



Cross – Border Cooperation

Durrës, Kukës, Gjakovë

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Published by: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
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This paper gives an overview on the opportunities and potential for successful cross-border cooperation

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1. Introduction

Albania is pursuing reform policies aiming to strengthen the democracy and enhance economic and social development. European Integration is at the center of the reform policies. The most important reform is Administrative and Territorial Reform (adopted on July 2014) which creates a new model of LGUs at the first level and creates a good base for sharing responsibilities and finances for public services by increasing expectations at the local level. This reform is followed by Decentralization Reform. These reforms are key components of ensuring good governance, strengthen the economy, strengthen communities from a social point of view and help the country in the process of European integration.

Albania as a potential candidate country shortly has obtained the candidate country status for EU, therefore on an on-going path of preparing for EU accession and absorption of EU funds. Since the receipt of this status Albania receives funding from all components of the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). So far, the country has benefited from Component I of the IPA (Institutional Construction) and Component II (Cross-Border Cooperation). After obtaining this status Albania, can take assistance from three other components, III, IV and V, respectively, Regional Development, Human Resource Development and Rural Development.

Furthermore local government units' needs to reveal the lessons learned from pre-accession relevant for local government development. Good neighbor relations and regional cooperation are essential elements of the Stabilization and Association Process. The experience so far of benefiting from Component II (Cross-Border Cooperation) are not so much evident as the LGs in Albania were very fragmented and with limited capacity for promoting and implementing cross-border projects in the areas of economic development, agriculture, tourism, education etc., but focusing mostly on cultural activities.

Administrative territorial reform will have an impact not only in quality of services to citizens, but also in increasing the territory, as a promoter for LGU development. In a larger territory the local units will be able to use more instruments for enhancing cooperation with neighboring countries. New LGUs should develop authentic local strategies for enhancing cooperation between neighbor countries. Strategies for local development should be concrete and have well defined priorities.

Important objective of Albania's foreign policy has been and remains regional policy. Albania, as a regional actor with a weight and an increasingly important role, is interested in a stable region where peace, socio-economic cooperation and cultural prevails, as well as to establish lasting relationships with its neighbors. Also, as part of the fulfillment of international obligations, the Albanian government will be fully committed to strengthening cooperation with international partners in various fields.

Strengthening local governance in order to ensure a higher efficiency of local government itself is the vision that follows the principles and standards set out in the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Exactly, new system of local government will lay the foundation for a new platform for national and regional development.

Important objective of this cooperation should be the promotion of joint activities to include partners from the border regions and the encouragement of entrepreneurship and investment for neighboring countries. This will help to reduce the level of isolation for these countries and the development of cooperation in various sectors.

It is essential that these countries should intensify reforms to achieve sustainable growth and to address the needed challenges to meet the economic criteria and to improve competitiveness.

The overall objective of EU financial assistance to Albania is to support its reforms to ensure compliance with EU law. This goal complies fully with the construction of cooperation networks

and exchange of experiences for a good neighbor ship. Albania in the context of cross-border cooperation programs offered by the IPA CBC will be able to participate in the IPA Adriatic CBC and IPA CBC Albania-Kosovo. Cross-border cooperation program (CBC) Adriatic IPA aims to strengthen the capacity for sustainable development in the Adriatic area. Cross-border cooperation program (CBC) IPA CBC Albania-Kosovo aims to promote cooperation between people communities and institutions in the bordering areas and to foster the sustainable development, stability and prosperity of these areas in the mutual interest of the citizens of Albania and Kosovo.

Now is the right time to get away from bureaucratic obstacles that have existed for years in order well use these funds, influencing in the conditions improvement of the border areas communities. The discussion on such topic in two Albanian cities of Kukes and Durres and Gjakova city in Kosovo, will be very important for getting the discussion on such possibilities and potentials.

1. Cross-border cooperation and its importance

Regional cooperation is an important element of the European integration process. Therefore, intensified and successful cross-border cooperation of both Albania and Kosovo, between themselves as well as with their other neighbors is an important element of IPA assistance. Cross-border cooperation is needed to improve local economic development and to foster contacts between people in the bordering areas, involving local and regional authorities, as well as all the relevant stakeholders (socio-economic parties and civil society organizations). Cross-border programs are focused on the local level on either side of a border, helping the local population address issues of common interest.

Cross-border cooperation programs represent the framework for rapid economic integration, aiming at reducing the existing differences between the levels of development of the cross-border regions, as well as improving the overall cultural, social and scientific cooperation between the local and regional communities. Involving the representatives from both sides of the border, who will set up a joint program, which is governed by a single set of rules, then good neighborhood relations will be developed. Cross-border cooperation programs are jointly designed by two bordering countries to tackle common problems and exploit shared potentials.

Recognizing the need to aid these efforts on the Regional level, the European Commission launched the CBIB – Cross Border Institution Building project in June 2006. The programs are financed by the European Union (EU) within the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). IPA is applicable to Candidate Countries and Potential Candidate Countries as well as to the Member States, which share a cross-border program with those countries. Main three priorities of the programs are:

- 1) Economic and Social Development;
- 2) Sustainable Management of Natural Resources;
- 3) Technical Assistance.

The ultimate result should certainly be the economic prosperity of cross-border regions, political security and safety in the region, and easier and rapid process of European integration.

Albania and Kosovo are part of western Balkan countries, which have realized that they have responsibilities towards each other and that they have many challenges in common, some of a cross-border nature. They see now the considerable benefits of increasingly close regional cooperation - political understanding, economic and social prosperity. This new resolve to address issues of common relevance in a cooperative manner must be reflected by concrete actions and projects.

The cross-border programs promote cooperation between people, communities and institutions in the bordering areas, fostering the sustainable development, stability and prosperity of the cross-border region in the interest of the citizens.

New opportunities are presented through the cross-border cooperation programs for which past experience is lacking. Cross border cooperation initiatives could become important tools to facilitate regional development and social inclusion within Kukes Region, Durres Region and later in the wider region.

2. European Union principles

Principle 1: Promotion of sustainable development

The principle of sustainability aims at providing development conditions to the living generation, without decreasing the development possibilities for the future generations. To reach this point, there have to be taken into consideration the three dimensions of sustainability, namely, the environmental, the economic and the social one.

- Environmental sustainability means the proper, environmental quality oriented use of natural resources, the improvement of the quality of the environment, the protection of biodiversity and risk prevention for humans and the environment.
- Economic sustainability implies the establishment of a future oriented economic system and a continuous increase in economic capability and competence for innovation.
- Social sustainability means social balance, the right for human life and the active participation of the population in policy making and society.

Principle 2: Promotion of equal opportunities and non-discrimination.

The cross-border programs should be in line with European and national policies for equal opportunities and non-discrimination. Equal opportunities are a basic principle for each single activity – not a separate issue. Inclusion of equal opportunities in all activities would bring balance and fairness within the society.

In accordance with EU objectives and policies, the programs must follow the horizontal principles of crossborder partnership, local ownership and equal opportunities, and will ensure that cross-cutting issues, such as non discrimination of minority and vulnerable groups, participation of civil society organisations, environment protection, gender rights, and good governance are respected and encouraged in the design and implementation of projects.

3. Description of selected area

Durres, Kukes and Gjakova are a good example of strengthening good-neighborly relations through joint initiatives in border areas. The focus of cross-border programs are on economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability, so to find out which are potential for cross-border cooperation in Kukes, Durres and Gjakova is important to analyze some main issues:

- Geography and Environment
- Population
- Economy
- Employment and workforce
- Infrastructure
- Culture and tourism

Durres Area

Geography and environment

Durres is located along the coast, from the river Ishem in north to border Kavaja in south. The long coastal line added in Durres emphasizes the feature of this municipality as a tourist area.

Durres has great strategic importance. Durres is located in the shores of the Adriatic Sea about 33 km in the west of the capital Tirana. It is located in one of the most close points to the Adriatic Sea opposite the Italian ports of Bari and Brindisi. It is the starting point of eighth corridor, as well as the junction of the most important lines of streets, where the most important is the line Durres - Kukes - Morine highway connecting Albania and Kosovo.

The new municipality of Durres includes five existing local unit: Durres municipality, the municipality of Sukth, and former communes of Rrashbull, Katundi i Ri and Ishem. Four new administrative units have a natural territorial connection with the city of Durres and share common interests in infrastructural, environmental and urban developments, mainly oriented towards tourism, trade and industry.

Population

The new municipality of Durres has a population of 168'458 of inhabitants. The population is homogenous and the tradition of mutual cultural exchanges. Although four units contribute to 87% of surface area, they constitute only 33% of the population of the whole area bringing the density of the area in 571 inhabitants /km². Durres is an area with high rates of internal migration, which has led to rapid and informal expansion of the city in the former swamp area and along the coast south of the city.

Economy

According to the data provided by the Institute of Statistics regarding regional GDP, Durres is one of the significant regions after Tirana, with 9.4% of the added value nationwide. At regional level, the GDP per capita is 3,276 EUR.

Durres is an important link to Western Europe due to its port and its proximity to the Italian port cities, notably Bari, to which daily ferries run. It also possesses an important shipyard and manufacturing industries, notably producing leather, plastic and tobacco products. The port processed more than 90 percent of all loading and unloading volume of the port, which makes it the most important commercial node in the country. Due to the facilities that create the port, Durres has been developed as an important city for the production, by bringing a boom in the construction sector.

Geographic concentration of enterprises corresponds to the data on economic development: over half of general enterprises (52%) and large enterprises (56%) operate in the section Tirana - Durres, but with a higher concentration in Tirana region. With over its 5600 economic activities and 15% of foreign investment, Durres is ranked as the second strongest economy in the country, after Tirana.

The southern coastal stretch of Golem is renowned for its traditional mass beach tourism having experienced uncontrolled urban development. The city's beaches are also a popular destination for many foreign and local tourists, with an estimated around 800,000 tourists visiting annually.

In contrast, the northern coastal stretch of Lalzit Bay is mostly unspoiled and set to become an elite tourism destination as a number of beach resorts are being built since 2009. Neighboring districts are known for the production of good wine and a variety of foodstuffs.

Employment and workforce

The level of unemployment for Durres runs at about 10.38%, where unemployment is more prevalent in females. The private sector employed about 31.3%, followed by private agricultural sector with 36.7%, and the public sector with 21.3%.

City of Durres before the consolidation of administrative and territorial reform enumerated 4.401 subjects in which were employed 27.737 employees. Sector where are employed the majority part of employees, around 7.626 people (or 27.5% of the total number) is the processing industry with about 403 subjects.

Although the favorable geographical position, the early traditions in trading and tourism and the economic activity, Durres has a poverty level higher than the national average.

Infrastructure

The area has a developed infrastructure thanks to its strategic position in the central area of the Adriatic Sea and serves as an important transportation hub for passengers and goods across the country, and consequently of the residents of the area. National important road as Tirana-Durres highway, Durres-Kukes road, etc. cross in this area.

Culture and tourism

New municipality of Durres is one of the geographical areas rich in historical and cultural viewpoint. As a gateway to Albania, the city of Durres offers experience and first impression of tourists arriving in Albania from the sea.

Durres is an early cultural city, for his own ancient origins. The city has inherited a lot of values from the past, the historic center and archaeological amphitheatre, hoardings byzantine, Venetian tower, perimeter walls of the castle and also the cultural center of religious ruins of the basilica in Arapaj, castle of Rodon, etc. There are also some museums and monuments such as the archaeological museum, ethnographic museum, Mujo Ulqinaku monument, Orpheus mosaic etc.

In Durres, there are organized national and international activities as Durres International Film Festival, the festival of jazz music, poetry contest Poeteka International festival of modern dance, folk music marathon, the Feast of the Olive, Summer Book Fair, etc.

Durres is famous for its beach, the biggest national beach with a linear length of 4 kilometres from the Dajlan Bridge to the Kavaja Rock. It is popular for its soft sand and the greatest exploitable sand belt at a width of 150-180 meters. The main characteristic of this beach is the gradual increase of the seawater depth, which makes this sandy beach ideal for sunbathing and swimming. Golem Beach lies as an extension of Durres beach. It has also soft sand, sandy seabed and gradual increase of seawater depth. The luxurious hotels and holiday resorts, which recently have been built there, the improved infrastructure and various services have made this beach popular and the main attraction for many people from Albania, Kosova, Macedonia and other places. There are also a lot of other beaches as Spille Beach, The General's Beach, Portez Beach etc.

Besides the beauty that the beaches offer and the large number of tourists that attract, they have some problems such as limited number of public toilets, as well as discharge of sewage in different areas of the Adriatic, which continues to cause marine pollution and health concerns of vacationers.

Kukes Area

Geography and environment

Kukes lies in the north eastern Albania and is bordered by Kosovo to the east and north east, Hasi in north, Puka and Mirdita in west and Dibra south. The landscape of this area is mainly mountainous. It is rich with mountain ranges, plains, valleys, rivers and lakes. It is rich in minerals like chrome, coal, ironnickel, copper, chalk, quartz sand, and marble and contains numerous natural monuments. All of these resources offer great possibilities for the development

of tourism and wood industry, but also hamper the transport infrastructure and the communication with neighbours. Therefore it is necessary cross-border cooperation and implementation of various projects of common interest to eliminate these obstacles and to develop the whole area.

Protection and preservation of the environment and biodiversity must be in particular focus, after injuries in the environment dealing with forests (deforestation) and water pollution due to storage of waste in Fierza Lake. There is a risk of deforestation due to uncontrolled felling of trees, rivers and lakes risk pollution from illegal landfills and poor industrial and urban waste management, and the intensive use of pesticides in agriculture, the fauna is threatened from over-fishing and illegal hunting.

Population

According to Census 2011, the population in the new municipality of Kukes is 47.985 inhabitants. The new municipality with an area of 933.86 km² and a density of 63.59 inhabitants /km² consists of 15 administrative units, which are: Kukesi, Malzi, Bicaj, Ujmisht, Terthore, Shtiqen, Zapod, Shishtavec, Topojan, Bushtrice, Gryke-Çaje, Kalis, Surroj, Arren dhe Kolsh.

An important trend noticed in Kukes is a general depopulation followed by migration from rural to urban centers. In recent years the population in urban areas increased by 3.8%, while in rural areas has dropped by 2.5%. The main factors that contributed to these demographic developments are related to economic transition: the closure of many state-owned enterprises and unemployment that accompanied it, infrastructure and communication extremely poor, generally difficult terrain, unfavorable climatic conditions and exploitation of forests.

Economy

Kukes is known as a country with a tradition of raising and breeding of sheep. The quality of meat and wool sheep was known throughout the Balkan. Kukes was also a recognized center of

transportation. Besides other types of transportation, there was developed water transport through Fierza artificial lake, which enabled the movement of goods and passengers as well as tourism development. Since 2000, through Fierza transportation has ceased to exist.

Kukes was an industrial center during the communist regime in Albania, but necessary transformation towards a free market economy after 90s made the bulk of the industry fail completely. This caused a lot of social wound, creating a large number of unemployed. Unresolved land ownership problems caused numerous property disputes and completely blocked the local and foreign business initiatives, creating an absurd lack that still continues nowadays and effects residents of Kukes.

Agriculture and farming are the main sectors of the economy, which promote economic development and improving the living. Kukes region can develop rude sheep type, which is characteristic for this area.

The food industry is confined only to the production of alcoholic beverages produced in a factory and some local small workshops that produce drinks and dairy products. Kukes has a carpet factory whose products is for domestic and trade use. There is also a copper processing factory as the raw material, copper, is found in this place. Kukes is a good centre for fishing and walking in the surrounding mountains.

Kukes Municipality has 770 businesses in total (including large, medium, small, and others businesses), while former municipalities appear with a reduced number of their total business. This is a significant difference that indicates that economic level is very low. The overall level of economic development indicators is relatively low compared to the national level.

Employment and workforce

In rural areas, the agriculture sector employs the majority of employees. The town of Kukes has seen growth since the opening of the highway and increased cooperation with businesses in

Kosovo, by reaching a large number of businesses. This is an indicator of the economy's growth trend and the reduction of unemployed number. Unemployment in Kukes suffered many changes during highway works since were hired a large number of people in the surrounding areas. But malfunctioning of regional employment policies causes the employment rate to remain low.

Infrastructure

In this area passes Durres-Kukes-Morine highway which is part of the national road linking Albania and Kosovo. Most of the villages are still not connected by roads paved, while unpaved roads are degraded.

Culture and tourism

Kukes has a large history and culture, local traditions, variety of agricultural products, culinary, which are valuable potential for tourism development in the country.

There are a wide range of cultural and artistic activities developed in this area, such as festivals, fairs, exhibitions, feasts (feast of chestnut, the feast of potato, the day of crafts, feast of honey etc.) conferences, week of art, championship of ski in Shistavec, fishing and sailing, mountaineering, camping, including cross border events with Kosovo that enrich the artistic life of the sports area. Kukes also is rich in museums and historical monuments, traditions and folk, which have become part of the national cultural heritage: Hasan Rexhepi house, Bushat Castle, Old school of Bicaj, Villa Castle, religious buildings, etc.

This area has numerous assets, especially extraordinary natural resources in mountains, alpine meadows, deep valleys, lakes, caves, canyons, etc. which can be potential to transform Kukes in a frequented area by tourists and to develop further kinds of sports and activities that can be done in this area.

However, the level of tourism throughout is very modest. This is due to the combination of numerous factors: limited accessibility, poor conditions of infrastructure (roads, energy, water, and sanitation as well as tourism infrastructure), poor urban planning, damaging of forests and other environmental problems, poor quality and, in general, low level of tourists' services and accommodation standards, inadequate marketing and lack of information and tourist guides.

Gjakova Area

Geography and environment

Gjakova Municipality is positioned in the west of Kosovo, at a height of 335 meters and lies between the rivers Ereniku, Krena and Llukaci, and possesses many potential natural and human resources, sufficient for its development. Gjakova municipality lies in the geographical area of Dukagjini, which is located between the mountains of Nemuna, Pashtriku, Mokra Gora and Sharri. The valleys from the rivers White Drini, Ereniku, Krena, Trava and Llukaci and some of their streams, make up the planes of Gjakova municipality with many very fertile fields. The nature and landscape make this municipality a very diverse and rich region. With surrounding forests, mountains, upland pastures, in western parts, with fields and arable lands and the Drini River in the eastern part, and with other rivers, Gjakova possesses rich environmental diversity with great opportunities for its further development. A considerable part of Gjakova is covered with forests, mainly in the north-eastern and the western part.

Population

According to the Kosovo Population and Housing Census 2011 the total population is 94,556 inhabitants and covers an area of approximately 586 km².

The level of migration in Kosovo, specifically internal migration is high. The dominant stimulus of internal migration is unemployment, and there is a tendency for population movement towards urban areas as there are greater employment opportunities.

Economy

Gjakove has a centuries old tradition of economic activities starting with handicrafts, trade, agriculture, farming, and developing further with textiles especially processing leather and metals, etc. Based on environment and the suitable climate conditions, agriculture represents a large development potential for economy. Currently, the agriculture production structure is dominated by the corn and wheat culture. Another important development potential are the meadows and the pastures with a surface area. Orchards are relatively well developed in the territory of Gjakova, and the gathering and processing of different sorts of these products such as apples, pears, cherries, strawberries, blackberries, apricots, etc. of about 13.861 ha, and the forests which cover over 20 thousands ha. Gjakove has an old tradition in cultivating grapes. Viticulture is an important activity, both for cultivation of grapes and wine production. The economy of the municipality of Gjakove is mainly based on small businesses. There are some 6,260 registered businesses in private and public sector, operating in the municipality.

Gjakova's municipal government is committed to creating the right conditions for companies to achieve success. Local leaders have simplified procedures for establishing a company and obtaining permits, and a new industrial zone provides the ideal location for new enterprises. Gjakova has a strong track record for economic growth and is ranked one of Kosovo's most promising local economies.

Employment and workforce

There are approximately 17,000 employed people in private and public sector. Also, there are self-employed people in agriculture. Gjakova is known for a labour tradition in industry and

agriculture, and for hard workers in handicraft, trade and services. It has young population structure, with a prominent and devoted willpower for work. These factors represent a great development potential for the future.

Infrastructure

The overall status of infrastructure in the municipality of Gjakova is assessed as good. Most regional roads are paved. Gjakova offers a very convenient location within easy access of markets in nearby Albania and throughout the region.

Culture and tourism

About 320,000 m² natural parks and about 50,000 m² of urban parks are located in Gjakova: Natural Park Qabrati Hill, Natural Park Shkukeza, Liberty Park etc, which are a great potential for tourism development. None of these parks has a specific protection status. In addition to this, their maintenance is at a very low level.

Historical monuments in Gjakova are divided into three main categories based on their cultural, religious and social context. The core part of the town was created between the Krena River to the east and Cabrati hill to the west. Around the cornerstone of the town was created the Old Bazaar, the center of trade and craftsmanship. Numerous bridges were built to enable the journey of trade caravans across the neighboring rivers. With the fast development of trade in the city, several inns were built to host the many visitors. Because of its ancient origins and fast economic development, Gjakova has become of great historical importance.

Events and festivals in Gjakova are not as much in numbers, as they are highly valued. The historic city of Gjakova, Kosovo, especially the Old Çarshia, is the hub of many outdoor and indoor festivals, cultural events and street parades. Many of them are seasonal and take place

only one time, while others are organised annually for many years by various festival societies. All of them draw interest from the locals and visitors alike.

Gjakova is attracting more and more tourism visitors thanks to its natural beauty, lively cultural scene, and historic landmarks, many dating back to the 17th century.

4. Potentials for cross-border cooperation

The traditional and natural proximity of Albania and Kosovo offer numerous opportunities for successful cooperation across the borders.

Local products from both sides of the border have little or no access to regional and international markets. Business support mechanisms are weak and insufficient. Economic activities vary among and within regions. Agriculture, trade, construction and food processing are generating the majority of local revenues. In the food industry, however, the lack of distinctiveness (packaging, marketing strategy, etc.) and the poor branding system are a still major constraints for future development. The south-east area, which includes Kukes and Gjakova, is rich in underground resources, some of them still under-exploited. In Kukes, however, the copper industry, once very important for the area and country's economy, today has become insignificant and currently all mines are closed. Most agricultural products are for selfconsumption, but a good part of Kosovo's production is traded on to the Albanian side of the border, mainly to the Kukes region, where domestic agriculture is poor due to the hard natural conditions and the prevalence of mountain areas.

So, mechanisms must be found to boost these industries in order to increase employment, increase trade exchanges and economic activity to turn the area, in an important and developed area.

Tourism, because of the diverse and attractive natural resources, has a strong potential for future growth and for fostering economic development throughout the area, and offers many opportunities for cross-border cooperation. It could generate considerable revenues, but it requires investments, both in infrastructure and to build-up professional skills among the labour force, and adequate strategies.

Tourism has good potential for development. All regions offer a variety of local features that are suitable for tourism activities, such as: beautiful nature and spectacular landscapes, traditional folk, and some world-famous cultural and historic sites. The mountains, national parks, protected areas and forests are renowned for their beauty and wilderness and could be of great interest to tourists and offer the possibility to organise winter and outdoor sports. The sea coastline, numerous lakes and rivers provide an excellent opportunity for resort and adventure tourism.

There are possibilities of further developing ski slopes and other winter sports in mountains. The rich variety of flora and fauna, lakes, caves, and other natural attractions that can be found in the lower parts offer good attractions for summer tourism.

There is some typical and traditional food: dairy and meat products (sheep cheese, kaskaval and lamb meat), fruits and vegetables such as beans, potatoes, onions and chestnuts, as well as wines and liquors, recognised as highly specific of the region.

Regarding infrastructure, there are currently six operating border-crossing points between Albania and Kosovo. Of these, three (Shishtavec/Kukes, Orgjose/Kukes and Borje/Kukes) are for pedestrians only, while three are for freight and vehicles (Morine/Kukes, Qafa Prush/Kukes and Qafa Morine/Tropoje, one on the highway between Kukes and Prizren, and the two others on local border roads connecting the Kukes Region to Gjakova and Peja in Kosovo). All three border crossing points for cars and trucks are under-equipped for processing the transit of goods.

The investments in modern infrastructure lay the foundations for economic development and growth.

Durres-Kukes-Morine highway has a special importance because it provides faster economic development, trade and tourism. This road links Kosovo and Albania and enables access to the sea for Kosovo. It has also created a great fluidity of people and will help cooperation between the two countries by creating another infrastructure of tourism, trade and economic benefits.

Kukes will have to grasp this opportunity and use it to its benefit by developing local capacities and know-how for putting successfully the region's resources in a competitive market and promote cross border cooperation initiatives. The highway connects the Kukes Region with major urban centres in Albania including the capital Tirana, the port of Durres, Shkoder, and with the city of Prizren in Kosovo. Works have started to build the highway on the Kosovo side with the aim of linking the border to Pristina. This road considerably facilitates commercial exchanges and enhances the prospects of tourism development.

Given the specific natural conditions, environmental protection issues have a high priority. Land degradation is present throughout the area. The environment is threatened by poor water and sewerage management, uncontrolled waste disposal, unregulated urbanisation, and by industrial pollution that has caused critical environmental damages. But, the three areas are rich in environmental resources and biodiversity. Protecting and valorising these assets is certainly one of the key points for sustainable development and can offer many possibilities for cross-border cooperation.

Culture is an important aspect that can help in strengthening the relations between the two countries, in order to convey the shared cultural and historical values. Especially during the last decade various links have been established across the border for business, cultural and social activities though mainly on ad-hoc basis. These relations have developed spontaneously, though

there are also some cultural exchanges that tend to consolidate a more regular frequency such as the event of Summer Day, Kukes Wedding, etc. Each area is rich in religious and historical sites and monuments, as well as in own traditions and folk. Numerous cultural events and festivals are organised, and there are diversified culinary traditions and handicrafts that could play an important role in the promotion of tourism and the improvement of life quality.

There are very strong bounds between the populations of the two sides of the programme area, which derive from the common language and history and from the deep common roots and intense human, cultural and commercial relations and exchanges that have linked these territories and their inhabitants for centuries. The cultural heritage is one of the most important assets for the development prospects. Cultural and heritage promotion and tourism could provide various opportunities for employment and for cross-border cooperation.

Conclusions and recommendations

- In conclusion, we can highlight that cross-border programs aim to increase the standard of living of the population by promoting sustainable local development in the cross-border area.
- Economic development is crucial if the region is to produce the jobs needed for its people. Further efforts are needed to increase trust and cooperation between peoples and countries. In the area of justice and home affairs, the countries need to enhance regional cooperation to achieve results. It is very encouraging that the areas of trade, energy and transport are among those where regional cooperation is the most substantial.

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- The overall aim of cross-border cooperation is fostering sustainable development in the cross-border region. Joint actions and cross-border projects should have an impact on the socio-economic status, strengthen social cohesion, foster the joint-management and valorisation of traditions and cultural and natural resources, support economic growth in areas with good potential for development, such as tourism, and contribute to improve environmental conditions.
 - The traditional products, if are properly marketed, could contribute to strengthening the identity and fostering the economic development of the region. Traditional and differentiated food products could play a role in tourism development. A clear agricultural policy, better land management, the improvement of irrigation schemes and infrastructure and the introduction of a modern agro-processing industry, remain key challenges and pre-conditions for an efficient development of agriculture.
 - It is important to enhance the cooperation among economic actors and stakeholders through common approaches for the support of local economic activities as well as the development of local human resources reflecting the needs of the area and also devote the resources to the protection and promotion of the environmental and cultural potential of the eligible border area as a means for sustainable local development.