Making a real difference for the people of Tajikistan

As a UN Volunteer Specialist on Economic Development at UNDP Tajikistan’s Aid for Trade project, I liaise with our clients and partner organizations, monitoring the range of actions and results achieved by the project. UNDP’s Aid for Trade project supports human development through the creation of jobs and by enhancing the export capacity of small and medium sized businesses.

One of the most meaningful encounters I had in Tajikistan was with a project client in the Northern Sughd region of the country. She was a former apricot farmer, who had a wide smile and a presence that showed how proud she was of her hard work and accomplishments. She told me that she used to sell her apricots at the local market, and was just barely getting by with the money she received.

Then she heard about the market information system supported by the Aid
for Trade project, and she started using it to compare apricot prices at different markets. She discovered that the price for her crops in the capital Dushanbe was much higher than at her local market. Despite the potential difficulties faced by female entrepreneurs in Tajikistan, she decided to collect her harvest, as well as her neighbours, and travel to Dushanbe to sell it. With the profits she made, she was able to send her daughter to university. I will never forget the confidence and happiness in her voice when she said “Now I am a successful business woman!”.

In the districts and villages where our clients work, I witnessed the impact the project can have, not just on the local economy, but on people’s lives. Meaningful and safe employment brings so much satisfaction, happiness and confidence to people. Our clients are already doing great and skilful work, and we are able to provide needs-based assistance so they can do even better in the future.

I now have a sound knowledge of the UN system, and have gained invaluable professional experience in development work. I wanted to apply my skills and experience on something very concrete for the benefit of society. This experience as a UN Volunteer has allowed me to work on an interesting project that makes a real difference for the people of Tajikistan.

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**Bio:** Ilona Vilhelmiina Vekkeli has a Bachelor’s Degree in International Relations from Malmo University in Sweden, and a Dual Masters in International Relations and Eurasian Studies from the University College in London and the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. She has previously worked as a Visa Officer at the General Consulate of Finland in St. Petersburg, and in various roles in the private sector, most recently as a Trade Development Consultant in London. Previously she volunteered in the “Global Engagements” group of the Swedish Red Cross, and in a London-based charity, HealthProm, which supports maternal and child health in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

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