming, Ms. Kakhiani learned that Koka was expected to offer credit to its members and charge them 15 percent interest for three months. Thus, Koka distributed 2,000 lari among members as loans and required 15 percent interest payments at the end of the three-month loan period. Although Koka members thought the credit idea odd, they tried it because

they believed it was a new condition to the original grant. Given the grant's success, they are glad to have gained experience in arranging microcredit for one another and plan to do so again in the near future. At the end of the first three-month microcredit term, Koka learned that such loans were no longer an essential condition for grant recipients and that members could have used their resources as they saw fit.

Koka has received a complementary combination of international, national, and local assistance. In addition to its initial grant, Koka has received aid from local Georgian sources, although the monetary value of such assistance cannot be compared to the initial donor grant. For Koka, the land it farms is a crucial part of its operation. A Zugdidi resident allowed the group to rent his land and abandoned house in Chitatskari in return for an 8 percent portion of the group's crops their first year. The rent for the land and house will increase next year once the organization is able to cover rent expenses. In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture allocated fertilizer to Koka, but only after it had already bought some. Rather than let it go bad or sell it late in the season, Koka distributed the extra fertilizer to members who have their own private plots. The minister of agriculture also personally promised to retain a space at the market in Zugdidi or any other big city for the group once its output level makes a market space profitable.



Koka participants identified several ways in which local and international assistance could be more helpful. They would like training in the management of collective farms and agricultural businesses, but they have not found appropriate training programs. Koka members are most interested in learning about others' experiences with collective farming. They have heard about models of collective farming used in Switzerland and Israel and would like to learn from those models. Small credit organizations can be seen as part of an intercon-

nected global microcredit network of donors, microcredit nongovernmental organizations, and grass-roots organizations (Ohanyan 1999, 6). Strengthening Koka's ties with other grass-roots organizations within this network would increase Koka's capacity for sustainable collective agriculture. Members of the board of peasant's credit unions did attend a donor-sponsored training seminar in Kobuleti where they learned about developing farms, but Ms. Kakhiani and Koka were not invited to attend.



## Why Koka Succeeded

Koka's success can be attributed to a number of factors. Among them:

1. *A strong sense of community.* The war may have strengthened an already existing sense of community since internally displaced persons shared a collective trauma and the war strengthened the saliency of ethnic identities. Another cultural factor is the *kolkhoz* tradition. Koka members both built on Soviet tradition (by adopting an egalitarian structure for group farming) and reacted against it (by rejecting a rigid hierarchy and cultivating informal decision-making). Even deeper than Soviet-era cultural influences, though, are Caucasian traditions of neighborly sharing and assistance, which become clear when Koka members describe their work together. Koka's close-knit community contrasts sharply with the relations found in other communities where ties do not expand beyond tight kinship circles (Putnam 1993). For Koka's members, community ties extend throughout the new communities formed where the former residents of Gali live as displaced people.
2. *Adaptation to shifting social class status.* To a large extent, displacement undermined social class divisions. Koka's middle and lower class members shared the discomfort of collective centers and banded together to improve their lot. Displaced teachers, doctors, and factory workers shared the same status since class lines had changed with displacement. Internally displaced persons could develop into a new middle class in Georgian society if they continue to fill the growing small-trade niche. Once they overcome the psychological barriers of displacement, they may be in a position to take risks with new enterprises.
3. *Mobile development.* Koka has embraced a mobile development strategy. Usually, internally displaced persons consider life on hold until an eventual return home. Politicians offer the displaced hope of return home—a promise to which they cling. While this sense of prereturn and postreturn as two separate lives can open IDPs to risky new enterprises, it can also stop them from directing immense energy at building a prereturn life. Displaced persons do not want to develop successful businesses that must then be abandoned upon return home. For a newly developed IDP business to be truly successful, it must be mobile: the displaced persons must be able to take it home with them. Koka members have a clear vision of taking their organization home to Gali, and this strengthens their commitment to the organization. Koka's development also promises sustainability, as Koka has received comparatively little international assistance and has a strong commitment from its members.
4. *Complementary combination of international, national, and local assistance.* Koka's support ranged from the initial international grant to national support from the minister of agriculture and the board of peasant's credit unions to local support in the form of subsidized land rental. This combination of support may prove crucial to Koka's long-term sustainability. As international development assistance fades away, Koka will continue to look for support locally and nationally, building on networks it has already established.

# General Lessons

The following lessons emerge from the study of Koka Farmers' Union:

1. *Beneficiary knowledge of assistance programs.* Koka might have developed further if members had been aware of other assistance available. The influence of international donors on Koka's development is indirect in part because of Koka's lack of knowledge about development assistance. Koka members not only did not know of the requirement to offer members credit when it first formed, but they still do not know about what development assistance is available. This information gap reflects a more widespread myth of no available assistance. Displaced persons generally lament a complete lack of international assistance, although in point of fact there are substantial resources for vulnerable people. Another general lesson is that information on available development assistance should be more widely distributed. In addition, information about credit lending schemes should be more thoroughly explained.
2. *Shifting gender roles in a predominantly but not exclusively women's organization.* Lessons on women's roles and women's organizations can be delineated. Although not a classic women's organization (given that one third of its members are men), Koka fulfills the function of a women's organization, in both assisting war-affected women and promoting women's advancement. Koka's women used the organization to confront the economic, psychological, and social problems generated by the conflict. That contributed to their economic and social empowerment.

Koka's women reinforce the conclusion that women adapt better to displacement than men. Women de-

velop coping mechanisms in the face of the psychological traumas of war and displacement. Women become informal traders in the markets where formal markets do not function and where men are considered less capable of low-status trading. Women are able to undertake these low-status positions in order to provide for their families. Women generally adapt and create communal networks to care for their families. In this sense, dire economic conditions were a positive factor in encouraging Koka's initial development. The Koka Farmers' Union is a network with a highly developed sense of shared responsibility for one another's welfare. The sense of responsibility the women have instilled in Koka extends to the families of members as well. Thus the Koka community provides for family members through such gestures as allocating extra milk for young children.

3. *Saliency and interdependence of economic and social empowerment.* Koka has contributed to the economic and social empowerment of women members. Women have assumed leadership in the agricultural sector, traditionally a male domain. This empowerment has also affected the self-images and identities of Koka members. The trauma of war and displacement has created a yearning to return to the prewar situation (including women's prewar status and roles). However, Koka members seem committed to the organizational continuity even after returning to their homes, thus ensuring that they will not revert to the prewar and social economic conditions. The economic empowerment of women and their consciousness of this empowerment are only partially reversible.



## References

- Ohanyan, Anna. 1999. "The Politics of Microcredit as a Subject of Global Public Policy." Unpublished paper. Washington: Global Public Policy Project.
- Paqui, Hilda. 1999. "Women and Conflict Resolution." *Choices*. December. UNDP.
- Putnam, Robert D. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.