

**“LOCAL ACTORS JOIN FOR INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
AND GOVERNANCE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS” (JOIN)**

**GEO084/GE174 (ADA) AND GE-CN: 8172-02/2011**

**FINAL EVALUATION**

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**Note:** The format follows the directives outlined in the Guidelines for Project and Programme Evaluations – 2009, from the Austrian Development Cooperation.  
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“This evaluation is supported and funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation and CARE and presented by [Marydean Purves] The report does not necessarily reflect the views and

opinions of the Austrian Development Cooperation and CARE".

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS**

ADC – Austrian Development Cooperation  
BDIC – Business Development and Information Center  
CARD – Center for Agribusiness and Rural Development Foundation  
CIC - CARE International in the Caucasus  
CiDA – Civil Development Agency  
ER- Expected Result  
FGD – Focus Group Discussions  
FVSC - Farm and Veterinary Service Center  
JOIN – Local Actors Join for Inclusive Economic Development and Governance in the South Caucasus  
KII – Key Informant Interviews  
LoE – Level of Effort  
MDP – Municipal Development Plan  
MoA – Ministry of Agriculture  
MTR – Mid-term Evaluation  
MWG – Municipal Working Group  
NGO – Non-governmental organization  
NP – National Partners  
NPO/NCO –National Project/Coordination Officer  
PLF – Log Frame  
RDA- Regional Coordination Department/MoA  
SME DNC – Small and Medium Entrepreneurship Development National Center  
STAGE – Strengthening the Role of Rural Associations in Democratic Process in Georgia  
UN – United Nations

# MAPS





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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The project *Local Actors join for inclusive economic development and governance in the South Caucasus* or (JOIN), project and programme number **GEO084/GE174 (ADA)** and **GE-CN: 8172-02/2011** was implemented from November 2011 to October 2014, and received a no-cost extension through April 30, 2015. Georgia and Armenia were the country fields of operation, and included the regions of Lori, Shirak, Tavush (Armenia); Kvemo Kartli, and Samtskhe-Javakheti, (Georgia). JOIN was funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) and CARE Österreich and implemented by CARE Österreich and CARE International in the Caucasus together with the partner organizations – Civil Development Agency (CiDA) in Georgia and Center for Agribusiness and Rural Development (CARD) in Armenia. The total budget for the project was 1,135,200 EUR, with 1,019,700 (90%) provided by ADC, and 115,000 (10%) provided by CARE.

The “summative ex-post” evaluation began on February 20, 2015 with a Desk Review. The principal evaluator was in the field from February 26 through March 11, 2015. Report writing was conducted from March 12 to April 20, 2015. An updated schedule is in the annexes. The report-writing period was extended by 5 days upon request. The purpose was to 1) contribute to a better understanding of the outcomes of the JOIN project, 2) document these for reasons of transparency and accountability and c) facilitate learning for future programme design. As per the Terms of Reference the objectives of the evaluation were to 1) review results (output, outcome, initial impact), 2) assess the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of JOIN and, 3) consolidate lessons learned and present recommendations to the target audiences. A qualified international consultant led the evaluation, accompanied in country by JOIN staff members. The “evaluation reference group” was composed of representatives from CARE Caucasus, partners CiDA and CARD. Russian and local language translators will join the team as needed.

The evaluation questions addressed the themes of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, impact, cross-border, cooperation and partnerships, and gender mainstreaming. The evaluation used participative, qualitative methods to assess the program at three levels: grassroots, Partner implementers, and principal project managers. Third party and indirect stakeholders were also part of the investigation activities.

The evaluation used several methods of data collection in various ways: key informant interviews, Focus Group Discussions, checklists, and records review, where possible. Interviews with CARE and Partner implementers were conducted to address the key questions concerning both project management and implementation. Review of records, charts, and training materials was conducted where possible. The design did not include a randomized, population-based survey with ultimate beneficiaries.

## **PROJECT RESULTS**

The project results are recorded in the Progress Update table, Annex 1. The evaluation findings are detailed by themes as identified above.

*ER 1: Local government, civil society and the private sector jointly develop, plan and implement gender-sensitive local municipal development plans (MDPs) for sustainable socioeconomic development.*

JOIN succeeded in working with and through existing structures, such as BDICs and ICCs. No parallel entities were created. Non-formal operational units were created to produce the MDPs. 12 Municipal Working Groups (MWGs) were established by the projects with approximately 144 members, representative of the three sectors. The members of the MWGs were self-selected local community members, with no formal authority, and the MWG as a body did not have a formal presence in the government. Through the MWGs, the members became involved in local planning processes, and each group conducted a value chain analysis relevant to their local socio-economic circumstances. The principal output for the MWGs was a Municipal Development Plan (MDP); plans were presented to the local and regional authorities. All MDPs included gender-sensitive analysis, although actual gender-oriented strategies were not evident. A non-representative sampling of MWGs in November/December 2014 records that self-confidence and knowledge on issues and how to work in MWGs increased on average for 58% of polled members. (n=73). 60% felt that their views were incorporated into the plans. In a complementary initiative, 11 small grants for local socioeconomic development initiatives were implemented, which reflected priority value chains developed in the MDPs. Some grants were independent of the MWGs (3/11).

*ER 2: Sustainable BDICS provide market relevant information and trainings to LG, CS, and PS in support of strengthening local value chains (in selected fields of agriculture).*



Four Business Development Information Centres (BDICs) are operational in Armenia. Two centres are embedded in CARD-sponsored Farm and Veterinary Service Centres (FVSC), one centre is wholly under the management of Small and Medium Entrepreneurship Development National Centre (SME/DNC), and one centre is operational at City Hall (Berd) with CARD support. Creative financing includes free office space, subsidized salaries, and materials and technical support covered by CARD and SME/DNC. Six Information and Consultation Centres (ICC) in Georgia are a government unit within the Ministry of Agriculture/Regional Coordination Department with salaries from the MoA, office space from the local municipality, with materials and technical support from MoA and other agencies (USAID, etc.). The BDICs/ICCs are intended to be a 'model that is economically self-sustaining.' Given that there is no fee-for-service scheme and all operational expenses are subsidized, there is no way to determine if the centres might be economically self-sustaining.

7711 Men and women visited the Armenian BDICs primarily to purchase farm and veterinary products, to obtain information, and to participate in trainings and meetings.

*ER 3: Institutionalised coordination mechanisms between national and involved local stakeholders are established to effectively address local socioeconomic development needs.*

Cross-border economic initiatives\* were more of the research and development arena, and included one trade fair, a cross-border exchange visit, and a small exhibition of products.

Project staff report that the government and main donors working on regional development planning are aware of the JOIN Municipal Development Plans as the team participated in the regional processes and met regional governors and Ministry Representatives to present the plans. MWGs have presented the final versions of MDPs to the wider Local Government and their respective communities. MDPs were discussed in a cross-municipal meeting. The Ministry of Agriculture and Territorial Administration are informed about the plans. UNDP and GIZ who are active in regional planning are informed about the plans. Two coordination fora were organized in Georgia on the quality of input supplies and cattle breeding,, two in Armenia on preventing soil degradation of agricultural lands, and a market linkages conference. In addition, more informal issue-based meetings were organized to discuss concerns identified as relevant in MDPs. Nevertheless, no official coordination mechanisms

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\* This activity was originally listed under ER.2.

have been established.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The conclusions are limited by the lack of specificity in the monitoring database. There was also frequent re-formulation of the indicators as they re-appeared in the different progress reports. Apart from the Armenia BDIC feedback system, the evaluator did not see a functioning monitoring and evaluation database that regularly tracked the indicators. Furthermore, there were no baseline indicators. Meta data was not collected for the Overall Objective.

*ER 1: LG, CS, and the private sector jointly develop, plan, and implement gender-sensitive local market development plans..."*

The innovation of a tripartite representation to develop the MDPs was perhaps the most beneficial output of ER 1. All parties claim to have enhanced their understanding of the other sectors, and in particular how the government planning process works.

Despite this, the scale of operations, and the scope of the plans appear to be too small to have significantly impacted even the local market scenario. The question about scale is the degree to which such an informal working group can influence and direct a process which belongs to a larger structure, and which is bound by regulatory and legislative directives. The question about scope is the focus on a single value chain, which while chosen to reflect a local priority, often is dependent on other dimensions, which are not treated in the plan (e.g. land registration, bank credit, etc.).

The grants scheme appears to have evolved in parallel to the larger purpose of consolidating separate sectorial interests into a 'public-private partnership', and then using the grant opportunity as a demonstration vehicle for the value-chain enterprise. Furthermore, the concept of an advocacy initiative was re-interpreted as a grant application to fund a purchase or a project. Training on 'advocacy' was dominated by the themes of project design, grant procedures, and business planning.

The project did raise awareness among its direct participants about the role of women in the agricultural sector, in particular with the evidence base of the Gender Study. A training event on gender for the MWGs reinforced the importance of including women and women's issues

in the MDPs. Two grants (not be confused with MDPs) to women's NGOs for felt products and tea products show some initiative, and indirectly reflect the value chains in their areas. Despite careful assessment in the project document, some deliberate metrics to count women's presence in closed activities, and a study, there was no specific strategy to enhance women's participation in the market arena. Discussions with project staff (CARE and partners) revealed a gap in practice and procedure on how to articulate a meaningful gender strategy for agriculture value chains.

Finally, there is vocal recognition, albeit no quantitative barometer, that cooperation between the different sectors has been created, and there now exists a corps of competent practitioners among MWGs who feel they would be able to coach other municipalities through the process.

*ER 2: Sustainable BDICs/ICCs provide market relevant information and trainings to LG, CS, and PS in support of strengthening local value chains [in selected fields of agriculture].*

The BDICs and ICCs have reach, relevance, and satisfaction results. The value chain analysis was a new approach by which to examine the local economy and its relationship to people's livelihoods. It lifted the concept of subsistence farming to the level of potential business development, and for that the project should be commended. It remains to build strong political will for better investment in SME with an understanding that this is where the economic health of the countries lives.

BDICs in both countries appear to have a solid foundation for continuing the mandate of information sharing, technical support, and possibly business development. The BDICs do not currently count many small farm holders (thus women) among their client base, however there are really no barriers to a dedicated outreach campaign on inclusion to recruit such clients.

It was not really clear if the project meant to link MWGs with BDICs as a means to promote the value chain work through MDPs. In Armenia, not all BDIC staff is on the MWG, and in 2 BDICs (Noyemberyan and Berd), the staff is unaware of the activities of MWG beyond some references to grant awards. ICC staff members in Georgia, on the other hand, dominate the MWGs, bringing a strong agricultural voice to the activities. The MDP documents were a tangible part of their program development. Given that the BDIC/ICCs have the support of local government and line ministry, as well as some financial means, their continued active

involvement as an advisory body to local government would be beneficial.

The cross-border initiative did not live up to the expectations in the project proposal. Early in the life of the project, cross-border market development ideas were 'down-sized' to be more realistic. Nevertheless, the implemented activities (cross-border value chain analysis, study visits and a joint conference that brought together participants, policy makers and value-chain actors from both countries) did advance the agenda.

*ER 3: Institutional coordination mechanisms between national and involved local stakeholders are established to effectively address local socioeconomic development needs.*

A variety of events were conducted that brought together different levels of stakeholders. There is no tangible evidence to confirm that durable coordination mechanisms have been established. While there were some commendable encounters between different stakeholders (a governor met with the JOIN team for the MDPs, and other presentations/exchanges were held among NGOs and international agencies (GIZ, UN), these were singular events and do not signal the adoption of a regular procedure for consultation among stakeholders. CARE management is on record stating that *were no plans or resources in the proposal allocated for establishing long term sustainable coordination mechanisms beyond the life of the project.*

Nevertheless, in some cases the dynamism of the MWGs and their MDPs appears to have made a favourable impression on some local government entities. Members of MWGs attest to having begun dialogue with authorities at the regional level via the MDP presentation opportunities they had through the project. If those five promising MWGs can produce another consultative report on a pressing socio-economic issue in their community, they stand to gain a foothold within the institutional corridors where decisions are made.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

For CARE CIC/Austria-

- Sustainability of project actions should be a shared responsibility with the partner organisations, and a strategy to that effect should be part of the contractual arrangements.

- Future project logical frameworks need more precision, better metrics, and an obvious rationale linking the results, activities, outputs and outcomes.
- Make more use of the quality research products developed during the project – find opportunities to publicize and circulate them.
- Resources permitting, conduct a post-grant implementation exercise to gauge the impact of the initiative on the local economic community.
- The proposal document outlined the concepts of *social enterprise* and *advocacy*, which have specific definitions and distinct processes for implementation. The project should have developed these concepts into measurable actions.
- A project of this calibre needed a strong public relations component to work the advocacy elements.

For the National Partners -

- Partnership differs from contract services, and both parties are expected to bring resources, technical and intellectual capacities to the table. In future endeavours, national partners should be held more accountable for their deliverables.
- Move away from activity-driven approaches, which often indicate a lack of strategic thinking.
- International donors expect mature national NGOs to have rigorous and effective M & E systems that can demonstrate cause and effect, and that are evidence-based. The National Partners would be wise to invest in this aspect of their work. This includes quality reporting, as the written report is often the only product seen by third parties, and the work is judged by what is put in a report.
- National partners should find reason to continue a relationship with the MWGs, as well as to promote the MDPs.

For the Donors –

- Expect more from national non-governmental organizations. They must learn to live up to expectations, and stay competitive.
- Make use of the research products from this project in larger fora.

General project management and implementation -

- Match the human resource needs better to the project tasks; understaffing undercuts success.

- Build a more robust monitoring and evaluation system that is responsive to programme needs – answering the questions of ‘who, what, when, where, why, and how’ for decision-making and optimal design.

## 2. BACKGROUND

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### 2.1. Summary Information

The project under evaluation is known as *Local Actors join for inclusive economic development and governance in the South Caucasus* or (JOIN), project and programme number **GEO084/GE174 (ADA)** and **GE-CN: 8172-02/2011**. Georgia and Armenia were the country fields of operation, and included the regions of Lori, Shirak, Tavush (Armenia); Kvemo Kartli, and Samtskhe-Javakheti, (Georgia). JOIN was a three-year project funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) and CARE Österreich and implemented by CARE Österreich and CARE International in the Caucasus together with the partner organizations – Civil Development Agency (CiDA) in Georgia and Center for Agribusiness and Rural Development (CARD) in Armenia. The total budget for the project was 1,135,200 EUR, with 1,019,700 (90%) provided by ADC, and 115,000 (10%) provided by CARE. A no-cost extension phase for consolidation and monitoring is being implemented from November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, through April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

A rapid overview of the state of the situation is well-summarized in a JOIN project Lessons Learned Paper from JOIN was carried out at a time of dynamic change in both Georgia and Armenia, particularly with regard to the areas of local governance and the agricultural sector. In Georgia, a change of national government led to considerable upheaval at the municipal level, which was only fully settled after local government elections, which took place more than a year later. The arrival of a new government also brought changes in the area of agricultural policy and, to a certain extent, regional development policy. In Armenia, a policy of territorial reorganization had been on the table since the very beginning of the project, though not implemented and series of elections in the countries numerous municipalities also impacted the implementation of activities, even if these elections resulted in far few cadre changes than in the case of Georgia. In both countries, changes in the law regarding the creation of cooperatives had potentially important implications for small farmers for the

creation of new opportunities that cut to the heart of the structure of agriculture. This dynamic of change required the JOIN project team to react and adapt as it looked to integrate the project's work into national processes.

## 2.2. Project Context <sup>1</sup>

### 2.1.1. *CARE in the Caucasus*

CIC's geographic scope includes regions in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the 'entities' of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorny Karabakh. In CARE International's confederation structure, CIC represents CARE Austria in the Caucasus and implements projects for the CARE family. CARE Austria is the ADC contract holder, is in charge of contract management, and targeted technical assistance. This project represents 5% of the current development projects portfolio of CARE Austria. CARE Austria's principle role has been to provide back-up administrative assistance, program guidance, monitoring, quality control and donor liaison.

### 2.1.2. *Geopolitical environment relevant to JOIN*

The South Caucasus is a geopolitical region located on the border of Eastern Europe and Southwest Asia, also referred to as Transcaucasia, or *The Trans-Caucasus*. The area includes the southern part of the Greater Caucasus Mountain range, the entire Lesser Caucasus Mountain range, the Colchis Lowlands and Kura-Aras Lowlands, the Talysh Mountains, the Lenkoran Lowlands, Javakheti and the Armenian highlands. All of Armenia is in Southern Caucasus; the majority of Georgia falls within this area. Trans-national highways, military roads and railroads connect the two areas. Persians, Khazars, Arabs, Huns, Turko-Mongols, and Russians have invaded and migrated into the Caucasus and have given the region its ethnic and linguistic complexity. Today over 40 languages are spoken by the 100 ethnic groups living in the area (including Azerbaijan).

During the life of the JOIN project, rapid political change in Georgia saw the rise of the Georgian Dream coalition in October 2012, and the election of a 'businessman billionaire' to the presidency in November 2013, along with a new Prime Minister. Over the course of the project, key government partners have changed within the Ministry of Agriculture, and long delays in stabilization of relevant government offices slowed project implementation. Re-

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<sup>1</sup> Authoritative sources include <http://care-caucasus.org.ge/> the updated CIA Factbook/June 2014 [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos.](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos.); The European Council on Foreign Relations <http://www.ecfr.eu/> (accessed March 25,2015), and <http://thediplomat.com/category/crossroads-asia>.

delineation of administrative territories has also had some adverse impact on the project's geographical reach in Georgia. During 2013-2014, the Georgian Dream-led government continued the previous administration's low-regulation, low-tax, free market policies, while modestly increasing social spending, strengthening anti-trust policy, and amending the labor code to comply with International Labor Standards.

Armenia had a presidential election during the life of the project in February 2013. The incumbent President Serzh Sargsyan won a second term in office by garnering just under 59% of the vote. Agricultural production, customs and trade revisions moved to the top of the list of priority government initiatives. Both foci are relevant for the JOIN actions.

### 2.1.3. Economic and policy environment relevant to JOIN

In 2011, Armenia and Georgia were on track to sign free trade agreements with the European Union. Implications for JOIN pointed most directly at cross-border trade initiatives between the two countries and onward toward the west. In 2013, Armenia began to entertain the possibility of membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which was not compatible with the EU plans. By January 2015, Armenia had joined the EEU. For Georgia, joining the EU and NATO continue to be among the country's top foreign policy goals.

**Georgia:** The most recent unemployment figures for 2013 stood at 15%; 13 % for women and 17 % for men. 9.2% lives below the poverty line. 35% of jobs can be found in the service sector, which is dominated by women, and wages are low. 56% of jobs are in the agricultural sector. There is some confusion as to whether women farm laborers are considered part of the agricultural or the 'service sector'. The government is finalizing its 2020 Economic Development Strategy and has launched the Georgia Co-Investment Fund, a \$6 billion private equity fund that will invest in tourism, agriculture, logistics, energy, infrastructure, and manufacturing.

**Armenia:** In what is known as the country's "Strategic U-Turn" by joining the EEU, some import tariffs for Armenia, including for agricultural goods, will have to be increased. In addition, since Armenia is also a World Trade Organization (WTO) member, more re-adjustments have to take place. Furthermore, Armenia will be affected by the unified CU sanitary, phytosanitary, veterinary and technical regulation measures, such as the use of the unified CU forms of veterinary certificates to facilitate trade in goods that are under veterinary control. The implications of this for JOIN have to do with the customs regulations that



Armenia was to re-design for its borders with Georgia as a means to facilitate cross-border trade.

The background research that went into developing the project document is extensive, and bibliographies can be found in the proposal as well as the Inception Report.

## 2.2. Project Design

### 2.2.1. Project objective, purpose, and expected results

The project's **overall objective**, (which is not meant to be measured in the lifetime of this project), is:

*"To contribute to poverty reduction in the border regions of Georgia and Armenia through improved cooperation between government, civil society and the private sector in the socioeconomic field."*

The **project purpose** is to:

*"Promote an enabling environment for pro-poor socioeconomic development through participatory planning, improved cooperation and exchange of market relevant information among local governments, CSOs and the private sector."*

Achievement of the objectives would produce three **results**:

*"ER1: LG, CS and the private sector jointly plan and implement gender-sensitive municipal development plans for sustainable socioeconomic development;*

*ER2: Sustainable BDICs provide market-relevant information and trainings to LG, CS and the private sector in support of strengthening local value chains (in selected fields such as agriculture);*

*ER3: Institutionalised coordination mechanisms between national and involved local stakeholders are established to effectively address local socioeconomic development needs."*

Indicators of success listed in the logical framework include: (language re-formulated by evaluator for consistency):

- 1) Increase the income levels in target regions (not to be measured);
- 2) Increase knowledge levels about local government policy processes;
- 3) Increase the number of small-business activity in target municipalities;
- 4) Increase the diversification of income-generating opportunities;
- 5) Increase the # of cross border economic activities/capitalization from cross-border agricultural value chains;
- 6) Increase the investments of private sector actors in the target regions;
- 7) Improve the capacities of small scale farming households to generate income from agricultural value chains;
- 8) [Incorporate] views of civil society (CS) and the private sector (PS) into socioeconomic planning at municipal level;
- 9) Increase the % of local actors aware of government responsibilities and donor initiatives to support local economic development;
- 10) Increase the % of local actors' awareness of women's needs and opportunities for income generation and legal framework and government programmes for women empowerment;
- 11) Improve women's perception of their ability to participate in decision-making in local governance and profit from business opportunities.

It should be noted that there are no known baseline data points for these indicators against which to measure progress. Nor are there definitions in some cases, to clarify what exactly reflects the change, e.g., 'improve women's perception of their ability to participate...'.

### 2.2.2. Project Logical Framework (PLF)

The PLF was analysed as per the directives for the Inception Report. Given that the PLF is generally the reference point for an evaluation, it was important to de-construct it and gauge the reasonable progression from objectives to results to indicators of achievement, etc. In the case of this project, the indicators and objectives mutated and changed form throughout six progress reports, and the mid-term evaluation<sup>2</sup>. Strictly speaking, this could make it difficult

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<sup>2</sup> Evaluator did a comparison chart to track these changes. It has since been provided to CARE management.

to attribute results. The evaluator chose to reference the authoritative PLF version in the proposal, but to be open to verifiable attribution of results to revised and/or additional indicators added over time. Normally, a Performance Monitoring Table (PMT) then establishes the tracking system for measuring progress over time, and this is connected to a database. However, the evaluator was not able to find such a comprehensive system that functioned throughout the life of the project. The project's activity tracking mechanisms are dispersed across a number of reporting formats and reports, which did not always have the same indicators as spelled out in the PLF.

### 2.2.3. Project beneficiaries

The original proposal identifies beneficiaries as:

*"Rural households with income below the poverty line (or at risk of falling below it). They are socially and economically marginalized by their distance to vibrant markets and adjacency to national borders.[...]. Most rural households in the area are engaged in subsistence farming (field crops, vegetables, cattle)".*

Generally speaking, 'beneficiaries' are recognized as groups that are 'downstream', or at the receiving end, of the action - whose lives should be improved, and who may also improve the lives of others. This evaluation did not include a quantitative, population-based survey, so it was not possible to actually interact with the ultimate beneficiaries in the communities. Furthermore, no baseline metrics were established in the PLF against which to gauge achievements, thus it is not possible to attribute quantitative change over time.

*"A sub-impact group of this project are women in farming households, who are most vulnerable as they undertake a major share of the farming and household work without legal ownership of the land".*

The qualitative and largely narrative gender analysis study did not establish a baseline data point on the number of women in the project catchment area. The project population estimates by municipality included in the original proposal are not sex-disaggregated. The only data point that captured gendered data was in the BDIC tracking forms, which registered the sex of visitors to the centre, but did not disaggregate the reason for the visit by sex.

### 2.2.4. Project Target Groups

According to the project proposal the **primary target group** are:

*“ Local actors engaged in agricultural market systems, namely:*

- *Local government staff, responsible for development planning [in agricultural markets], local governments play the role of establishing and/or informing about rules that govern market access, such as tariff and non tariff barriers [ ].*
- *Representatives of local CSOs, including NGOs, rural/ farmer associations, and/or CBOs, whose objective is to further local economic development [ ].*
- *Members of the local business communities: Established companies (e.g.: packaging, marketing, suppliers of inputs), small businesses (e.g. small scale processing, slaughterhouses) in the agricultural sector as well as the local chambers of commerce”.*

According to the proposal, the total number of persons in these target groups is @120 representatives. These target groups were engaged by the project to deliver actions and services to a larger pool of beneficiaries.

### **2.3. Activities and Expected Results**

Three Expected Results (ER) formed the basis for the activities plan. The program of activities was designed to respond to the needs as identified in the original proposal. As the project evolved, activities that were achieved were no longer updated in Progress Reports. In some cases, new activities were added and monitored. According to CARE management:

*“Activities that were completed did not require an update. E.g. if 12 MDPs were developed in 2013, we did not report on this in every coming report. Or, after the BDIC models were developed, there was nothing to report on this activity. - On the other hand, new activities, to implement MDPs were implemented and the project reported on these.*

*In summary, progress reports are covering a certain period of time and are describing progress, achievements, lessons learned or failures during the reporting period. Usually there is no need to repeat all results achieved during previous periods in the new ones unless they are essential for the given report. Then findings of the regular report are consolidated in the annual or the final ones”.*

2.3.1. ER1: “LG, CS and the private sector jointly plan and implement gender-sensitive municipal development plans for sustainable socioeconomic development”.

- 1) Support the establishment of inclusive Municipal Working Groups (MWGs), consisting of local government staff, CSO members and the private sector for the revision of municipal development plans on small-business/ local economic development;
- 2) Deliver five trainings for 5-7 Municipal Working Group members in each of the target municipalities to build capacity on gender-sensitive and participatory planning and budgeting methods;
- 3) Support Municipal Working Groups in analysing, adjusting and prioritising sustainable municipal development plans for market development in agricultural value chains as well as their cross-municipal review;
- 4) Organise a small grants scheme to co-finance initiatives that strengthen agricultural value chains in target municipalities as well as across the border;
- 5) Market cost-advantaged input supply opportunities within the target municipalities to private sector enterprises.

2.3.2. ER 2: "Sustainable BDICs provide market-relevant information and trainings to LG, CS and the private sector in support of strengthening local value chains (in selected fields such as agriculture)".

- 1) Develop models for the establishment of business development and information centres (BDICs) in the target municipalities based on an analysis of locally existing initiatives and local needs;
- 2) Establish/strengthen BDICs for information to small scale farmers and local businesses in the agricultural sector;
- 3) BDICs organise introductory community event informing about their services;
- 4) BDICs organise trainings for their beneficiaries on identified themes (e.g. on business-plan writing, business regulations, etc.;
- 5) BDICs organise quarterly information meetings with local businesses and farmers;
- 6) BDICs organise cross-border trade events promoting links between small businesses.

2.3.3. ER 3: "Institutionalised coordination mechanisms between national and involved local stakeholders are established to effectively address local socioeconomic development needs".

- 1) Organise regular (semi-annual) visits of representatives of the regional and central government to meet MWGs and discuss small-business development needs;
- 2) Organise a coordination forum for each Armenia and Georgia with donors, NGOs and private-sector enterprises operating nationally and across the border;

- 3) Final project conference with relevant stakeholders to discuss and disseminate lessons learned.

*2.3.4. "Accompanying measures to strengthen coordination with other government and donor-led initiatives and to make sure that lessons learned are shared and discussed with stakeholders".*

- 1) *Establish a Coordination Committee including central and regional level government representatives and donors;*
- 2) *Collect lessons learned and formulate case studies on cooperation between local actors for participatory municipal development planning and the BDICs.*

The programme of activities was modified slightly over the three years of the project. The activity under 2.3.1. *"Market cost-advantaged input supply opportunities within the target municipalities to private sector enterprises,* was removed by December 2012. Following the MTE, an activity to develop a website for the CCIs in Georgia was added. This was not acted upon due to lack of authorization from the MoA. The form of the cross-border trade fairs was changed to exchange visits in ER 3.

The Accompanying Measures were implemented during the first and fourth years.

### **3. INTRODUCTION**

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The nature of this evaluation is considered "summative ex-post" evaluation, with the purpose to 1) contribute to a better understanding of the outcomes of the JOIN project, 2) document these for reasons of transparency and accountability and c) facilitate learning for future programme design. See Annex 12. Terms of Reference for more details.

#### **3.1. Evaluation objectives**

As per the Terms of Reference the objectives of the evaluation were to:

- Review results (output, outcome, initial impact),
- Assess the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of JOIN and
- Consolidate lessons learned and present recommendations to the target audiences.

## 3.2. Methods

### 3.2.1. Evaluation Team

The team consisted of a qualified international consultant as principal investigator. A CARE Caucasus staff member served as Evaluation Liaison. The “evaluation reference group” composed of representatives from CARE Caucasus, partners CiDA and CARD. Russian and local language translators will join the team as needed.

### 3.2.2. Key Evaluation Questions

The evaluation questions addressed the themes of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, impact, cross-border, cooperation and partnerships, and gender mainstreaming. Section 5. EVALUATION FINDINGS, follows the thematic sequence to address all questions.

### 3.2.3. Evaluation Design and Methodology

Given the short turnaround time for the exercise, the consultant did not file an Inception Report or Evaluation Plan in advance. Since the consultant had conducted a final evaluation in 2013 for the same organization, the Evaluation Plan from that exercise was used as reference. The evaluation used **participative, qualitative methods** to assess the program at three levels: grassroots, Partner implementers, and principal project managers. Third party and indirect stakeholders were also part of the investigation activities. 10 out of the 12 MWGs were visited and interviewed. Due to time constraints, the MWGs of Marneuli and Bolnisi were not visited.

The evaluation used several methods of data collection in various ways: key informant interviews, Focus Group Discussions, checklists, and records review, where possible. Interviews with CARE and Partner implementers were conducted to address the key questions concerning both project management and implementation. Review of records, charts, and training materials was conducted where possible. The design did not include a randomized, population-based survey with ultimate beneficiaries.

### 3.2.4. Instruments for Data Collection

The evaluator used a variety of instruments including:

**Focus Group Discussions.** Data from FGDs laid down the starting point of the analysis as they provided the essential information from both direct and indirect beneficiaries of the project for each ER.

**Key Informant Interviews.** Key Informant interviews were conducted at the regional, national regional, and community levels in the catchment areas. The range of key informants included Partners, activity implementers, and policy makers, as well as donors (EU).

**Checklists, rankings.** Checklists and double entry ranking tables were used to assess a variety of actions and outcomes.

Table 1. List of Instruments and Data Collected

Type of Instrument	# of instruments	Party of Interest	# Collected
Focus Group Discussions	1	MWG	10
Key Informant Interviews	1	CARE staff, partner organisations, Indirect stakeholders	10
Checklists	2	CARE JOIN staff, CARD & CiDA	5
Scoring and Ranking Tools	3	CG Activists	83
Document Review	-	-	+/- 20

### *3.2.5. Evaluation Schedule*

The evaluation began on February 20, 2015 with a Desk Review. The principal evaluator was in the field from February 26 through March 11, 2015. Report writing was conducted from March 12 to April 20, 2015. An updated schedule is in the annexes. The report-writing period was extended by 5 days upon request.

## **3.2. Constraints**

The primary constraint for this evaluation was the lack of a Performance Monitoring System (PMS) that centralized different data products. The evaluator had to search through different reports to extract and consolidate data with which to draw conclusions. This took a great deal of the evaluator's time. In addition, the databases had some glitches which might affect the validity of the data.



Some key actions did not appear to have a paper trail, for example the Information Availability Review for Georgia, the MDP presentations to high-level stakeholders by MWGs, and the final stakeholder conference/presentation events in October 2014.

The last progress report was dated June 2014, eight months previous to the final evaluation.

Much rich information came through in discussions with project senior management, however as it was not always evidence-based, there were limitations on casting the information as authoritative.

## 4. EVALUATION FINDINGS

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This section reflects the questions for the evaluation as itemized in the Terms of Reference. There are some questions for which the evaluator was unable to find a response, due to the lack of verifiable evidence. This should not be assumed to mean that the project did not produce the results rather the mechanisms for capturing progress indicators could not be identified. Please refer to Annex 1. Logical Framework Project Update for cross-reference.

### ***4.1. Relevance***

Generally, 'relevance' is to prove that a specifically desired objective – in this case using project-inspired MDPs to craft progressive agricultural programs – is dependent on the success of the planning process for those MDPs. One way to assess the relevance would be to compare prior MDP planning processes and their effect on local agricultural development circumstances. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the previous methods of developing MDPs were exclusive to government entities, non-evidence based, and unilateral in their dissemination approach – that is, the final product only went up the hierarchy. By comparison, the JOIN process was highly inclusive, supported by both quantitative and qualitative data, and shared with many stakeholders.

#### *4.1.1. Relevance of the process for developing Municipal Development Plans*

The table below summarizes the perceived relevance for different stakeholders of the process of developing the municipal development plans. Overall, the process was assessed as a valuable tool for both individuals who engaged in it and the grassroots level organizational units. Time management, as well as timing (i.e., the cycle for government planning) were problematic. For those MWGs with an active private sector participation, they gained new insight into systems planning. The test is always whether the process can be replicated intact, and if so, will the output be put to use.

Stakeholder Sector	Process: realistic, relevant, applicable?		Product/Plan
	Plus	Minus	Utility
Local governments	<p>Inclusive and value-added because of the technical information from private sector, and the added scope (reaching the community) of civil society contributions.</p> <p>Exposed the LG to a planning approach that they can use in the future. In some cases, MG leaders have already initiated another planning process for a different value chain using the method.</p>	<p>Time-consuming process.</p> <p>The gaps in skills and resources within the LG, limits the potential of the process to take hold and become a standard of practice.</p> <p>The single value chain approach was too narrowly focused, according to some actors.</p>	<p>MDPs were professional, well researched, and representative. BUT plans lack authority &gt; financing means.</p> <p>The MDPs focused on one chosen value chain. This was considered a Production and Marketing Plan for that value chain.</p> <p>Some LGs obtained funding from a grant linked to the value chain.</p>
Regional governments	No evidence.		MDPs were submitted to regional govts in some cases.
Private sector	Gained access to information and contacts that they might not have previously.	<p>Process was time-consuming, and slow moving from a production and market and point of view. Concept of 'inclusiveness' was not consistent with a profit motive.</p> <p>The representative 'private sector' was quite far off the intended profile of JOIN (small-scale, with female farmers).</p>	Their business interests were served in some cases, through grants.
Civil society	Gained greater credibility/respect from the other 2 sectors. Demonstrated their conceptual and planning skills, and grant writing talents.	<p>CS didn't position the gender and inclusivity agenda in a way to appear advantageous to LG and PS.</p> <p>Disappointingly narrow role of women as planners.</p>	Received some social grants, or in some cases small business support (Amasia,

\* Sources: CIDA interviews, FGDs with MWGs, JOIN staff assessments.

#### 4.1.2. MWG members obtained relevant skills for future use.

Based on input from the focus group discussions (FGD) and the training assessments, the systematic and progressive training and coaching that MWG members received gave them planning skills that continue to serve them today. The skills acquired appear to be gender neutral, although there is no way to truly assess this. Apart from the measurable gains in knowledge and skills recorded in the pre and post-tests of the training events, members spoke freely about their new competencies. They mentioned value chain study, team work, assessments, project writing, etc. – concepts and techniques that are not typically in the vocabulary of ordinary citizens at the local level.

*“We first of all got acquainted with the working methods that help to organize our work more quickly and effectively. Secondly we learned how to participate in the decision making process of our community. Thirdly, we get used to the ways of working as a team. And finally, we had a possibility to cooperate with the representatives of other sectors”.* Male. Local government. Azatan. Armenia.

*“ We consider that the most valuable product of MWG work is the value chain study, and how we can do this now”.* Male.CSO. Dmanisi/Georgia.

*“ We acquired skills for project writing and project management”.*  
Female. CSO. Amasia/Armenia.

*“We gained new capacities, determined the problems and had an opportunity to compare Georgian agricultural system, exchanged the ideas with our Georgian counterparts. We also established contacts that will help us with problem solving. Moreover we get more acquainted with the 4 year development plans.”* Male. Private sector. Azatan, Armenia.

*“We learned how to work as a group (team-work). We became more active in our community, and established contacts with other groups and bond/effective cooperation with the local government. We also learned a lot during the exchange of the ideas and finally identified the ways for community development”.* Female. Private sector. Stepanavan/Armenia.

*"I am not a farmer, not interested in farming...but now I've learned to look at the whole problem and its impact on all sectors".* Male. Local government. Azatan/Armenia.

*"The research that we had been undertaking, trainings that we have been participating in, all these helped us to be empowered enough to convince MoA about the need and importance of vet laboratory in the municipality".* Male.ICC.Gardabani/Georgia.

Working in a team was a significant takeaway mentioned by almost all of the MWGs. It is well known that one way to ascertain a person's ability with a newly acquired competency is to transfer that skill/knowledge to others.

*"The difference is the fact that before this group people mainly gathered with specific aims, i.e. the representatives of civil society was having separate meetings, the local government with people engaged in the governance sphere. The project helped to mix these groups".* Male. Local government. Berd/Armenia.

Members were asked whether they could advise and lead another municipality through the process of developing a plan:

*"Surely we can go to other municipality as consultants. We will go through these steps while establishing a new working group: we will create a group organizing a community meeting to identify the active people who would like to work on voluntary basis and are aware of community needs. Then we will identify the problems and needs. Compare the drawbacks and opportunities of the community and will have a presentation of the problems and problem analysis".* Male. LG. Amasia/Armenia.

*"We are actually assisting another municipality in the planning of installation of their electronic voting system."* Female. LG. Amasia/Armenia.

When asked if they now have skills to independently prepare strategy, make a presentation at local as well as at the national level and etc., one MWG member in Dmanisi, Georgia stated that *"Since 2012 [in group] he has collected valuable knowledge and skills and he thinks he can quite independently can replicate what was done during this time".* [male].

Private sector actors saw the added value in being a member of the MWG:

*“As a private sector we didn’t know the 4-year community development plans in details before we joined the group. We didn’t have much impact on these plans, but it became more transparent and we very more interested to participate in the public hearings where the development plans were discussed”.* Female. Stepanavan/Armenia.

4.1.3. BDIC and ICC services are largely representative of MoA policies and services, albeit narrowly focused.

The Business Development Information Center (BDIC) country models are distinctly different and thus must be discussed separately. Previous reports have documented the evolution of these models, and the evaluator will not re-visit the lengthy process and programming history underpinning the state of the situation today. The evaluation takes at face value what was observed and reported during the fieldwork.

**In Armenia**, two BDICs (Azatan and Stepanavan) have been installed within existing Farm and Veterinary Service Centres (FVSC), which are wholly owned units\* under the management, funding, and resourcing of JOIN’s partner CARD. The FVSCs provide technical services, products, and information to walk-in clients and through organized training events. These services are coordinated and financed by CARD, independently of the JOIN project. The information provision activities of the BDIC units at the FVSCs rely on a database which draws information from the Ministry of Agriculture’s website, as well as CARD-sourced (not JOIN specific) references. Apart from the provision of some office equipment and one-off non-technical training events, it was difficult to distinguish the added value of the BDIC inside the FVSCs. The target groups of the FVSC, and the bulk of their clients, are medium to large farms and breeders of livestock. Small farmers (< 2 ha), and single animal owners are simply not on their radar, which means few women clients.

*“The small farmers are mainly involved in wheat, corn and potato production, which a little bit far from our priorities. **[Small] farmers themselves find it non-profitable to address their issues to us.** In contrast, we have established good cooperation grounds with large farmers. But we have an agro webpage where the farmers can find the information of their interest, can post announcements and sell their products. Moreover, we provide trainings on good veterinary practices, good breeding, where small and medium farmers can also participate”.* Vardan, FVSC, Azatan/Armenia.

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\* The ‘owners’ of the FVSCs were somewhat unclear about their legal status.

The December 2013 Activity Report stated that two community meetings (one in each FVSC) were held, which provided information on issues relevant to cross-border marketing, as well as an introduction to the website [www.e-agro.am](http://www.e-agro.am). Disappointingly, only 25 people attended both events, with only 4 women among the participants.

The two other BDICs in Armenia (Noyemberyan and Berd) are housed within the Municipality, and as such, have a closer relationship to local government and to the MoA. Small and Medium Entrepreneurship Development National Center Fund (SME DNC of Armenia)<sup>3</sup> sponsors the BDIC in Noyemberyan. A review of this entity's website, as well as other reports about SME DNC describe a program that is exactly the profile of the JOIN BDIC program. The added value from JOIN included a renovated space, training events, and coaching support from the JOIN staff. The Berd BDIC receives technical support from CARD, with subsidies from the municipal government via office space and staff salaries.

**In Georgia**, the BDICs are known as Information and Consultation Centres (ICC), and are a wholly 'owned' entity of the Department of Regional Coordination of the MoA. The local municipality provided ICC office space in some cases and this demonstrates a clear vested interest in these units. For a historical overview of the evolution of this model, see JOIN Progress Reports<sup>4</sup>. The DRC acknowledges a major challenge continues to be finding qualified staff for the centres. The goal is for ICCs to provide extension services and to do this staff members need training skills. While the development of the ICC model has been problematic, it would appear that political will is coming together. Time and consistent, continuous attention by a corps of regional and national civil servants will determine the future.

ICCs receive the bulk of their information from the MoA/Georgia. ICC members in Gardabani said that *"The information data base is constantly being updated. Database contains information about machinery, enterprises, cattle, beehives and etc"*. When the evaluator checked the website (under the MoA/DRC) it stated "under construction", however CARE reports that the site is running. There is another closed site from which the ICC staff is able to gather their information. Regarding gender equity in services, the ICC coordinator in Dmanisi said, *"mostly men farmers visited the office for consultations and advises. Only few women came to BDIC office for consultations regarding formation of cooperatives"*. A female ICC staff member had the following observation:

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<sup>3</sup> now DNC was established in 2002 by the Government of Armenia, and is a tripartite initiative of government and public organizations. [www.smednc.am](http://www.smednc.am).

<sup>4</sup> JOIN Progress Report Dec. 2013, and JOIN Progress Report Dec. 2012.

*"We have had one woman come into our ICC in the 2 years that I have been here. I am the administrator and I manage the database. I am here in the office everyday. I know of one cooperative that was established with a woman leader. But we all know that this is for show only; the men do the business side".* Marina, ICC office administrator, Ninotsminda/Georgia.

One concern at the ICCs in areas that border Armenia is that informational materials are in Georgian language, whereas reportedly the majority of the population is ethnic Armenian and prefer Russian or Armenian language materials. There was no possibility of checking on government language policies to verify if materials can be produced in appropriate languages by geographical region.

One service that ICCs can offer is land registration. This is a very important step for many small landholders (especially women) to be able to qualify for credits and programs. No ICC staff member mentioned this, although that does not suggest they are not actively performing this service.

## ***4.2 Efficiency – project resources and budget***

### ***4.2.1. Project burn rate was inconsistent, but eventually resolved.***

Throughout the life of the project, delays in activity implementation were documented in Progress Reports. In most cases, delays were due to government re-alignments, however there were also grant submission and award delays, as earlier noted. At the time of the evaluation, final accounting details were not available<sup>5</sup>. However, the December 2014 report shows an overall burn rate of 90%. The level of expenditure for Result One was at 73%, and for Result Two at 62%. Both project partners returned unspent funds to CARE. CARD returned 15,424 euro at the end of the project, and CiDA returned 13,407 euro. A quick check of the burn rate for the partners showed that their personnel lines were expended up to 100%, so it is assumed that the returned funds were from unachieved activities under their task sheet and timeline.

This surplus is at odds with the statements made in interviews with the partner management, both of which claimed that the project funds were insufficient to do the tasks at hand. Nevertheless, both partner organizations had five human resource categories financed up to

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<sup>5</sup> Projections were through March 31, 2015.

60% under the JOIN project. Salary compensation for the partner staff was competitive, which would suggest that a commensurate level of effort was expected. In particular, the financial officer at each partner organization was covered at 30%, yet CARD financial reports were routinely late and incomplete<sup>6</sup>. CARD management indicated that they invested many more human resource hours than were budgeted for the activities. They claimed that the JOIN project represented only 1% of their total revenue, but demanded significantly more of their time. There is no way of confirming how much time the partners actually did spend on the project, as no timesheets were kept.

4.2.2. The available human resources within CARE for this project were deemed inadequate by the evaluator, as well as by an external Lessons Learned paper.

In discussions with CARE project staff (JOIN and others), the evaluator learned that JOIN staff was over-expended in terms of time, and the spheres of expertise required for the work. Given the agricultural focus of the project, it would have made sense to have an agronomist consultant at some time. Likely, the partners were expected to perform this role. Furthermore, given the weight assigned to gender issues and inclusion as a measure of success, more dedicated gender expertise would have been a good human resources investment. Finally, the importance of a good public relations and communications approach required time and talent somewhat lacking in the project staff profile.

*“ While strategies for advocacy were developed, the level of intensity of communication required to realize support for an initiative was considerable, and JOIN did not have the human resources to provide the appropriate level of accompaniment or to open sufficient doors to gain the required investment”. Lessons Learned. Peaceful Change Initiative. Sept.2014.*

As noted in Progress Reports and contract revisions, CARD’s scope of work was reduced by the removal of ER 2. CARD’s responsibilities were picked up by CARE, with no increase in staff.

4.2.3. Grant allocations increased over time and were 89% spent or allocated by March 2015.

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<sup>6</sup> Sources: JOIN financial report. Internal.12/2014; interview with CARD management, JOIN Operations checklist, interview with JOIN staff. March 2015.



The grants component was budgeted at 180,000 euro. In December 2014, the burn rate was 53%, and rapidly increased during the last extension quarter. The evaluator heard different discussions regarding the grants scheme and its purpose/relation to the overall achievement of Result One. Some MWGs perceived the grants as the purpose for establishing the group. Nine out of twelve MWGs submitted grants based on a chosen value chain, and eight of these grants were funded. BDICs and ICCs were not involved in administering the grant initiative. BDICs and ICCs have a mandate to foster business start-ups and facilitate funding opportunities, however the BDICs/ICCs did not play a role in evaluating and selecting grants.

*“The approach of the grant scheme proved to be a disappointment to members of the **working groups who expected to have their own initiatives supported directly.** In Georgia, in particular, where the analysis focused on a large territorial unit and therefore brought to the fore gaps that could not be dealt with by minor interventions, initiatives led by working group members could be supported. In Armenia, by contrast, the project’s grants were of an appropriate size to make an impact on the communities’ well-being”.* Lessons Learned. Peaceful Change Initiative. Sept.2014.

The grant opportunity was open to the public at large, and some of the awards went to non-MWG initiatives. A review of the Armenian grants activity <sup>7</sup> concluded that the bulk of the awards did correspond to the intended purpose: *“Organise a small grants scheme to co-finance identified priorities for improved market systems in target municipalities, including female and young entrepreneurs, cross-border cooperation as well as sustainability aspects.”* Strictly speaking, there was only one initiative that actually made youth engagement a priority. Due to a complex environment on cross-border trade, no grants addressed this issue – see Section 5.6.

## **4.3 Effectiveness**

### 4.3.1. Progress toward results was slow but steady.

Progress towards results is recorded in the Progress Update table, Annex 1. As noted earlier in the discussion about the PLF, there were some questions about which indicators (objectives) to assess, given the multiple re-formulations that occurred in different reports. The evaluator chose to refer to the Progress Update in the last available Activity Report of

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<sup>7</sup> JOIN - Small grant monitoring report/Armenia.Dec.2014

June 2014 as the point of reference. All project activities were achieved by the end of the project, although some of them changed form over time, e.g., trade fairs became exchange visits. An activity added at MTE, to develop a website for the ICCs in Georgia, did not materialize due to lack of authorization from the government.

An evidence-based assessment of progress toward the project purpose is somewhat hampered by the confusion in understanding the M & E system. The indicators did not have baseline data with which to determine if, and by how much, they were achieved.

**“To promote an enabling environment for pro-poor socioeconomic development through participatory planning, improved cooperation and exchange of market relevant information among local governments, CSOs and the private sector”.**

*-Increased # of cross border economic activities/capitalization from cross-border agricultural value chains.* No data point for baseline and/or end line comparison. No data collected on the number or types of cross-border activities.

*-Increased investment of private sector actors in the target regions.* No means of measuring as no data reference point in M & E system.

*- Capacities of small scale farming households to generate income from agricultural value chains has improved.* No data point for baseline and/or end line comparison. Project did not work with a target group of small scale farmers.

*- Public socioeconomic planning at municipal level is taking into account views of CS and PS.* Anecdotal evidence as reported in 4.3.3. and 4.3.5.

*- % of local actors aware of government responsibilities and donor initiatives to support local economic development has increased.* No data point for baseline and/or end line comparison. ‘Local actors’ probably means MWG members, and this is addressed in 4.3.3. and 4.3.5.

*- % of LA aware of women’s needs and opportunities for income generation and legal framework and government programmes for women empowerment.* No data point for

baseline and/or end line comparison. Anecdotal evidence in 4.3.4., and in reports on the Gender training.

- *Women's perception of their ability to participate in decision-making in local governance and profit from business opportunities has improved.* 'Women' in this case is limited to the female members of MWGs.

Without comparative data or a representative quantitative survey, the evaluation is unable to report on the achievement toward the purpose.

*4.3.2. All 12 municipalities (through MWGs) produced a plan, although evidence of implementation evidence is lacking.*

Most MWGs were detailed and in-depth. As noted in the chart from Section 5.1, the quality of the research was a significant plus factor for the best developed MDPs. In addition, full involvement of all MWG members appears to have produced the better plans, as they are more reflective of the group. As per the chart in section 5.1 MWG members cited time management as their most challenging constraint. People mentioned over and over again that accommodating the different schedules of all the MWG members was a constant issue, and that the process dragged on. Enthusiasm and momentum are the casualties in situations like this, as well as the loss of accuracy when time erodes memory and focus. At the time of the final evaluation, there was no evidence recording the actual implementation of the MDPs. Granted projects should not be confused with MDPs.

*4.3.3. MWGs contributed 'stand-alone' components to the broader MDPs in their municipality.*

Available evidence points to a solid understanding of the planning process among MWG members. It was somewhat unclear as to how associated the MWGs were with the larger planning process of their municipality. Given that most of the MWG plans were designed around a single market value chain initiative, they could be seen as a chapter of the overall municipal development plan, which reportedly has many more elements to it. With this in mind, 'resourcing' the MDPs becomes a much bigger question. In some cases, MWGs relied on the grant scheme to find funding for their particular initiative. In other cases, MWGs had the opportunity to present their plan to a larger donor audience at for a organized by JOIN. It should be noted that there was no indicator or activity requirement to achieve funding of the MDPs, other than the grants opportunity. Some MWGs seem to have really found a

purpose in their work. They were asked: what do you think could be the future of the group? What is the possibility that you will keep working together?

*"We will work on advocacy campaigns for the development of tourism engaging youth. With the help of the youth we can see the existing obstacles for tourism, identify the issues. Then a sociologist will develop a survey and it will be distributed by the youth to the public. After it we will invite local government, business and present them the results of the survey and pinpoint the ways of improving the business environment".* Female. Private sector. Stepanavan/Armenia.

*"We will continue working in the group to identify the other issues and find other organizations that are willing to invest in the projects".* Male. LG. Tashir/Armenia.

*"MWG members should get together at least once every three months to discuss and analyze the various issues, like branding, Marketing, packaging and etc".* Male. CSO. Akhalkalaki/Georgia.

*"Our MWG made a value chain analysis of potato; that it is a good idea if MWG will make the value chain analysis of tourism as well. But it is bad that we can't implement the ideas without money".* Female. Media. Akhalkalaki/Georgia.

*"We first of all get acquainted with the working methods that help to organize our work more quickly and effectively. Secondly we learned how to participate in the decision making process of our community. Thirdly, we get used to the ways of working as a team. And finally, we had a possibility to cooperate with the representatives of other sectors".* Member, MWG. Azatan, Armenia.

It should be kept in mind that the number of MWG permanent members is approximately 81 (Progress Report Dec.2012). This is a very small cohort with which to draw conclusions about the scope of their influence.

#### 4.3.4. JOIN made modest gains for women as leaders in non-traditional roles.

There is no way of gauging a change in women's participation as a result of being involved in the MWG, in part due to the absence of an indicator to track such an evolution. Of the 20 women MWG members who participated in the evaluation FGDs, the majority were already experienced at interacting with local government and/or civil society. 5 female members

represented the NGO sector and maintain sustained contact with local government. Exposure to the private sector, however, was new for them. Female private sector representatives were few (4), and only one of those was involved in the targeted commercial agriculture sector. Some of them expressed a new understanding of the municipal planning process. A project staff member who is deeply involved in women's empowerment actions in Armenia made the following observation:

*"Women [in MWGs] weren't in the position of planners or decision-makers – except where there were women-run NGOs [and these were mainly focused on women's issues, not broader agricultural development and planning themes]".* Natalya Martirosyan, Coordinator, JOIN/Armenia.

To gauge changing gender perceptions, the evaluator quoted some statements by men and women about women's roles and power, taken from the March 2013 'Gender Analysis in Value Chains' report (see report listings). The statements were largely descriptive of the limited sphere that women occupy in the public space. She asked the participants to state whether these perceptions of two years previous had evolved. There were minimal changes in perception.

[Original statement 3.2013]: *"The woman does not want to be responsible. If something does not work out, she will be blamed for it. It is better for men to decide."*

[Response 3.2015] *"I would not agree with this statement as the women are more responsible in our society."*

[Original statement 3.2013]: *"Men in our village wouldn't accept a woman leader, wouldn't accept a woman in charge."*

[Response 3.2015] *It is somehow acceptable statement. It is a man's world and only they rule the world.*

[Original statement 2013]: *"Men in our village wouldn't accept a woman leader, wouldn't accept a woman in charge."*

[Response 3.2015]: *There is some truth, as men don't like intelligent/smart women. If we study the statistics of elected women in parliament and government, it will be evident.*

*4.3.5. The MWG model is clearly an entry point for citizen participation although it is limited in scope and scale by the restrained size of an MWG.*

It is a task force, a committee, a working group – not an assembly. Nevertheless, for most participants (many of whom were already active in linear initiatives), it was the first time they engaged in an integrated initiative.

JOIN partners and staff took a more macro view, and pointed out that the critical factor is to understand who takes the lead and what the expected outcome should be:

*“The situation was not ready for an [independent extra governmental] initiative at the grassroots level [which is why CiDA worked to adjust the original approach to MWGs]. Local government as leader provides more chance to adopt these final documents (MDP). Our final product was not a working group our product was the participatory planning method, and the final product of a plan”. Zviad Devdariani, Director, CiDA/Georgia.*

In discussions with MWG members and other stakeholders, some salient points emerged that reflect the reality of citizen participation in the public space. Government still plays the leading role in setting agendas – and in both countries, it would appear that this role is ‘approved’ by civil society and the private sector. The challenge of ‘ownership’ was a concern:

*“If there is no lead by the government – and the only resources are from the government, how can they invest ownership if they are not leading the process? The approach from the beginning was different – this kind of WGs, and all were contributing, but finally no one felt it was their document – from a human point of view, individuals felt they contributed, but where to house it and how can **they** implement it?” Zviad Devdariani, Director, CiDA/Georgia.*

‘Entry points’ often took a practical approach, as JOIN helped MWGs to orient their formative research and analysis on real issues in their communities. During the FGDs, one group in Azatan was asked: **Did you form a group for the purpose of purchasing the anti-hail system solely?**

*“The purchase of this system was not the only reason for the creation of the group. But taking into consideration that we have a space for building this system and the reason that it can support the development of agriculture, we considered it as a priority...”*

JOIN expected that the MWGs would evolve to serve in an unofficial\* budget advisory capacity to the local and regional governments. In Armenia, almost half the MWG members are employees of local government. In Georgia, it is considerably lower, although staff of the Ministry of Agriculture BDIC units dominates the MWG membership there.

*"It was learning plus implementation, e.g, SWOT approach – the MWG had to go out and survey the beneficiaries and come back and put the figures together. This is not a typical LG learning type, not a PS type of activity. LG from their side, their involvement of owner of information was quite high... we need this information. When the group was split by issues, LG provided stats, CS did this in the social sphere".*

*"The most notable purpose was to raise the community issues (for instance the unemployment) and discuss the ideas for solving the problems, to promote the involvement of the society and form active groups within the community. And it allowed us to come up with the issues that really concern the people in the community and not the official statements from the local government".* Female. Amasia/Armenia.

*"As a private sector we didn't know the 4 year community development plans in details before we joined the group".* Female. private sector. Stepanavan/Armenia.

**Examples** of MWG influence on local municipal planning and budget considerations:

*"We didn't have much impact on these (MD) plans, but it became more transparent and we very more interested to participate in the public hearings where the development plans were discussed...".*

*...Well, we advocated to have a specialist (salary paid by LG) in our local government who will be specifically involved on promoting the development of tourism in Stepanavan. And this was accepted." Females. NGO and private sector. Stepanavan/Armenia.*

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\* There appeared to be confusion about this at MTE, with reference to MWGs eventually serving in some official capacity.

4.3.6. Coordination fora and thematic conferences under ER 3 exposed MWGs to the larger arena of planning, development and funding – both governmental and external agencies.

However, there is little evidence of a systematic and progressive building of linkages from local to regional to national levels. Presentations were made at each level, but it is not evident that at each passage, the MDPs gained supporters or endorsements along the way, for cumulative effect.

4.3.7. JOIN succeeded in working within existing structures.

No parallel entities were created. In Armenia, the local administrative level has the Council of Elders, which is an elected body of advisors, and meets only during government plenary planning sessions. CARD management expressed the opinion that “creating MWGs is parallel to the Council of Elders” [Gagik Sardaryan,3/3/2015], however a Council member in Azatan offered the following clarification:

*“First of all, it is an elected body; they discuss other issues and have discussions mainly during the plenary sessions. Secondly the council of elders is not so much representative body, as the members form private sector and civil society are mainly left out of this government body”. Gevorg Abrahamyan (m), farmer & member of the council of elders /Azatan.*

4.3.8. Some anticipated risks did materialize, and were addressed by the project to the degree possible.

The fluctuating political environment in Georgia was a constant factor to deal with over the course of the project’s delivery. The final evaluation conducted a Risk Verification update, based on the Risks Table from the original proposal (see Annex 3). Some of the more challenging encounters are reviewed below.

**HIGH RISK: Local actors are hesitant to participate in activities due to lack of resources (specialized human resources, working time, funds).**

As noted in the FGDs with the MWGs, as well as the comments from the JOIN partners, lack of resources was a constant issue cited. The mitigation strategy (capacity building, technical expertise, grants funding) was engaged, and worked to counter the risk. However, this kind of



risk is an element that should be eliminated as part of the initial design strategy, not left to a mitigation scheme.

**MEDIUM RISK: “Policies or strategies affecting municipal development planning fluctuate”.**

Project staff felt that this should have been rated at high risk, as the changing political scenario and cabinet re-shuffling in Georgia significantly affected project progress and direction. In Armenia, village consolidation led to re-designated administrative zones, which reduced the scope of MWGs. In both countries, the MWGs never evolved into an officially recognized entity within governments, as per donor expectations. Project staff worked to embed skills and capacity among key players within local government and civil and private partners as a tool to contribute to local development planning in the future.

**HIGH RISK: “Local government and local CSOs lack resources to contribute financially or in-kind to grants schemes”.**

The small grants scheme was founded on the premise that they would be *co-funded*. While JOIN staff did emphasize this aspect throughout the grants development process, less than half of the grants were co-funded. According to project staff: “In Armenia, CARE partnerships helped to attract additional funding. In Georgia, most value-chain related projects were too large-scale to find the local resources needed to match funding meaning that fewer projects were supported”.

Strictly speaking, the evaluator felt that some of the challenges identified as risks were part of a problem statement, and as such the project design should have built in strategies to overcome them.

4.3.9. The Mid-Term Evaluation recommendations were partially implemented.

The evaluator found that some of the recommendations were unrealistic, consistent with the CARE management response in February 2014. It was difficult to find documentation for the status of the more relevant follow-up actions. Project management provided an overview. Some of the more substantial elements are presented here.

- 1) *“MWGs need to be connected to some structure, either NGO or Government to help ensure sustainability...”*

**Action:** Prepare and sign MoU between the MWG members and the LG, where the LG commits to involvement and regular information.

**Update:** In Armenia the village consolidation process is not complete. Without having information about how the changes would affect the community engagement, most LGs did not want to take the responsibility. Therefore, only two LGs (Tashir and Azatan) signed MoUs. In Georgia LGs, elected in 2014, were hard to convince to sign MoUs, since they did not have ownership of the work.

2) *“ Develop a system for regular engagement with community...”*

**Action:** Presentation of MDP follow up to communities by MWGs.

**Update:** In Armenia MWGs informed communities about grants received from JOIN. In Georgia, where grants were disbursed, MWGs also informed their constituencies. However, this does not constitute a 'system'.

3) *“CARE needs to maintain relationships with all of the donor organisations...”*

**Action:** Inform all donors / development actors in the region on MDPs and BDICs; invite them to issue-based meetings and forums; gather information on latest status of their programmes and inform MWGs where relevant.

**Update:** JOIN was in touch with the donor community throughout the project and invited them to different meetings.

4) *“MWGs should be encouraged to meet every month”.*

**Action:** Ensure all MWGs attend planned meetings. Plan one additional meeting to discuss the MoU with the LG and one additional meeting to follow up on the individual action plans.

**Update:** MWGs met as needed for specific activities; frequency increased as necessary, through different trainings, fair, conferences and advocacy actions.

The evaluator concurred with the comments from Management that meetings without purpose serve no one. In addition, all MWGs mentioned that time management was always an issue for them.

5) *“More women farmers should be encouraged to join, particularly in more conservative regions”.*

**Action:** When designing individual action plans and advocacy plans, ensure that the role of female farmers is discussed and, where possible, included.

**Update:** Female participation in advocacy trainings was ensured and often they represented the needs of women, eg. Amasia group focused specifically on helping women.

However, apart from female members of MWGs (a very small cohort), there was very little female representation or participation with the project at large.

- 6) *“Need to put in place appropriate monitoring and analysis to ensure that if the system of service and information provided by the government in Georgia is enhanced by the project, then the results are well documented and can be used for lobbying up-scaling”.*

**Action:** The project team will monitor this through on-going feedback forms, regular discussion with the BDIC officers as well as through a comparison between non-BDIC GoG centres and BDICs. Include analysis of non-BDIC centres into final evaluation and ongoing monitoring.

**Update:** In Georgia the Ministry of Agriculture rejected JOIN monitoring forms, as well as the idea of the software. There was no progress on gaining access to Georgia’s ICC data systems, which are managed through the MoA. Qualitative discussions were held with ICCs during the final evaluation, however no data was prepared in advance for analysis.

- 7) *“Connection to existing institutions is vital, but in order to ensure that there is some added value, the team should develop a strategy for outreach beyond the central provider. “Increase outreach: Provision of bus/marshutka service could connect women to central information/services”.*

**Action:** Set targets for BDICs on how many community visits they should make per month, how they should approach people (through which channels) and they type of information they should provide during the outreach activities. Include targets into BDIC officers’ action plan on outreach to women, eventually through informal channels (e.g. door to door visits).

**Update:** Action plans were designed through JOIN-led trainings. Implementation, especially in Georgia, was problematic. Action plans were gender-sensitive.

For further information, see Annex 4. Management Response to MTE.Updated.3.2015.

## ***4.4 Impact***

### *4.4.1. JOIN’s additive value to STAGE II is felt, rather than explicit.*

Project management stated that there was no evaluation of STAGE II so the final evaluation was unable to make comparisons to draw an evidence-based conclusion. The impact goals of the project could not be considered achievable in the time frame of three years. The stated indicators were not fully formulated for measurement:

- Increase in income levels in target regions
- Knowledge about local government policy processes
- Increased # of small-business activity in target municipalities
- Diversified income-generating opportunities.

No baseline data was established for these indicators. Early on, project management acknowledged that the consultant engaged to do a baseline study did not provide the requisite information for the monitoring and evaluation plan ( see Inception Report). 'Changes' as a result of the action are perceptive and qualitative, as noted in the FGDs.

4.4.2. Full implementation of municipal development plans belongs in a larger arena.

As noted in 5.3.3, JOIN-initiated MWGs are not an authoritative unit within the local government, nor are they the only body involved in planning for an administrative region. Furthermore, the project had no mechanism for tracking implementation of MDPs. If by 'implementation' is meant a grant obtained in association with a MWG, then 11 "plans" were implemented. However, not all grants fell under the purview of the government – which is ultimately where the impact might be felt. Special interest groups directly associated with the grants benefited the most. For a detailed overview see Annex 5. Armenia Small Grants Monitoring Report. For information about the Georgia grants, the final Progress Report will have a complete report.

4.4.3. Changes to the local social and economic development context, in particular with regard to income generation and poverty reduction for men and women are not evident.

The final evaluation was unable to find evidence to attribute change in the local social and economic development context to JOIN's interventions. As noted, these macro-level indicators were not measurable in the time frame.

4.4.4. BDICs are being used more and more for a diverse range of services.

The last count of visitors to the 4 BDICs in Armenia for January-June 2014 was 1438. By the end of the project, the total count for all activity, including training, meetings, and purchase visits was 7711, taken from the BDIC database.

In Armenia, a major success factor at two of the centres (Azatan FVSC, Stepanavan FVSC) appears to be the opportunity to purchase quality agro/livestock products, which is a component fully under CARD's organizational mandate. According to CARD management, they are testing a 'franchise' approach, which would account for the significant difference in product sales between the two FVSCs. The number of people using the ensemble of BDIC services is recorded in the JOIN tracking system, and collated below. Georgia ICCs did not adopt the JOIN project monitoring system, as noted previously, and their own database and records were not available to the project. ICC staff did show the evaluator the ledger for recording visits, as well as the screen monitor displaying the database of information products they access.

Table 2. BDIC Services

Collated BDIC Activity Data 2013-2014 as available (Armenia only).						
Category (unless specified, not gender disaggregated)	Azatan 2013-2014 (19 mos) FVSC	Stepanavan 2013-2014 (19 mos) FVSC	Berd 2014 (4 mos)	Noyemberyan 2014 (8 mos)	Total	% of activity or representation
# of events	21	23	7	10	61	
Attendance	260	363	94	157	874	
Attendance/ Women	90	79	49	63	281	32% (at events only)
Customer input provided	1990	333	213	233	2769	
# Women input	248	120	86	89	543	19.6%
Making a purchase	1620	174	n/a	n/a	1794	65% (reason for visit)
Seeking technical advice	274	63	67	n/a	404	15% (reason for visit)
Credit services	28	35	34	107	204	7% (reason for visit)
Training participant	202	68	11	225	506	18% (reason for visit)
Biz info	27	19	40	2	88	3% (reason for visit)
Information board	0	42	0	0	42	1.5% (reason for visit)
Computer use, printing	8	15	17	1	41	1.5% (reason for visit)
Books, brochures	16	56	10	22	104	4% (reason for visit)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4784</b>	<b>1390</b>	<b>628</b>	<b>909</b>	<b>7711</b>	

#### 4.4.5. BDICs have reach, relevance, and satisfaction results.

Roughly speaking, in any given month in Armenia, approximately 331 people visit the four BDICs, excluding one-off training or special events. The median is 60 visits per center per month, which is quite promising. This suggests that the BDIC model is an effective model for providing agricultural information, albeit still limited in its reach. Monitoring data from the same source as the above table monitored satisfaction levels with the services, but the data table is flawed and cannot be considered reliable.

Given that information search and dissemination is a key function of the BDICs, there was a lost opportunity in the very low use of computer and internet services at the centres.

Conversations with the staff indicated that they perceive the information search activities as their domain, although they routinely cited the existence of websites the farmers could

consult. As concerns the number of start-ups resulting from the support received, there is some evidence that BDICs were directly responsible for this kind of initiative, referencing the number of visits for credit services (7%). Other anecdotal information suggests that based on input from the BDIC, some farmers expanded their existing farm activities. Furthermore, in both countries the larger business environment demonstrated a growing emphasis on support to SME initiatives both in the government sector and the banking sector<sup>8</sup>.

## ***4.5 Sustainability***

### ***4.5.1. Sustainability for the MDP model/process was not measurable at this stage.***

There were no indicators by which to assess the degrees of sustainability specified by the ToR<sup>9</sup>. The evidence base at this stage is anecdotal and opinion-based – see the summary notes from the FGDs. During the FE, key project staff rated the MWGs as to their potential for continuation independent of the project. Criteria to determine potential sustainability included:

- The MWG designed a grant together
- Won a grant
- Diverse representation in the MWG (LG, CS, PS)
- Presence of an experienced local NGO in the group
- On record as valuing team work
- Evidence of some concrete initiatives to keep group working for > < 6 months.
- At least 30% women members.

Based on these factors, MWGs were rated on a scale of 1 to 3:

- 1) = Little possibility of remaining active over the next 6 months (March - Sept.2015) in its present form.
- 2) = Likely to stay active in its present form over the next 6 months (March - Sept.2015).
- 3) = Will stay active and likely to grow in its form – new members, new projects in the next 6 months and beyond (>Sept.2015).

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<sup>8</sup> News articles referenced in Georgia Today, Mar.6-12, 2015; Financial Headline News & Analysis/Georgia, Feb.26, 2015; website <http://news.am/eng>, accessed March – April 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Sustainability of planning process; financial sustainability; other actors taking up MDPs.

*“Active”* meant meeting with or without the support of external partner, pursuing another initiative with or without the support of an external partner. *“Present form”* meant all 3 sectors continue to be represented, and women members are fully involved.

Five MWGs received a rating of (3), four received a rating of (2), and three received a rating of (1). This suggests good potential at the grassroots level for sustainable engagement in local planning. The full ratings by MWG can be found in Annex 6.

#### 4.5.2. BDIC models show promise of financial sustainability, albeit not from fee for services.

As discussed earlier, the BDICs and the ICCs appear to be situated institutionally in a way that will ensure their financial stability at least in the short to medium term. All receive subsidies for salaries, rent, materials and technical support from either a larger organization, or the government. CARD in Armenia is committed to supporting and growing the BDICs that are embedded in their FVSCs, and it would appear that SME/DNC under the auspices of the Armenian government is also committed to the BDICs it sponsors. In Georgia, the ICCs are under the management and financial support of the Regional Coordination Department. Although it is early days, the RDC/MoA is optimistic. The Director outlined five factors for success over time:

- 1) Attention to human resources in the form of better training and capacity building as well as a diversified workforce with skills in marketing and public relations;
- 2) The extension services need to develop an instructional capacity rather than just hands-on field ‘fixes’ (via veterinarians and agronomists);
- 3) Build a fee for service approach into the extension services;
- 4) Develop the commercial sector role;
- 5) And establish cooperatives to link small farmers to larger farms and processors.

#### 5.5.3. Lessons on how best to organise agricultural information for small farmers in remote rural areas are difficult to ascertain.

This is in part because there is some confusion as to what constitutes a ‘small farm’, its role in the commercial space, and whether these are the persons frequenting the BDICs/ICCs.



According to both governments, the smallest defined unit is 1.25 hectares and under. The average plot in Georgia is 1.16 hectares, and their produce is largely for home consumption, with surplus sold at the farm gate to a dealer.<sup>10</sup> Armenia's average farm size is 1.9 hectares, operating under the same conditions. The JOIN project document defines the beneficiary group as: "*...mostly low income, self-exploitative – self-employment in the agricultural sector. Most rural households in the area are engaged in subsistence farming (field crops, vegetables, cattle)*". However, virtually all of the persons interviewed at BDICs and ICCs stated that their target market is the mid-size farm, e.g., 5 hectares and above. Even the Director of the RDC in Georgia said that the technical equipment and services being designed for use at ICCs is 'too sophisticated' for the small farms<sup>11</sup>.

As there is no baseline data on how many 'small farmers' were to be reached by the project, and those who visit the BDIC/ICCs to receive information are self-selecting, the evaluation is limited in its ability to determine if the fixed-centre approach to information distribution is the most effective.

*4.5.3. There is no evidence which documents 'sustainable relationships' between local and national level actors, and key lessons learned for connecting locally identified priorities to national and regional planning processes.*

Notwithstanding, members of MWGs attest to having begun dialogue with authorities at the regional level via the MDP presentation opportunities they had through the project. In particular, the Stepanavan MWG advocated including [eco-tourism] priorities into regional and national-level strategies. The group worked closely with the regional tourism platform, led by World Vision Armenia and Lori region Governor. A tourism advisor staff position was actually funded by the municipality, and the MWG undertook a study on tourism, which engaged youth to actually do the community assessment.

Project staff (including partners) observed that working with locally influential spokespersons –often the mayor – was a success factor, as well as frequency of contact to keep the issues on the agenda. Timing would appear to be another lesson learned, as some MWGs explained

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<sup>10</sup> An Investigation into the Possibility of Cross Border Value Chains Between Georgia and Armenia in the JOIN Project, GEOWell, 12/2013.

<sup>11</sup> Miriam Gelashvili, Deputy Head of Department, Regional Coordination Dept, MoA, Georgia. 3/11/2015.

that there is a short window of opportunity to get their concerns on the planning agenda of the municipality, which must respect regional and national budget development deadlines.

Project management observed that advocacy efforts could have gone farther 'up the ladder':

Excerpt from Lessons Learned Paper:

"Networking and advocacy activities were programmed after the municipal planning work had taken place, with a view to bringing the initiatives designed by the planning process to those actors empowered to invest in them and turn them into reality. Implementation of the project also showed, however, ***that considerable advocacy and communication work was also needed with regard to the enabling environment for participatory planning to take place and for strategic plans to be adhered to. From this point of view, some of JOIN's advocacy and communication activities may have been better targeted at higher-level officials dealing with local development planning, such as officials in the relevant ministries.*** Advocacy in this area may have had the effect of building the status of the planning process and had an impact on the motivation of officials working at the local level.

## **4.6. Cross border**

4.6.1. Progress on cross-border cooperation for small farmers in the bordering regions of Georgia and Armenia could not be measured, as there was no volume of business to observe, nor trade records to consult. In fact, according to information in the Lessons Learned Paper, there was no specific objective to establish cross-border economic activities:

*"...owing to the challenging nature of impacting international policy and the often closed nature of decision making in such areas, **the project did not set out any specific results that it was looking to achieve in cross-border cooperation.** Instead, activities aimed at enhancing cross-border activity fell under a number of components. Examples include conducting a cross-municipal and cross-border value chain analysis that complemented the local municipal planning, study visits to better understand opportunities and barriers to cross-border collaboration organized by BDICs, and joint conferences that brought together participants, policy makers and value-chain actors from both countries".*

JOIN did accomplish what it set out to do as per the research agenda. The project published a cross-border value chains study in December 2013, which described a context rich in potential, as well as complex in navigating the processes and policies. For each possibility, the report countered with the obstacles. Nevertheless, the report was widely distributed, from the Ministry of Agriculture to the members of different MWGs, who even cited it. As a research product, it appears to have been used by GIZ and UNDP, both of whom cited it in interviews.

During a renewed round of grant applications in late 2013, the project gave priority to fund grants that featured cross-border cooperation between Armenia and Georgia. The maximum allocation was increased to USD 40,000 and the required contribution from the applicant's side was decreased from 60 to 50%. Any project featuring non-profit advocacy, awareness raising and capacity building [assumed related to cross-border issues] were to be fully funded. A potential project was sketched out in the December 2013 Progress Report:

*“ **Noyemberyan: creation of a roadside market** on the Armenian-Georgian highway. Horticulture is a key priority of the municipality, but people have limited possibilities for selling fresh fruit, due to the absence of a market. The aim of the advocacy initiative is to convince key decision-makers of the necessity of establishing a market and to identify the ways of gathering funding for the realization of their idea. The advocacy plan foresees identification of government structures responsible for issuing necessary permits/ licenses and the revision of legislation concerning food safety and sanitation and taxation. The rest of the group endorsed the plan and decided to clarify which licenses/ permits will be necessary for the road market and what budget is needed by mid-August”.*

Further written documentation about this promising initiative will be forthcoming in the final report to ADA. Project staff indicated that political will was a challenge to take it forward.

One cross-border fair was organized in autumn 2013 in Gyumri, Armenia, with the participation of Georgian BDICs and MWG members. In autumn 2014 the project organized two more cross-border events. The first was an exchange visit between Armenian MWG members to Georgia where they observed how value chains operate. Participants obtained market contact information, services, and prices. The second event was in Yerevan, billed as a market linkages conference, and a small exhibition of products at the end of September 2014.

#### ***4.7 Cooperation and partnerships***

4.7.1. Relationships with donors, line Ministries, regional agencies and peer CSOs had collective benefits for MWGs and/or individual members, as well as for the BDICs/ICCs.

Prior to the MTE, the CARE team held regular meetings with different stakeholders to identify potential for cooperation within JOIN. The December 2012 Progress Report provided a summary of coordination actions initiated by JOIN as a means to link MWGs to enduring partnerships. Associations were developed in Georgia with GIZ, UNDP, Georgian National Investment Agency (GNIA), USAID's Economic Prosperity Initiative, the Eurasian Partnership Foundation, and the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia. In Armenia, linkages were established with GiZ Local Governance Program in Armenia, the Armenian Development Agency, Oxfam Armenia Branch, and the Agricultural Alliance in Armenia, led by Oxfam and World Vision. Over the life of the project, some of these associations dissolved due to separation of interests, while some endured. While not exclusively through the efforts of JOIN some resulting associations were established, including:

- MWG in Amasia is working with World Vision for business development skills and continuation of the felt products project;
- Stepanavan MWG built linkages with the Regional Tourism Platform;
- Noyemberyan BDIC is now fully associated with the Armenian SME/DNC;
- Berd MWG organizational capacity has helped the Mayor to develop other initiatives such as road repair;
- Georgian ICCs receive support from USAID for soil analysis testing.

4.7.2. The JOIN implementation partnership varied in efficacy over time.

As outlined in the original project document, the partner agencies of CiDA and CARD were chosen because they had necessary competencies and networks. Both partner agencies are very large entities in their own country, with operations equivalent to or possibly larger than those of CARE in the Caucasus at the time of the final evaluation of JOIN. This dynamic may have contributed to some of the management differences experienced in the tripartite over time.

Over the life of the project the roles and contribution of the partner agencies changed, and this is on file with CARE and ADA. Issues of scope and accountability led to some contract modifications, and it is logical that these changes resulted in altered relationships as well as

expectations. The revision that limited CARD's role to ER 2 clearly added additional responsibilities to the core JOIN staff at CARE. Despite a reduced workload, CARD is on record as being late with reports and deliverables. Due to CARD's vast reach in the Armenian agricultural sector, it chose to embed the new BDIC model into its own institutional structure (FVSC), which in its way, was a move toward sustainability. CIDA brought considerable community-based experience to the partnership. For a detailed assessment of the partners by the CARE/JOIN project management, see [Annex 14a](#).

The experience on the JOIN project was quite different for the two partners. Both agencies completed a checklist about their work on the project, and in full disclosure, the results are published in [Annex 14b](#).

There does not appear to be a strong relationship between the sustainability of project actions and the partnership with CARD and CIDA. As CARD was not involved in developing the MWGs, it is unlikely they will seek out these units in the future. Neither did CIDA express any future plans to work with MWGs. It would appear that the partner relationship was largely contractual.

#### **4.8 Gender mainstreaming**

##### ***4.8.1. There is evidence of gender programming, although only within the structures supported by the project.***

During the project proposal development, CARE CIC took great care to address the gender equality criteria as per the requirements (see original proposal Annex 6.). Key project indicators were crafted to capture gender dimensions. A key activity during the project was the Gender Analysis Study, which provided some good insights about gender in the context of small-scale agricultural economies.

*"...in the focus groups it was clear that because women are basically practically in charge of so much of the home, finances, and agricultural activities the women of course are responsible for considerable innovation and direction of overall farm activity. That said, it is clear that outside of the household, the woman has to take a far more formally subordinate role".*

And –

*“...Our research shows that practical control of small landholdings and resources is largely left to women”.*

The study also pointed out the abiding socio-cultural environment that still inhibits women's engagement in the public space. Balancing these two principle conclusions, the study offered some observations regarding the gender mainstreaming approach:

*“It is expected that the ‘private sector’ component will be represented by small farmers... and 1/3 representation in the MWGs will be women, however more likely from the NGO sector than the farm sector...women are less likely to express themselves in the public space if it might mean contradicting men...and another challenge is ensuring information access to women”.*

The Study concluded with some recommendations to incorporate into the project strategy:

- 1) Ensure that a proportion of training participants are women;
- 2) Pro-active, community-based outreach to women (farmers/ag workers);
- 3) Provision of transportation (bus) services to facilitate market access for women;
- 4) Ensure a few female BDIC officers;
- 5) Identify some time-saving mechanisms for women to enable them to participate in the larger sphere of economic development actions.

The key points in the study were used by the project as the basis for 'gender sensitivity' training with MWGs. As noted earlier, the ultimate product of the MWGs – the municipal development plans – did included a chapter on gender and women's empowerment.

The training activities did carry the requirement that 30% of participants should be women. Generally speaking this did occur, with the exception of trainings that dealt with animals – breeding, vet services, etc. There were women representative on most MWGs, however they were largely from the NGO sector, with a few in local government or public service. It was rare to find any female farmers involved in the MWGs. Women are the key staff persons at the Berd BDIC and the ICCs in Gardabani, Ninotsminda, and Akhalalaki. Their roles are largely administrative, and they claim not to be involved in technical training events or upper level

management/development planning. These women are on the 'front line' to see clients at the BDIC/ICCs, and they claim that very few women come for information and/or services.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

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### ***5.1. Expected Result One: "LG, CS, and the private sector jointly develop, plan, and implement gender-sensitive local market development plans..."***

- The innovation of a tripartite representation to develop the MDPs was perhaps the most beneficial output of ER 1. The quality of the planning process and the final product appears to be a significant improvement over the traditional approach, although there is only anecdotal confirmation of this.
- Nevertheless, the scale of operations, and the scope of the plans appear to be too small to have significantly impacted even the local market scenario.
- The grants scheme appears to have evolved in parallel to the larger purpose of consolidating separate sectorial interests into a 'public-private partnership', and then using the grant opportunity as a demonstration vehicle for the value-chain enterprise
- The project did raise awareness among its direct participants about the role of women in the agricultural sector, in particular with the evidence base of the Gender Study. Two grants to women's NGOs for felt products and tea products show some initiative, and indirectly reflect the value chains in their areas. Throughout the project, there was no oversight in M & E to assess the location and proportion of women in the selected value chains and whether male/elite capture was occurring (which seems to have happened).
- Discussions with project staff (CARE and partners) revealed a gap in practice and procedure on how to articulate a meaningful gender strategy for agriculture value chains.
- Finally, there is vocal recognition, albeit no quantitative barometer, that cooperation between the different sectors has been created, and there now exists a corps of competent practitioners among MWGs who feel they would be able to coach other municipalities through the process.

***5.2. Expected Result Two: “Sustainable BDICs/ICCs provide market relevant information and trainings to LG, CS, and PS in support of strengthening local value chains [in selected fields of agriculture].”***

- The value chain analysis was a new approach by which to examine the local economy and its relationship to people’s livelihoods. It lifted the concept of subsistence farming to the level of potential business development, and for that the project should be commended. It remains to build strong political will for better investment in SME with an understanding that this is where the economic health of the countries lives.
- BDICs in both countries appear to have a solid foundation for continuing the mandate of information sharing, technical support, and possibly business development. The BDICs do not currently count many small farm holders (thus women) among their client base, however there are really no barriers to a dedicated outreach campaign on inclusion to recruit such clients.
- The cross-border initiative did not live up to the expectations in the project proposal. Early in the life of the project, cross-border market development ideas were ‘down-sized’ to be more realistic. Nevertheless, the implemented activities (cross-border value chain analysis, study visits and a joint conference that brought together participants, policy makers and value-chain actors from both countries) did advance the agenda.

***5.3. Expected Result Three: “Institutional coordination mechanisms between national and involved local stakeholders are established to effectively address local socioeconomic development needs”.***

There is no tangible evidence to confirm that durable coordination mechanisms have been established. While there were some commendable encounters between different stakeholders (a governor met with the JOIN team for the MDPs, and other presentations/exchanges were held among NGOs and international agencies (GIZ, UN), these were singular events and do not signal the adoption of a regular procedure for consultation among stakeholders.

Nevertheless, in some cases the dynamism of the MWGs and their MDPs appears to have made a favourable impression on some local government entities, and if those five promising MWGs can produce another consultative report on a pressing socio-economic issue in their community, they stand to gain a foothold within the institutional corridors where decisions are made.



## 6. LESSONS LEARNED

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6.1. The project design was far too ambitious for the available resource package of time, talent, and funding.

6.2. A better strategic framework in the project design could have provided more guidance for activities development, linking them more cohesively to the results.

6.3. The project's ability to be flexible allowed it to navigate an uncertain political environment as key government stakeholders changed, and policies were transformed.

6.4. Despite a major divergence of opinion on the implementation approach, JOIN and CARD did succeed in embedding BDIC services into local accessible centres.

6.5. Given the stated importance of the role of women in agriculture, and the weight of this aspect on the success of the project, a specific gender strategy would have been a very useful guideline.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

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For CARE CIC/Austria-

- Sustainability of project actions should be a shared responsibility with the partner organisations, and a strategy to that effect should be part of the contractual arrangements.
- Future project logical frameworks need more precision, better metrics, and an obvious rationale linking the results, activities, outputs and outcomes.
- Make more use of the quality research products developed during the project – find opportunities to publicize and circulate them.
- Resources permitting, conduct a post-grant implementation exercise to gauge the impact of the initiative on the local economic community.

- Be clear about concepts such as *social enterprise*, *advocacy*, and how these are translated into project activities.
- A project of this calibre needed a strong public relations component to work the advocacy elements.

For the National Partners -

- Partnership differs from contract services, and both parties are expected to bring resources, technical and intellectual capacities to the table. In future endeavours, national partners should be held more accountable for their deliverables.
- Move away from activity-driven approaches, which often indicate a lack of strategic thinking.
- International donors expect mature national NGOs to have rigorous and effective M & E systems that can demonstrate cause and effect, and that are evidence-based. The National Partners would be wise to invest in this aspect of their work. This includes quality reporting, as the written report is often the only product seen by third parties, and the work is judged by what is put in a report.
- National partners should find reason to continue a relationship with the MWGs, as well as to promote the MDPs.

For the Donors –

- Expect more from national non-governmental organizations. They must learn to live up to expectations, and stay competitive.
- Make use of the research products from this project in larger fora.

General project management and implementation -

- Match the human resource needs better to the project tasks; understaffing undercuts success.
- Build a functional monitoring and evaluation system that is responsive to programme needs – answering the questions of ‘who, what, when, where, why, and how’ for decision-making and optimal design.