

Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation is currently carrying out projects in the Gorno-Badakhshan region of the Pamir Mountains.

Project manager Margit Säre describes the living conditions of Tajik people along the Afghan border and what Estonians can do to support the Tajiks.

It is worth mentioning that in the area where Peipsi CTC is carrying out its projects there is a place that is directly linked to Estonia. In the Tanimas mountain range of the Pamir Mountains there is a peak called Tartu University 350. The peak stands at 6,258 metres and was named for the 350th anniversary of Tartu University in 1982 when it was conquered by Estonian mountain climbers during an expedition specially organised to celebrate said anniversary.

The Gorno-Badakhshan region of the Pamir Mountains forms *ca* 45% of the country's territory but is home to only 3% of its population. It is also rather isolated from the rest of the country – mainly due to mountain roads that are impassable in winter and spring. Although Tajikistan was among the poorest Union Republics in Soviet times there were still certain industries operating in the region. Today the state of its infrastructure, industry and economy is very poor.



Important border relations with Afghanistan

Project activities are carried out in the Isakshim region with Afghanistan right across the Panj River. Tajikistan shares a 1,344 km border with Afghanistan; China lies to its east, Kyrgyzstan to the north and Uzbekistan to its west.

The locals have deep respect for Aga Khan IV – the spiritual leader of Ismailis who resides in the United Kingdom. His foundation has built several bridges across the border river Panj and opened

joint Afghan and Tajik markets that assemble on islets or bridges of the river. At the moment most of the markets are unfortunately closed for security reasons.

In some places there are water pipes crossing the border river. Most of them are currently not working but these have been of great assistance to several Afghan villages who in times of drought have received help from Tajik regions who have had water to spare.

Isakshim's cultural heritage is extremely unique but was significantly damaged in Soviet times. During our visit we realised that although local people have many sheep, they do not generally process wool. They throw it out and instead knit colourful socks and mittens from synthetic yarn imported from China. Neither are they familiar with natural dyeing methods.



Photo: Tajik women offering their handicraft.

Ecotourism is beginning to develop in the region. At the moment, however, most accommodation is very primitive with toilets outside and no water supply. There are no quality (i.e. adhering to minimum hygiene requirements) restaurants, and the locals do not engage in selling souvenirs or foodstuff produced from local raw material.

Away from home – working in Russia

The economy of Tajikistan received a severe blow after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and during the Tajikistani Civil War (1992-1997). The UN Human Development Index places Tajikistan on the lowest place of all former Union Republics – 133rd among the total of 187 countries. Several studies indicate that nearly 50% of the state's population live below the poverty line. All this has led

to a massive outflow of labour. Approximately 90% of these job-seekers head for Russia. It is believed that 40% of the state's GDP is formed by the money sent home by Tajik migrant workers.

Nearly 90% of migrants are men and this puts women and children in a very vulnerable and economically and socially unstable position. It is not uncommon that a man working in Russia finds a new wife there, leaving his wife and children in Tajikistan without support and in extreme poverty. On the other hand, the outflow of men has contributed to the independence of women in this Muslim country.

The ongoing project of Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation supports small scale entrepreneurship among women in particular. With support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the second project is being carried out in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), focusing on women's entrepreneurship and regional development and the development and marketing of herbs and handicraft.



Photo: Trainings for women , organised by Peipsi CTC project

One of our goals is to revive old traditions and skills – trainings will be organised in the course of the project so that locals could learn about dyeing with herbs and the use of local clay for producing ceramics, among other things. We would also like to purchase wool processing equipment, an embroidery machine, etc. for them. With local entrepreneurs and village elders we will discuss the options for using renewable natural resources in establishments providing accommodation. The region does not make use of solar and wind energy although it would be possible.

Tourism could be the key to the development of Gorno-Badakhshan. Here, cross-border tourism with Afghanistan would be a great attraction. Kayak trips could be organised on the border river Panj and on both sides of the border it would be possible to engage in mountain climbing and hiking.

As Afghanistan's neighbour Tajikistan is an important security partner for both NATO and the European Union. However, Tajikistan has not been a popular destination for development cooperation projects neither in Estonia nor among other EU countries. Yet international cooperation is of extreme importance so that we could help to make this society more democratic and open as this in turn would contribute to regional and economic development and would reduce the radicalisation of local people.

Estonia does not have a foreign mission in Tajikistan and our economic cooperation is almost non-existent. In terms of relevance, Tajikistan currently holds the 100th place among Estonia's trading partners although, considering the increase in Tajikistan's domestic demand, there could be potential for it in the areas of transport, IT, e-services, etc.