
The importance of traditional crafts for sustainable tourism development in Kakheti region

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Abstract---This article analyses the role and importance of traditional crafts and entrepreneurship in tourism on the example of the Kakheti region. Based on the studied materials, suggestions are offered considering the principles of sustainable tourism development, which is important for specialists and small entrepreneurs in the field of handicraft production. In the article, the authors developed and proposed recommendations for the tourism sector and its sustainable development, which is now a priority destination for the Kakheti region and at the same time one of the growing and dynamic sectors of the economy. This paper discusses the handicraft business as one of the sources of income for the local population. The purpose of the article is to analyse the current situation in the business of traditional crafts and identify new opportunities for development. Presented material will be useful for organizations interested in implementing small and medium enterprise promotion projects in the Kakheti region.

Keywords---handicrafts, tourism, Kakheti region, traditions, sustainable development.

Introduction

In the Kakheti region, one of the most growing economies is tourism. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, from 2015 to 2023, the number of hotels in the region increased by 260% (from 101 to 269). The increase in the number of visitors to hotels was 463% (from 96,000 to 445,000)¹ At the same time, tourism services improve and become diverse. It is important to note that world-famous hotel brands, "Holliday Inn" and "Radisson Collection" are presented in Kakheti. National brand hotels also operate in the region.

In line with such growth, it is necessary to ensure the sustainability of the tourism sector with guaranteeing its positive role in economic, social and cultural development of the region. In order to diversify the sector, in addition to overnight accommodation and catering services it is important to offer other, more diverse touristic services. Innovative and original tours, acquaintance with local traditions and rituals, moreover, handicraft buying opportunities can make Kakheti region's touristic service more diverse.

According to the official definition of UNESCO, "Handicrafts are those artisanal products which are produced by artisanal, either completely by hand or with the help of hand tools or even mechanical means as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of finished product"².

¹ National Statistics Office of Georgia <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/93/regionuli-statistika> (16/04/2025)

² UNESCO Statistics Institute <https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/craft-or-artisanal-products> (20/12/2024)

In many developing nations, handicraft is the major breadwinner and supplier of gainful employment. Furthermore, it is a major contributor to the GNP per capita. More explicitly, handicrafts have been recognized as the second largest rural employment after agriculture in many regions of the world. "Handicrafts have many attributes like high employment potential, low per capita investment, and high-value addition, the participation of women and weaker sections of the society, environmentally friendly, and the prospects to fuel artistic, innovative, and creative talents. These attributes make this sector one of the most favoured and preferred sectors in the process of economic growth and development"³.

Traditional crafts also create new perspectives for the development of a circular economy. "The circular economy (CE) is a model of production and consumption, which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible. In this way, the life cycle of products is extended. In practice, it implies reducing waste to a minimum."⁴ „ A circular society in the sense of exchange has been present throughout the history of mankind. Individuals created goods and tools from natural resources, such as wood or stone, for their own use and for exchange in a barter economy. Then, craftsmen appeared, using their skills to create goods for others, explore new materials like metals and ceramics and repair broken objects as a service to their owners. This evolution was driven by human desire for a better quality of life and by individual initiatives."⁵

Overview of the sector

Kakheti region is one of the largest and most diverse regions of Georgia. Due to the ethnographic diversity and the traditions that have preserved to this day, the production and sale sector of handmade items can be considered as a source of financial income for the local population and therefore, an important part of sustainable tourism development. Nowadays, traditional craft production requires not only the professionalism of specialists in a particular field but also systematized knowledge in the field of commerce and some business skills. It should be borne in mind that cultural values must be fully integrated and used in tourism development. Modern trends and ancient traditions should be maintained together to ensure the sustainability of the tourism development. Creative cultural activities play its role in economic development. At the same time, the production of traditional crafts does not require technological innovations and large investment. Folk crafts traditions in Georgia have developed aesthetic tastes and respect for values for centuries. It was a hand-woven garment, handmade guns and jewellery. "The technology of making

³ Waqar Ahmad Khan and Zeeshan Amir. (2013). Study of Handicraft Marketing Strategies of Artisans in Uttar Pradesh and Its Implications: Research Journal of Management Sciences. Vol. 2(2), 23-26.

⁴ Prasek D. Circular Economy handbook for universities. (Tbilisi 2022). Page 9.

⁵ Walter R. Stahel. (2019). The Circular Economy. A user's guide. Routledge Taylor and Francis Group (London and New York).

household items was passed from generation to generation, items were often made for sale and had an income generation function." ⁶

"Traditional arts and crafts are considered as an integral part of the cultural diversity of Georgia".⁷ Georgia's visitor's interest in cultural values and hand-made products is gaining every year. This is evidenced by the surveys and interviews conducted with both international and domestic tourists. "Visitors try to take items from Georgia that are associated with Georgian culture, tourists pay considerable amount of money in national souvenirs, since the purchased items best "talk" about Georgia." ⁸ Also, great attention is paid, to ensure that souvenirs are made by local masters. In this way, visitors returning to their own country share their impressions with friends and family about Georgia. The presence of crafts masters in the region allows the production by local resources in the region and possibilities of repair in case of damage, which leads to the long-term use of the products. The adoption of resources such as wool, bone, secondary metal and wood material gives the opportunity to create additional value through minimal use of natural resources, which is a characteristic feature of the circular economic model and therefore sustainable economic development.

Kakheti region has rich experience and resource potential for the development of traditional crafts. As well as learning opportunities. Handicraft development in Kakheti region is related to both geographical and ethnographic factors. Historically, in the Kakheti region, handmade items were made for both decorative and practical use. Climate, lifestyle and available raw materials led to different directions of crafts. For example, in mountainous settlements with a cold weather, where sheep farming is developed, the culture of sewing and weaving was more popular. Lowland territories, where the agriculture is more developed and it is possible to get raw materials like clay and wood, are known for the tradition of pottery and woodworking. Blacksmiths and the production of weapons were associated with a long-established warrior lifestyle in the region.

Nowadays, main directions, which are wood, wool and blacksmiths have remained in Kakheti region. It is noteworthy that in modern life, traditional crafts, along with the practical and decorative use, gradually become one of the directions of business that is closely related to the tourism sector.

⁶ Gogebashvili N. Shanshashvili A, Kiknadze T, „How to Make business from traditional crafts "Tbilisi 2015. Page N 4. Published by international centre for art and the association of traditional crafts.

⁷ Shanshashvili A. Traditional Crafts in Georgia: A Short Historical Overview. Georgian Folklore Magazine. 2022.

⁸ Newspaper Rezonansi, 23 April 2016. Page 3

The sharing of craftsmanship has traditionally taken place in families by transferring knowledge from the old to the new generation. Fortunately, nowadays, exist more diverse opportunities to study this work. In particular: educational institutions and small enterprises in the Kakheti region offer traditional crafts courses to people interested in this work. In all eight municipalities of Kakheti, there are art schools owned by the Municipality City Hall, which contribute to the preservation and development of the tradition of crafts in the region. Based on two main vocational education institutions in the Kakheti region, traditional crafts courses are available. The vocational college "Prestiji" in Telavi Municipality offers a course of artistic weaving⁹. Vocational College "Aisi", with the main building is in Gurjaani municipality, and branches in Akhmeta, Dedoplistskaro and Lagodekhi, offer courses for making felt, making ceramic goods, enamelling, artistic weaving and artistic processing of wood¹⁰.

Mostly, handicraft products are made in families. Most of them are not registered as a business. Any official register about number, size, address, and other necessary information, managed by any organization, does not exist. This fact is worth considering.

There are eight municipalities in the Kakheti region. All of them are characterised with diverse geographical and climatic conditions. Handicraft production features are also different in each municipality. In this regard, Akhmeta attracts some more attention.

"The territory of Akhmeta includes a cultural landscape that is well known by the richness of craftsmanship traditions. Sheep farming has a great place in this area because of Tusheti and its sheep husbandry traditions. For that reason, the main field of crafts is wool processing. Specialists of horse harness preparation and masters of weaving traditional bags and carpets still operate in Akhmeta. For centuries in Tusheti, there was a tradition of using natural dyes. The necessary raw materials for dyes were obtained both in the mountains and in the lowland areas. Woodworking and wooden tools were of great importance in folk. Tushetians also worked out leather, making traditional shoes and hats.'¹¹

⁹ Web page of VET „Prestiji“ <https://vetprestige.ge/index.php?m=211> (22/12/2024)

¹⁰ Web page of VET „Aisi“

<http://collegeaisi.ge/assets/uploads/catalog/%E1%83%9E%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A4%E1%83%94%E1%83%A1%E1%83%98%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%20%E1%83%99%E1%83%90%E1%83%A2%E1%83%90%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%92%E1%83%98.pdf> (24/12/2024)

¹¹ Guidebook for the project "Zrda in Georgia" Tbilisi 2019. Financed by the USAID

Small workshops in Kvemo Alvani (Akhmeta) are popular between international tourists, where traditional Tushetian socks, accessories and gloves are prepared. Visitors of the workshops can participate in the process of sewing as well.

In Kvemo Alvani village, there is a woodworking workshop "Tursa", where wooden vessels are made: Bowls, plates, beer mugs, wooden accessories and small size furniture. Workshop offers visitors to attend and participate in the process of production.

The wool enterprise "Tusheti" in Zemo Alvani is interesting in terms of the supply of raw materials to the workshops. Here the primary processing of wool takes place. Interested visitors can get acquainted with all the stages of wool processing: wool hacking, painting, and trimming process.

Similar enterprises can be found in the Pankisi Gorge of Akhmeta, which is one of the most beautiful locations in the municipality. It is distinguished from a tourist point of view: cultural cognitive, eco-gastronomic and ethnographic aspects. In the village of Duisi in the Pankisi Gorge, there are small workshops, such as "Pankisi", where horse accessories, felt carpets, garment and hats are made. The workshop offers master classes for the manufacture of traditional shepherd's coat "Nabadi". The same type of workshop was created by the Kakheti Regional Development Fund in the Pankisi Gorge, where felt, sewing, weaving and ceramics are produced. The workshop offers a wide variety of master classes to visitors.

Over the past two decades, several unions of traditional craft family businesses have been established in the Kakheti region, including:

Akhmeta Municipality - in the space of the Kvemo Alvani local lore Museum, there is a workshop "Mzemoe". The workshop brings together 15 local masters. Employees of the enterprise possess traditional crafts from their childhood, which they learned from their ancestors and then deepened their knowledge using modern technologies at the community college "Aisi", after which they were given the opportunity to diversify their products. In "Mzemoe" enterprise, visitors can attend master classes of weaving and wool processing.

Workshops in the village of Nukriani are distinguished by their originality and identity. "The social enterprise "Nukriani Workshops" started in 2007 based on the community organization "Nukriani". The establishment of a creative workshop proved to be an effective way to promote employment for rural women and youth. Locals employed in the enterprise create a wide variety of products of traditional crafts. In the social enterprise, decorative and practical items and accessories are created

from felt and textiles: bag, table cover, decorative pillows, toys and souvenirs. In addition, the workshop offers practical courses for learning crafts."¹²

In 2005, in Dedoplistskaro municipality of the Kakheti region, was founded Workshop "Pesvebi", where traditional Kizikian rugs are created. „The studio used historical and ethnographical sources. From the very beginning, the studio's main purpose was to restore and develop traditional Kizikian handicrafts and involve local women in activities. In a short period of time, all participants learned rug and tapestry weaving techniques, making accessories from felt. "Pesvebi" has the experience of using natural stains for dyeing. They used ethnographical material and renovated dyeing traditional methods, which was practically lost. At the studio are created the rugs, loom-woven bags. The design of the works, its' ornament, colour, and colour combination are traditional Georgian. At the same time, the collection adapted with contemporary new approaches is created. The works' colours are very light, and design suits the everyday life ".¹³

In terms of business development, it is important not only to produce products, but also to create opportunities for selling and for cooperation.

Basically, handicrafts, produced in the Kakheti region are sold on the site of production. Enterprises such as "Pesvebi", "Mzemoe" and "Nukriani workshops" have partners in Tbilisi and their products are sold in special stores in the capital. Restaurants or hotels with traditional interiors are also their customers. Handmade items produced in Kakheti are also sold in church stores, traditional exhibitions and tourist fairs.

It is noteworthy that with the funding of the European Union and the German government, in 2024, an art pavilion was built by the Kvareli Municipality City Hall specifically for crafts masters in the city of Kvareli. The project is a good example of collaboration and business promotion.

One of the important platforms for the cooperation development is Georgian Traditional Crafts Association. "Georgian Heritage Crafts Association is a membership organization, which acts to safeguard Georgian heritage crafts traditions and works towards a sustainable framework for sector's development in the future. Georgian Heritage Crafts Association aims to overcome the existing challenges through the creation of a networking platform for individuals, craftspeople, organizations and guilds, which care about the loss of traditional crafts skills. The goals of the association are: Coordination and enhancing of networking opportunities between different craft actors; Promotion of the heritage craft sector and raising maker's status among the wider public; Acting towards the creation of enabling environment

¹² Social enterprises alliance Georgia <https://www.seageorgia.ge/social-enterprises/22> (27/12/2024)

¹³ Georgian Heritage Crafts Association https://crafts.ge/?p=masters_detail&id=17 (27/12/2024)

and communicating the vital importance of heritage crafts to governmental bodies; Enhancing sector's economic potential and raising the competitiveness of Georgian Heritage Crafts products; Supporting the inclusion of the young generation in craft-related education to ensure that the highest standards of heritage skills are passed from one generation to the next. Survey and analyse craft sector-related issues, including academic and applied scientific studies; Supporting heritage crafts through technical assistance and fundraising."¹⁴

Findings and recommendations

Based on the analysis of the presented material, we formulated the following recommendations and conclusions:

As an example of enterprises in the article, we can consider traditional crafts as one of the means of economic empowerment of rural women. This is one of the best ways to overcome poverty in rural areas.

In the Kakheti region, traditional crafts business along with the family tradition is gradually becoming a source of income and is established as one of the directions of business. This is due to the presence of opportunities for its study, availability of raw materials, the increasing indicators of tourism and the emergence of sales and cooperation opportunities.

We consider it necessary for the state to implement a supporting policy for the sector, which is unimaginable without studying and analysing statistical data. Unfortunately, there are no official statistics that would give us information on the number, size and needs of businesses engaged in craft.

Preservation of folk craft traditions and transfer to future generations is the cornerstone of sustainability. Folk crafts master classes are the best offer for visitors based on their interests. With the preservation of folk crafts, acquaintance with patterns and master classes, Georgian cultural values in line with the sustainable development of tourism in the Kakheti region are also promoted.

We consider that traditional craft business' consumer market should be divided into two segments:

- **The first segment** should be focused on tourism and produce products attractive to tourists, such as souvenirs, authentic small-use items, etc. Such enterprises should be supported by the state by creating trade and exhibition spaces. The field itself should be promoted, and the correct information should be provided to tourists on where and what kind of products can be bought.
- **The second segment** should be focused on the local consumer so that this business does not lose its original function and serves the needs of the local population.

¹⁴ Georgian Heritage Crafts Association <https://crafts.ge/?p=dynamic&id=2> (27/12/2024)

Producing items with less prices and more practical functions should become profitable for both the manufacturer and the customer.

In both cases, the emphasis should be placed on the use of local raw materials.

When developing projects supporting the sector, it is necessary to work together with the government (including local self-government), non-governmental, educational and private sectors to identify needs, identify development opportunities and correct problem solving based on real data.

In the value chain of sustainable tourism, traditional crafts have an important place as it creates opportunities for visitors to acquire knowledge, entertain, buy local souvenirs and works of art. Promoting traditional craft development can be part of the region's development strategy as it provides opportunities for indirect employment through tourism using the natural resources available on the site. Research and need analysis of SMEs in all eight municipalities of the Kakheti region will be important for further development projects of the sector.

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