

Traveling to Tajikistan beyond Generations

Engaged in a technical cooperation project in a new country for the first time in a while, I headed to Tajikistan in Central Asia at the end of July 2022.

Speaking of Central Asia, the first thing that comes to my mind are images of a historic romantic oasis, a key route for East-West trade, the ancient Silk Road, a historical world of steppes and, from an agricultural perspective, fascinating interactions between pastoral nomads and farmers from all points of the compass.

The mother tongue in Tajikistan is Tajik, related to the Persian language. The land area is approximately two thirds of that of Honshu island in Japan while the population is about 9.75 million people, smaller than Tokyo. The capital, Dushanbe, is indeed an impressive oasis city with magnificent buildings resulting from the former socialism era and distinguished by tall tree-lined avenues.



Beautiful tree lined avenue in Dushanbe

Compared to neighboring resource-rich countries, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the economy of Tajikistan is smaller and relies mainly on primary industry and income derived from migrant labor to Russia. More than 95% of Tajikistan's land area is hilly or mountainous, with the eastern region dominated by the Pamir mountain range, which has an average altitude of over 5,000m.

In terms of agriculture, the proportion of livestock and fruit trees is relatively high in the Pamir, but the production in the flat lands and low hills of the western region is economically important. Major agriculture includes key strategic crops such as wheat and cotton, field crops such as potatoes and onions, rice cultivation, and livestock farming, as well as fruit such as apples, peaches, apricots, and grapes, and vegetables such as tomatoes and cucumbers on a commercial basis are produced, shipped, and traded.

Agriculture in Tajikistan is also characterized by a form of production that involves extended farmer family groups (from a few to more than a dozen people) called Dehkans. The state farms (Sohkhoz) and collective farms (Kolkhoz) of the socialist era have been dismantled and reformed, and are being gradually downsized. On the other hand the government is encouraging Tajikistan's citizens, not only peasant households, to produce their own food in their own backyards, which are designated "Household Plots". The crops produced in Dehkan farmland are subject to regional planting restrictions imposed by the government, often resulting in policy quotas, whereas in private gardens which are classified as 'reserved land', the people are free to choose crops and livestock for their own self-sufficiency.

The main target areas for this project in Tajikistan are the federal territories and the southwestern Khatlon region. The objectives include promoting the introduction and revitalization of market-oriented agriculture among farmers and strengthening the capacity of government officials as counterparts in the process. My expected role as an agricultural expert will be to select farmers at an appropriate level and identify specific activities in Dehkan farmland.



Field survey at Dehkan farmland

It is worth mentioning that for AAI, Tajikistan is a country with great ties and bonds. As a result of the vegetable production training course for country-specific program, targeting Tajikistan in JICA Tsukuba Center, some of the staff in AAI traveled to Tajikistan between 2000 and 2002. Since that time we have deepened the interactions with the trainees. We hope to use this business trip as an opportunity to further deepen exchanges between our staff and Tajikistan across generations.

(Koga, October, 2022)