



Youth, Peace and Security in Kyrgyzstan: a contribution to the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security mandated by UNSCR 2250.

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1. Introduction

This report focuses on young men and women's positive contributions to peacebuilding processes in Kyrgyzstan and their perspectives on the country's peace and security challenges. It is a contribution to the global Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS)² that is being conducted to support the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 by highlighting and promoting young people's active and positive contributions to sustaining peace around the world.³

Carried out through a participatory, action-based research process, this study encourages reflection among key stakeholders in Kyrgyzstan on how to promote the meaningful participation of youth in local, national, regional and international efforts to sustain peace, including efforts to prevent violent extremism and counter-terrorism.⁴

Specifically, this study has the following objectives, in line with the overall goal of the Progress Study:

- Identify and prioritize the main peace and security-related issues that matter to and affect young people in Kyrgyzstan;
- Discuss gaps, challenges and priorities in promoting and supporting young women and men's active involvement in conflict prevention, conflict transformation, social cohesion and sustaining peace in their communities, institutions, and/or country;
- Collect in-depth information on young people's activities, initiatives and innovation to prevent violence and sustain peace; and
- Identify substantive recommendations based on the local, national or regional experience of young men and women, to inform the Progress Study on YPS and guide the implementation of UNSCR 2250.

² UNSCR 2250 requests the Secretary-General "to carry out a progress study on the youth's positive contribution to peace processes and conflict resolution, in order to recommend effective responses at local, national, regional and international levels," and to present the results of the Study to UN Member States. The Progress Study includes a series of thematic and country case studies—including this country study of Kyrgyzstan—as well as consultations and focus group discussions with young people in 20 countries and a global survey of youth-led peacebuilding organisations. The participatory and inclusive approach of the Progress Study reflects the recognition of the importance of consulting young people as a way to redress their marginalization.

³ This report uses the definition of peacebuilding agreed by the UN Secretary-General's Policy Committee (2007): "Peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peacebuilding strategies must be coherent and tailored to specific needs of the country concerned, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritized, sequenced, and therefore relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives."

⁴ UNSCR 2250 urges all Member States to "increase inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels in local, national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict, including institutions and mechanisms to counter violent extremism, which can be conducive to terrorism, and, as appropriate, to consider establishing integrated mechanisms for meaningful participation of youth in peace processes and dispute-resolution."

2. Methodology

The research process and approach was designed based on participatory principles and to involve key youth partners. PeaceNexus selected two youth organisations that have played a leading role in peacebuilding processes in Kyrgyzstan, Youth of Osh and IDEA Central Asia, to lead the field research. The criteria for selecting partners in the research included:

- Historically established and practically youth-led organisation focusing their projects only on youth;
- Relevant experience and the motivation required for this study and ability to work in July-August 2017;
- Regional representation and potential to reach diverse youth populations for participation in the research;
- Existing positive relations with local communities, local government and youth groups for potential involvement to the project.

PeaceNexus, Youth of Osh and IDEA of Central Asia jointly developed guidelines and questions for interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) (see Annex 1 and 2) during an initial workshop in August 2017, on the basis of the overall methodological guidance developed for the Progress Study. Preliminary research results were then presented, discussed, and validated with partners, government representatives, youth and international organisations and a second validation workshop took place in September 2017.

This research process included three main phases:

1. Desk research on the common and youth-relevant peacebuilding challenges in Kyrgyzstan;
2. Consultations with key stakeholders including government, youth organisations and international organisations in Kyrgyzstan to understand the institutional framework for youth engagement in peacebuilding and key youth-related activities. Discussions focused on stakeholders' experiences in youth related activities, their perceptions of the challenges youth face, and their visions and recommendations for how to create opportunities for youth to participate in peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan.; and
3. Field research involved 66 in-depth interviews and 6 FGDs with a total of 54 young people. These targeted both youth activists and vulnerable youth in rural and urban areas throughout the country (See Figure 1 for the research locations). The interviews and FGDs included questions related to five themes of UNSCR 2250 (Prevention, Participation, Protection, Partnership, and Disengagement and Reintegration). They

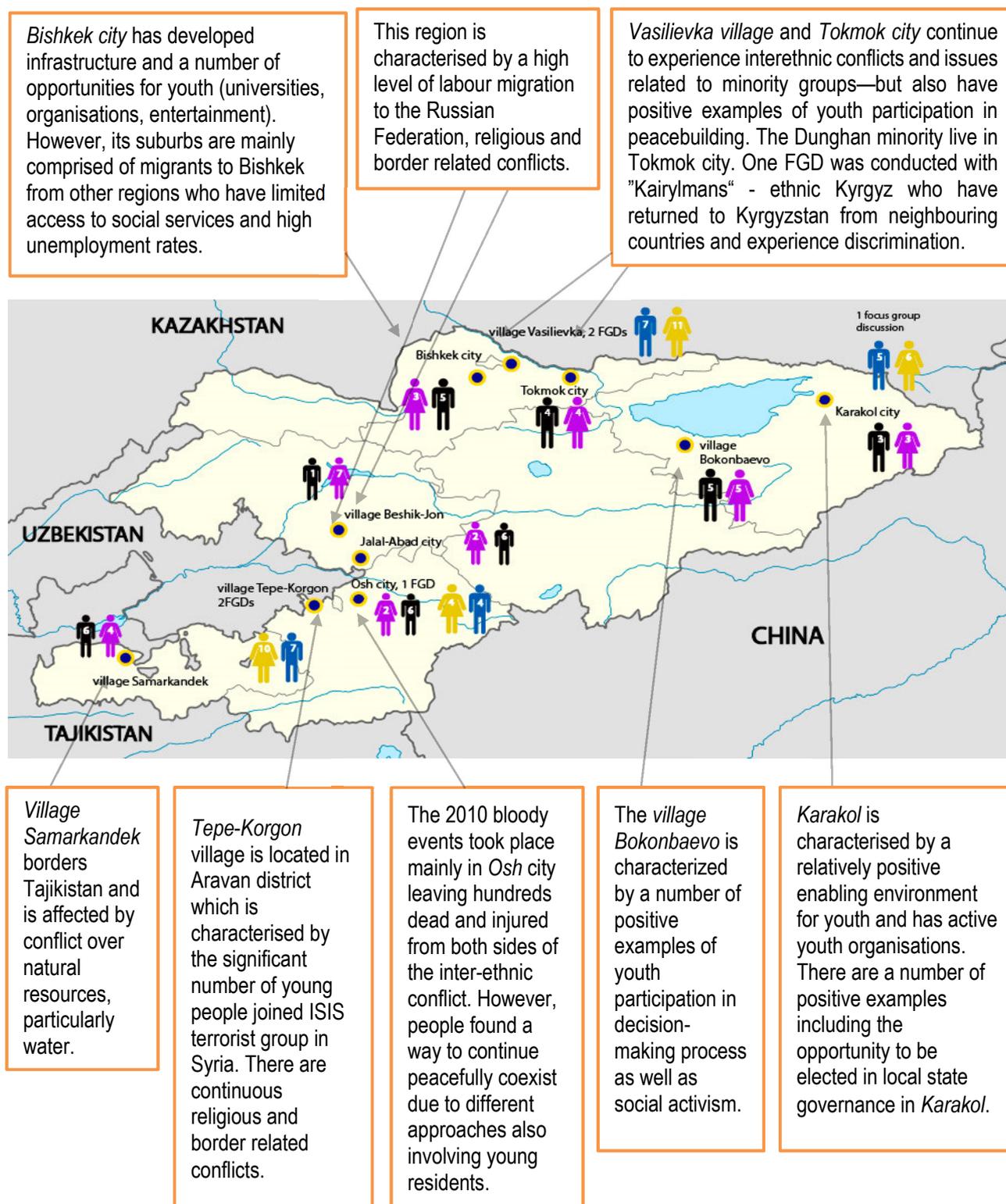


were undertaken in Kyrgyz and Russian depending on the respondents' preferred language.

2.1 Selection of respondents and locations

The locations and respondents in the field research were selected according to the following criteria: (i) coverage of both urban/rural areas; (ii) ability to reflect conflict issues and challenges related to violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan; (iii) potential to provide success stories related to youth engagement in peacebuilding; (iv) ability to capture gender dynamics and experiences of vulnerable groups. The map below illustrates the rationale for selecting the research locations based on the characteristics of each of locality as well as the number and gender of respondents for in-depth interviews and FGDs in each location.

Figure 1. The research locations



 Female respondent for interview
 Female respondent of FGD

 Male respondent for interview
 Male respondent of FGD

2.2 Challenges and limitations

The research team experienced several challenges in conducting the field research that are worth noting here:

- *Difficulties getting some youth to participate as respondents.* Because the field research was conducted in August, some potential respondents were unable to share their stories because they were preparing for the new academic year or busy with seasonal work.
- *Difficulties getting open responses to some research questions.* The majority of the questions for FGDs and in-depth interviews were based on the methodology proposed in the Progress Study and, although they were adapted to the Kyrgyz context, at times the field officers faced challenges in collecting data from respondents. For example, the majority of respondents found it hard to respond on the question: What is security? Some felt certain questions were too personal, and during FGDs, some respondents preferred to agree with the majority rather than to share their own opinion. Nonetheless, the discussions initiated through the research seemed to have been constructive for respondents, in some cases sparking reflection on how they could contribute to solving certain problems for their communities.

3. Youth Demographics in Kyrgyzstan

In 2017, the Kyrgyz Republic overcame the demographic youth bulge: the average age of the population is 27.4 years. Kyrgyz law defines youth to include the age group from 14 to 28.⁵ Currently, there are 1.761 million young people in this age group in Kyrgyzstan, approximately 30 percent of the total population. Today there are more than 300 registered youth organisations, public foundations and movements⁶ and each political party in Kyrgyzstan has its youth wing.

Young people aged 15-29 comprise 34 percent of all employed people in Kyrgyzstan. There is a significant differential in employment rates among young men and young women (under 300 thousand employed young women compared to just over 500 thousand employed young men).⁷ This gap reflects the traditional expectations of women and men's roles in family life and the early average age of marriage, which was 23,6 years in 2015.⁸ Youth unemployment is higher than that of the general population. In 2015, the

⁵ Law of the Kyrgyz Republic № 256 «On the foundations of state youth policy», 31st July 2009, Bishkek. Some statistics kept by the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic include young people up to 29 years.

⁶ These are registered by the Ministry of Justice.

⁷ National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, *Number of employed people by age and gender*. <<http://www.stat.kg/ru/opendata/category/190/>>

⁸ National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, *The average age of first marriage by sex and territory*. <<http://www.stat.kg/ru/opendata/category/334/>>

overall unemployment rate was 7,6% (9% for women only) and among youth it was 11,6%.⁹

The number of young people convicted of crime decreased between 2011-2015 alongside an overall reduction in crime convictions. However, youth still are the second largest age group convicted of crime in Kyrgyzstan. Many of these crimes are petty or non-violent: in 2014 the most common youth convictions were for theft (15,2%), drug trafficking (13,2%), robbery/robbery with violence (12,9%), and hooliganism (11,9%).¹⁰ National statistics also point to a relationship between crime and unemployment—77% of young people who commit crimes are unemployed.¹¹

In 2016, Kyrgyzstan was ranked number 64 out of 188 countries according to the Youth Development Index, a composite indicator assessing the level of human development of young people aged 16 to 24 years. It ranks in 104th place for life expectancy and health, 86th place for education, 86th place for job placement, 30th place for civic participation, and 90th place for political participation.¹²

4. Youth and Conflict in Kyrgyzstan

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Kyrgyz Republic has experienced a series of revolutions and ethnic conflicts. Young people were a driving force in two revolutions in 2005 and 2010 as well as during violent clashes that took place in June 2010 in the South of the country.¹³

The independent Kyrgyz Republic embarked on an ambitious economic and political and economic reform agenda. However, corruption and poorly executed policies eroded trust in the government, contributing to a crisis of credibility between state, local authorities and society. The collapse of social services, including health and education, in the post-Soviet period contributed to youth radicalisation and involvement in conflict. This study analyses the factors affecting young people's vulnerability to involvement in conflict as well as their potential to be agents of peace in more detail below.

During the period following independence, the Kyrgyz Government attempted to unite the more than 80 ethnic groups living in the country under

⁹ National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, Employment and unemployment: results of the integrated selective survey of households' budgets and labour force in 2015, Bishkek, 2016
<<http://www.stat.kg/media/publicationarchive/712ba4ee-ac1c-4c6b-a7f2-d373c5243031.pdf> >

¹⁰ National Statistical Committee, «Crime and Legal Order in the Kyrgyz Republic» (in Russian «Преступность и правопорядок в Кыргызской Республике»), Bishkek, 2015, <<http://www.stat.kg/media/publicationarchive/5e7bd90a-b56e-4a93-a5b6-84134aa1de1c.pdf>>

¹¹ Ibid, p. 52

¹² Program of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic "Development of youth policy for the years 2017-2020"

¹³ Akiner, *Kyrgyzstan 2010: Conflict and Context*, Silk Road Paper 2016, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Studies Program.

a common ideology based on a history of the ethnic Kyrgyz people. However, this process created tensions with ethnic minorities. In addition, Kairylmans—ethnic Kyrgyz people who returned to Kyrgyzstan from other countries—have experienced difficulties with integration.

Since 2010, there has not been large-scale conflict in Kyrgyzstan. However, ethnic and resource-related disputes as well as other types of violence continue especially in the border areas. Kyrgyzstan's extreme climate, scarce resources, landlocked geography and susceptibility to earthquakes and climate change related risks make it vulnerable to resource-related conflicts.

Kyrgyzstan could be characterised as a post-conflict country that has passed through a series of stages—resolution, rehabilitation, restoration and reconstruction—and is now undergoing the last and longest stage—development and transformation.¹⁴ Despite some academic critiques of the contribution of development to peacebuilding,¹⁵ human development, democratisation, governance and institution-building are essential to sustaining peace in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶ Kyrgyz society requires strong public and private institutions that will meet the socio-economic, political and civic needs of people, including youth. In the long term, developing the capacity of local youth organisations as well as individual young activists and key officials in local government and other state agencies is also necessary to sustain peace and to enable youth to play a positive role in peacebuilding.

4.1 Who am I?: Youth identity crisis and vulnerability to radicalisation

Young people in the newly independent Kyrgyz Republic faced a fundamental identity crisis in the context of the collapse of the Soviet education system. Under the Soviet system, there had been a strong institutional system guiding the transition from childhood to adulthood at all age levels, from Little Octoberists (7–9 years), to Pioneers (9–14), and ultimately the more exclusive Communist Youth League, or Komsomol (14–26).¹⁷ At independence, the Kyrgyz Republic was unable to replace this system that shaped young people's identity and the education system deteriorated. The economic crisis, the emigration of professionals including teaching staff of schools and universities, and lack of state funding for all levels of education led to the closure of a significant number of kindergartens, limited financial, educational and human

¹⁴ Uvin, *The Development/Peacebuilding Nexus: The Typology and History of Changing Paradigms*, Journal of Peacebuilding and Development, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2002, p.9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interviews with the members of international organisations in Kyrgyzstan

¹⁷ Esengul, Mamaev & Yefimova-Thrilling, *Youth and public policy in Kyrgyzstan*, Youth Policy Review Series, Youth Policy Press, 2014.

resources in schools and universities and poor access to education for low income families.

In this context, some young people became vulnerable to a range of ethno-nationalist, religious, political and extremist groups that offered them a source of identity. There has been a trend towards heightened religiousness among youth, and recruitment of Kyrgyz youth into violent extremist/terrorist groups has been a growing concern, especially in the south of the country. According to 2016 study,¹⁸ more than 90% of Kyrgyz youth stated that they are religious and the most common religion for them is Islam (95,1%). Since the beginning of conflict in Syria and Iraq a number of Kyrgyz citizens left Kyrgyzstan to fight on the side of Syria's anti-governmental forces as members of the Islamic State. Counter-terrorism officials in Kyrgyzstan reported figures of 863 Kyrgyz members of the Islamic State between 2010 and June 2016, with 188 of them being women. The majority of Kyrgyz fighters (77.5%) travelled from the south of the country, predominantly populated by ethnic Uzbeks.¹⁹

The rise of religious conservatism among young people in Kyrgyzstan affected their way of life, including external attributes such as religious clothing. This has contributed to mistrust and discrimination, particularly against women, from the secular part of society.

"There is a problem of discrimination in religion. Women in hijabs are not recruited for work, or the treatment for them is based on prejudices." – 28-year-old woman in Vasilievka village

"I'm very much afraid that when I finish my studies, they will not hire me", – 23-year-old woman, wearing hijab, Vasilievka village

There has also been a rise in ethnic nationalism linked with discrimination against women. Ethnic Kyrgyz men have increasingly subjected young Kyrgyz girls and women to physical and psychological abuse for having relationships or being married to a man of another nationality.

4.2 Who will I be in the future?: Lack of prospects

Depending on their environment and upbringing, Kyrgyz youth face few options or paths for the future. These may include marrying early; becoming a marginal seasonal or unskilled worker or contractor; following the path of a politician or state official, in which a public position becomes a source of earnings and the security for one's self and loved ones; becoming a religious leader or religious figure; or following the path of crime. With limited future

¹⁸ Baktygulov, *Youth of Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Almaty, 2016.

¹⁹ Speckhard, Shajkovi & Esengul, *Analysis of the Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan, including the Roles of Kyrgyz Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening in, and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan*, International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism Research Report, 2017.

prospects, young people are not motivated to learn and to expand their horizons—and this mindset increases vulnerability to radicalisation. Furthermore, there are few resources available to young people to enable them to understand opportunities that may be available after they finish their schooling.

In our village, young people do not want to learn, get knowledge, and expand their horizons. Many boys study at school just for the certificate, and girls after 9-grade work or get married. This is a very big problem for us, in the future ignorance of young people can lead to more conflicts. - FGD in Tepe-Korgon village, Aravan district

For young Kyrgyz women, especially in rural areas, the options are particularly limited. Forced or arranged marriages remain common: a young woman often does not have the ability to marry the man of her choice—instead agreement is made for her among the families or there may be a ‘traditional kidnapping’ by a man she never met. Typically, a young married woman in her husband’s family has fewer rights than other members of the family, is expected to act as a silent cleaner, cook or servant, and can be exposed to physical and/or psychological abuse. One survey²⁰ suggests that a significant proportion of women in Kyrgyzstan believe that domestic violence is acceptable. Women themselves may play a role in legitimising violence—for example in some instances mothers-in-law support their son’s abuse against his wife.²¹

“Society prevents young girls from learning and developing. After they become wives (and most often at a young age), they cannot raise children due to lack of education. A woman because she is a woman receives a lot of responsibility, and women are often not listened to.” – 26 year old married woman in Vasilievka village

A number of factors reinforce social and economic disparities between urban and rural youth. Young people in rural areas are unable to focus on their education because they are typically burdened with agricultural work. In addition, village schools tend to be weaker and less well resourced than urban schools. While one FGD highlighted that younger teachers in one rural area were attempting to use innovative and non-traditional approaches in the classroom, they faced resistance by an older generation of teachers who were afraid of any changes in schools.²² Young people from rural areas often migrate in search of work opportunities or they stay in rural villages and work in the agricultural sector. Few attempt to pass university entrance exams because

²⁰ More than 1/3 of women in Kyrgyzstan accepts domestic violence in their families, Information Agency 24.KG <https://24.kg/obschestvo/24794_bolshe_treti_jenschin_v_kyrgyzstane_odobryayut_domashnee_nasilie/>

²¹ Childress, *Understanding Lived Experiences, Help-seeking and Coping with Domestic Violence, and Leaving among women in Kyrgyzstan: A Grounded Theory Study*, p. 169.

²² FGD in Vasilievka.

they are deterred by the high cost of tuition and limited state financing available.

Economic migration from rural areas places additional burdens on young people who are left behind. Children left behind by migrant workers are prone to psychological and physical abuse and have limited access to social services, health care and education. One study²³ showed that rather than benefiting from remittances, young people from families of migrants are more likely to contribute to the household through daily chores or agricultural work, in order to replace the labour of the migrant member. In addition, young women in migrant-sending households tend to spend more time in unpaid work such as childcare, and to have less time for leisure.²⁴

Finally, young people especially in rural areas lack information about opportunities as well as knowledge about how to deal with the potential conflicts in their communities. Many young people lack critical thinking skills and the ability to question social norms: there is a pervasive and widely accepted view that youth should obey and conform to the roles expected of them by elders and society.

“Where I live most of the youth do not live in their own image but in the image of the community. Because the community affects us very much. We were taught to obey society, to be like our society.” – 14 year old girl

“The problems of youth are not solved, because young people are passive, they do not participate in the social life of the village and school. And also there is no possibility of increasing their potential, and they simply do not know where to start and where to turn in case they have a problem.” – 28 year old woman

4.3 Limited influence on political decision-making

A 2016 study²⁵ involving the youth representatives of political parties, activists and young civil servants concluded that young people are still not able to influence decision-making processes due to both limited knowledge and experience and elders’ control over this. A number of factors affect this including corruption, tribalism/nepotism, lack of educational opportunities, discrimination against certain groups including women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and LGBT youth. Furthermore, youth engagement in politics is not always positive: political leaders use young members as instruments to achieve their own personal political goals, while at the same

²³ Karymshakov & Sulaimanova, *Impact remittances on youth labor supply: evidence from Kyrgyzstan*, 2016

²⁴ Karymshakov & Sulaimanova, *Migration impact on left-behind women’s labour participation and time-use: evidence from Kyrgyzstan*, UNU-WIDER Paper 2017/119.

²⁵ Amankulova, *Access of Kyrgyzstan’s Youth to political participation: opportunities and limitations*, (in Russian), Legal Prosperity Foundation, 2016.

time, young people take advantage of their political connections to secure their future financially and otherwise.

4.4 Lack of trust in state agencies and local authorities to prevent conflicts

Young people lack trust in state agencies and local municipal bodies to prevent conflict over natural resources such as water as well as ethnic and cross-border conflicts. To some extent, corrupt state agencies and local authorities are seen as part of the problem. For example, the field research highlighted a dispute over unfair land distribution to young families, which they felt was due to corrupt state agencies.

4.5 Violence, bullying and racketeering in schools

Boys aged 14-17 years worry about bullying, racketeering and ethnic based fighting in schools, especially among teenagers. They highlighted lack of understanding and support from teachers and the inability of law enforcement bodies to address these problems. Girls were less concerned about fighting and bullying. The recent opinion poll M-Report of young people showed that 69% of them stated that there was bullying in their schools (27% experienced bullying personally and 42% saw other classmates experience bullying).²⁶

5. Young People's Positive Contributions to Peacebuilding

In recognition of the role of youth in the 2010 clashes as well as the threat posed by youth radicalisation, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, with support from international agencies and donors including UNFPA, UNICEF, UNDP, GIZ and the OSCE, initiated a series of policy development and reform initiatives aimed at addressing youth concerns. In addition, the UN Peacebuilding Fund supported a number of projects to help prevent a relapse into violent conflict, including youth focused initiatives. Many of the institutional and policy reform processes have stalled or achieved few concrete results. Nonetheless, as a result of these efforts, some progress has been made in empowering youth, enabling their participation in decision-making and promoting social activism.

In this context, this study has attempted to gather stories that highlight young people's positive contributions to peacebuilding and to draw out examples of successful strategies that may help inform future efforts. The success stories described below include examples of smaller-scale initiatives supported by international NGOs/donors as well as stories of individual transformation and young people's positive social engagement in their communities.

²⁶ M- Report youth opinion poll, *School racket*, 2017, available at: <<http://mreport.kg/ru/poll/shkolnyj-reket/results/>>

5.1 Youth engagement in conflict resolution following the 2010 Osh conflict

After the clashes in 2010 in Osh, a youth organisation organised an exchange between Uzbek and Kyrgyz youth to promote inter-ethnic harmony and overcome stereotypes. Within the framework of a project of the territorial youth council, they organised a two-day visit for 10 young people in which youth from Japalak which is 98% Kyrgyz visited Amir-Temur (On-Adyr) which is 95% Uzbek. Uzbek activists organised a concert and festival for the Kyrgyz youth visitors with traditional foods and sports. In addition, the Kyrgyz youth visitors stayed in the homes of the Uzbek activists. After two days staying together, they became friends and realised that their stereotypes of each other were false. They continue to remain in contact, to implement projects and to support each other.²⁷

5.2 Preventing violence in schools

The field research pointed to successful efforts to tackle violence and crime in schools, particularly racketeering and bullying in Osh through a partnership between the police, the schools, the municipal authorities and a youth organisation. The project included three main components: 1) training conducted by a youth organisation in partnership with the local police inspector that utilised videos and photos 2) exposure of senior students to the daily work of the special forces under the Ministry of Internal Affairs 3) the Committee on Youth Affairs of the Major Office of Osh city and the Central Internal Affairs Directorate organised a visit to the pre-trial detention centre for senior students in order to help them understand the consequences of violating the law. Violence and bullying still remains a concern in many schools across the country and therefore a similar approach might be relevant in other contexts.

5.3 Deradicalisation and preventing violent extremism

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has supported a number of projects aimed at preventing violent extremism and addressing youth radicalisation. One successful initiative involved youth in developing videos to counter radicalisation. Young people were asked to research the main tools for radicalisation in their communities and the results demonstrated that almost 90% of young people watched Islamic State videos on YouTube. Young representatives of SFCG began working with youth who were susceptible to radicalisation, providing them with knowledge, opportunities and demonstrating alternatives. They developed videos with positive social

²⁷ FGD in Osh.

messages about peacebuilding and disseminated them online and through social media.²⁸

“Young people have soft minds; they quickly absorb it all. Therefore, the content in the video informed young people not to take all the information they find on the internet for granted.” –Mirzalim, age 24

Another innovative project to tackle radicalisation focused on girls studying in a *madrassa* in Aravan district in the South of the country. The project was implemented with the help of local Imam to respond to negative perceptions of Islam in Kyrgyzstan as well as sources of information that draw young people to violent extremism. Girls studying in the madrasa decided to record positive narratives on Islam²⁹ in the form of melodies/naashyds. They then spread them among young people in their communities using the approach of peer-to-peer religious education.

In Kara-Balta city, Chui oblast, SFCG supported an educational project developed by a student named Maisalbek who attended a SFCG deradicalisation seminar. He went to schools near Kara-Balta and brought 20 students to a training seminar focused on de-radicalisation. The students he trained communicate daily via a WhatsApp group messaging and are writing and sharing their own insights on radicalisation with their communities. Even when this project ends, Maisalbek said he would continue this work.

“Anyone can feed themselves, even dogs feed themselves. I want to feed others. – Maisalbek, student, Kara-Balta city

5.4 Public-private partnerships to finance infrastructure and services for youth

Issyk-Kul oblast is famous not only as a tourist area, but for its large gold mining operation ‘Kumtor’. Every year, the Centerra Gold Company is obliged to contribute financially to the development of Issyk-Kul oblast. However, in the past, the local administration has failed to share information with the community about how the funds were spent, leading to disputes with the local population, especially youth.

However, in Bokonbaevo village in Issyk-Kul oblast the local administration took a different approach and funds provided by Kumtor gold have been used to support projects designed by youth. A young deputy in the local government coordinated a competition among young activists to receive funds to implement about fifty social projects in the region over the course of two years, such as construction of children’s playground, assistance to

²⁸ Video “Everybody is responsible for Peace,” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E62_690_eGU>; Video “There is no future for extremism,” available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAFW0qld3Uw>>

²⁹ Those positive narratives were based on the understanding Islam as a peaceful religion; promoting such values as peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and unity.

vulnerable groups, and opening of musical and dance studios. There were some initial challenges because young people lacked the skills to write project applications and as a result a number of projects were not funded. However this issue was resolved by allowing all participants to select the best projects for their community, a decision-making process that was widely accepted as fair.

“During this period young people were given a lot of attention ... The goal was to help young people to adapt in society, so that they would change in a positive way. They themselves took part in solving their problems.” – Deputy, age 25, Bokonbaevo village

5.5 Establishing sports facilities where youth interact

Suzak district in the South of the country has few leisure and social opportunities for youth. Teenagers united the conservative community around the idea that sports could serve as an effective tool against the growing threat of youth radicalisation. The idea behind the initiative was to create a safe and open place for young people to meet, channel their anger into physical activity, and find reliable support so that they would not have to look for answers in violent extremism. The exercise facility is unique in other ways as well: it is a shared space where all youth in the community, including those who are not religious, could casually interact with each other and local imams.³⁰

5.6 Supporting small business opportunities for youth

The small village of Min-Kush once had strategic importance to the Soviet Union due to mining of uranium ore, however today it is among the least developed villages in the country and continues to suffer from the consequences of high levels of radiation. A young resident of this village participated in a training organised by the youth-led organisation Institute for Youth Development which was co-financed by the local administration and GIZ. As a result, he decided to renovate an old building in his village and open several small businesses there: a hairdressing salon, a photo studio, a computer club and computer services. The visible success of these small businesses provides a positive example for other young people. It has also helped increase trust in the local government which co-financed the initiative and helped erase young people’s feeling of being forgotten.

5.7 Offering positive role models

A number of events at a national level have enabled young successful professionals, businessmen and activists to share their experiences and challenges with youth (e.g. Jash-Bulak-2017, JashCamps, Youth Kurultays).

³⁰ Baktygulov & Karimova, *Making deradicalisation work: case of Kyrgyzstan*, SFCG, 2017.

However, in some cases, this is not enough to motivate youth: they also need to see success stories and models from peers in their own communities to believe they can follow the same model. For example, a 24 year old female activist from Tokmok related how she had been inspired by a well-known activist from her community.

“Nasekov Aibek (approx. 24 years) is a deputy head of the Tokmok Youth Council. From the 9th grade, he began active work in his school. As part of his organization, he travelled in many countries. In 2011 he founded the Public Association. Through this organisation, he does a great job in the city. In the beginning he built a playground for children. In the neighbourhoods, they participated in cleaning streets, opened a business, opened a buffet for students, purchased equipment, and organised celebrations. In winter, closer to the New Year he holds photo sessions in order to finance his organisation. Also opened a cinema in the neighbourhoods.” – 24-year-old woman in Tokmok

5.8 Protecting the rights of disabled youth and orphans

Kyrgyz Republic has not yet ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, thus, ignoring the obligations of this document. Moreover, despite certain rights of young people from orphanages, in practice they do not have any protection and support after reaching the age of majority (18 years old in Kyrgyzstan).

To address the rights of persons with disabilities, young activists in Tokmok city developed the “Disability does not limit the opportunities” project in partnership with International University in Central Asia, ACCELS and the local administration. The goal of the project was to provide skills training and opportunities (computer knowledge, sport opportunities, etc.) to young people with disabilities to raise their self-confidence and belief in their future and help them integrate in society.

“We all exchanged energy, because we and they wanted to learn something. They had a huge desire. They were shining with excitement to get something new.” – 22-year-old student activist, in Tokmok

The Public Fund for the Protection of Orphans’ Rights³¹ raises funds for projects to support orphanages as well as to support orphans in their integration into society. The leader of the organisation—a young man who had previously lived in orphanage—actively involves young people in the cause through social media, encouraging both volunteerism and donations. He would like to organise a global meeting of volunteers in Kyrgyzstan in the coming years to promote the idea of volunteerism and social responsibility.

³¹ Public Fund for the protection of orphans’ rights official website: <https://rightsoforphans.org>

“In the “Preparation for school” project our task was to help children to prepare for school so that they would not end up in orphanages. Thanks to ordinary citizens, we collected 500 backpacks. 50 low income families received the necessary school supplies for their children.” – Igor Belyaev, 24-year-old activist, Bishkek

5.9 Increasing women’s confidence and changing traditional family roles

IDEA Central Asia, in partnership with Youth of Osh, and with support from UNICEF, implemented a project to involve women and youth in the electoral process. The project involved 75 young people from 19 communities / villages in six oblasts of Kyrgyzstan. The project supported community members themselves to conduct a study to identify the reasons why women and young people are not actively involved in electoral processes. As a result, the participants took part in TV and radio debates, where they raised issues of gender and age discrimination, especially in the political sphere. Several young people put forward their candidacies in elections to local keneshes (councils) and three of them became deputies of the local kenesh. Project participants also remain active members of their communities.

“I was at a seminar on improving leadership qualities among women... conducted by UNDP. We called all women who could not go out for any reason and tried to improve their leadership qualities. We also held a three-day seminar on leadership skills. On the basis of this seminar, participants wrote for themselves a project for women entrepreneurs. Women wrote projects at the sewing, carpet shops. They won the project and now two or three women are working there. After the seminars, many women decided to submit their candidacy to the deputies of the local kenesh.” – 26-year-old female activist

5.10 Informal dispute resolution and social and community activism

There are many examples of informal, youth-led conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives that are not financed by any donor, youth or state organisation, but instead reflect young people’s social contribution to their communities. For example, recent school graduates often form charity and mutual aid funds. Through these funds, classmates have been able to develop projects that benefit their communities, including building football fields, houses for low income families or single mothers, and helping the school where they studied.

Similarly, there are numerous examples of young people’s leadership in informal dispute resolution and conflict prevention. For example, youth diffused tensions between young men from Chui and Issyk-Kul oblasts (the North part of the country) over a domestic issue and prevented it from escalating into a group conflict involving almost 50 young men that gathered

after an event on the football field. In order to prevent a mass brawl, young people from an older group of one side of the conflict decided to negotiate with the 'young elders' from the side. This informal negotiation finally led to a truce.

"In the regions and villages there is internal communication between generations, classmates, but there is also a hierarchy of power, informal rules of intergenerational communication. Often there are conflicts between generations and then seniors are mediators when they arise," – Aydar, 26, Issyk-Kul oblast

In another example in Kochkor village (Naryn oblast, north of the country), youth have helped resolve a potential conflict between three religious movements with conflicting interpretations of the Quran. Tensions between the religious movements (Tablighi Jamaat, Yakyn Inkar and some other groups) led to a mass brawl in June 2017 near the mosque. In order to prevent a recurrence of violence, the 29 year-old imam of the district, local youth activists and the local administration organized a dialogue involving the three groups where it was agreed to end the conflict. Since June 2017 there have been no conflicts among those particular groups. The authority of the imam and his ability to gain respect from all sides has been critical to resolving this as well as other disputes.

In another example, young religious activists on their annual zakyat³² from the micro district Amir Temur (On Adyr) built a house for a poor 80-year-old woman and her daughter after their landlord who was also a relative pushed them out of the property. Rather than open up a dispute among relatives over the case, the woman went to the local imam, who then asked young people to help her by building her a new home.

Young people also contribute out of a sense of social responsibility to their communities, as this example from Teplokluchenka village in Issyk-Kul oblast illustrates. The village lacked a system to organize the burial of the dead (i.e. the digging the graves). After a case in which a family was unable to organise a burial, the young men from the village made an agreement and drew up a schedule for digging the graves for all funerals on a voluntary basis as a contribution to the family members of the dead person. This was promoted social cohesion because young men helped dig graves in both Muslim and Orthodox graveyards, regardless of their religion or nationality, thus contributing to interethnic and inter-religious harmony and tolerance.

Mutual assistance funds and communities such as the 'Joro community' (Jura, Jororor) in the South³³ and Jamaats in the North are another important

³² Zakyat is a mandatory annual tax in favour of poor people as well as to develop projects that promote the spread of Islam and true knowledge about it.

³³ It is relevant mainly to the south of the country: Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken oblasts

informal institution that is relevant to conflict prevention. For example, despite its historical roots as a men's association, the Joro community has become a mechanism for mutual assistance in which both men and women contribute, regardless of age and ethnicity. Based on the community of interests, fellow villagers, classmates, professionals, relatives and countrymen gather in groups of Joro where they discuss the latest political, economic, cultural events in the region and beyond. New mutual assistance groups have started form around professional interests or other social causes, such as Sherine and Yr-kese, which have played an important role in reconstruction and recovery after the conflict in 2010.³⁴

6. Conclusion

If we refer to Sherry Arnstein and Roger Hart's ladder metaphor for the stages of youth participation,³⁵ all of the stages are relevant to youth involvement in peacebuilding and decision-making processes in Kyrgyzstan. While young people are still manipulated and used by politicians, they are also increasingly engaged in discussion of strategic development and peacebuilding policies and there are a growing number of young deputies of local councils. Nonetheless, many problems remain unchanged: mistrust between elders/state servants and the younger generation remains an obstacle. Young people in rural areas continue to be the most marginalised and alienated—with few economic and social prospects for young people or little space for leisure. These opportunities are even more constrained for girls.

A significant obstacle to young people's positive engagement in peacebuilding is their lack of goal-setting and critical thinking skills and their dependent mindset. This makes them vulnerable to manipulation and radicalisation. Social media and the virtual world increasingly influence young people's consciousness. While this exposes youth to new information and worldviews that may be eye-opening, they also often lack the ability to filter the information available to them.

Despite these challenges, this study has shown the potential for young people resolve conflicts and contribute to sustaining peace. Many of the initiatives highlighted here are small-scale and informal, but they nonetheless provide a starting point upon which to build. Many of the activities led by youth organisations highlighted in this report have been made possible through partnerships with international organisations, as well as the Kyrgyz government and the private sector.

³⁴ Sherine and Yr-Kese are mutual assistance funds that finance certain social projects, for example, to construct houses for those who are in need and to help children of women with low income. This practice was also applied to assist injured Uzbeks in Osh and Bazar-Korgon in 2010.

³⁵ Global youth development index and report 2016, Commonwealth Secretariat, p. 69.

7. Recommendations

For the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic:

- Work together with youth activists to improve the mechanisms for youth involvement in decision-making, including by creating space for dialogue and partnership with youth.
- Help overcome negative perceptions that youth are potential instigators of conflict and recognise and support their positive role as agents of peace for example by disseminating positive stories of youth engagement in peacebuilding and promoting young people's positive engagement through inter-ethnic events and local dialogues involving youth.
- In cooperation with youth organisations, review the Youth Centers that are inactive or ineffective around the country in order to understand the challenges to their effectiveness and explore if and how they could be revived.
- Recognise the particular challenges faced by the children who are left behind due to labour migration and explore how educational institutions (i.e. kindergartens, schools and universities) can help fill the gap in cases in which family structures have broken down due to migration.
- Recognise and foster informal mechanisms for conflict prevention and sustaining peace in communities.

For the Ministry of Education and Science and Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism of the Kyrgyz Republic:

- Address the gap in opportunities between rural and urban areas, including by investing in renovating schools, enhancing school curriculum, building libraries and multicultural centres, and organising extra-curricular activities in rural areas. These efforts need to take into account specific needs in rural areas, such as the seasonal nature of agricultural work.
- Support the more systematic organisation of Career Days in schools to help teenagers to choose a profession after graduation.
- Ensure that psychologists are available in schools and universities so that young people in need of counselling can find help.

For youth organisations:

- Depend less upon external donor support and increase self-sufficiency and financial independence for example by encouraging volunteerism.

- Pay attention to local individuals' development and attempt to involve diverse young people in their projects to provide equal opportunities for all.

For international organisations and donors:

- Support youth organisations by encouraging volunteerism in order to enable a strong, self-sufficient young generation that is motivated to change society without depending upon external financial support.
- Develop an agenda to support Kyrgyz youth that based on an understanding of the real opportunities and challenges that the youth of Kyrgyzstan face rather than global or internationally driven priorities.
- Recognise the existence of local and informal initiatives in conflict prevention/sustaining peace and explore how they can be supported and developed into wider initiatives.
- Simplify requirements for funding and reporting on youth projects to enable young activists with good ideas to compete for funding. In addition, donors could explore ways to make the application process more accessible to young people for example by making videos in Russian/Kyrgyz or Uzbek languages explaining how to complete the application forms.
- Support projects to enable youth open small and medium-sized business as well as to encourage young people to begin thinking about the options and opportunities to enter business while in high school and to make informed choices for their future.

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Annex 1: Information used to introduce respondents to the study

1. Who is conducting this study?

In Kyrgyzstan, the study is being conducted by two youth organisations IDEA Central Asia and Youth of Osh with the financial support of the PeaceNexus Foundation. The final national report is being developed by the national consultant of the PeaceNexus Foundation - Omurkulova-Ozierska Elnura with the contribution from Ikbaljan Mirsaiitov.

The country report will subsequently be submitted to Mr. Graeme Simpson and Head of the UNFPA / PBSO secretariat: Cecile Mazzacurati for inclusion in the Global Report.

2. Why are we conducting this study?

This Study is being conducted to learn more about the role that young people can and do play in peacebuilding throughout the world. This Study aims to: 1) Identify and prioritize the main peace and security-related issues that matter to and affect young people in local, national, regional or global contexts; 2) Discuss gaps, challenges and priorities in promoting and supporting young women and men's active involvement in conflict prevention, conflict transformation, social cohesion and sustaining peace in their communities, institutions, countries and regions; 3) Collect in-depth information on young people's activities, initiatives and innovation to prevent violence and sustain peace; and 4) Identify substantive recommendations based on the local, national or regional experience of young men and women, to inform the Progress Study on YPS and guide the implementation of UNSCR 2250.

3. How will the information be used?

The information that is gathered in this Study will be used in the production of a final report that will be presented to the UN Security Council and Member States. It will also be made publicly available, including to any of the participants of the various consultations, focus group discussions or country case studies. The Study team will be happy to provide you with a copy of the publication that results from this Study, if you wish.

4. What are the benefits of participating?

As a result of this research and your participation in it, you and others like you may learn more about the peacebuilding work of your peers around the world or in your particular region. You may benefit by developing stronger connections with other organisations working to promote young people's participation in peacebuilding. You and your organization may also benefit from readers of the publication learning more about your organization and its

work. Participation in consultations enables young people to play a role in influencing and shaping international and national policy on the issues will be presented in the progress study.

5. How will your identity be protected?

Within the framework of this National Report on Kyrgyzstan's youth, you are given the opportunity to sign a written permission to use your data and the information you have provided. You will be given three options, one of which you will be able to sign. This form guarantees you the provision of anonymity. The authors of the global report also guarantee the preservation of your data and the provision of anonymity.

Annex 2: FGD and Interview Questions

General questions for all FGDs and in-depth interviews:

1. Tell us about the life and role of youth in your city / village / community?
 - What are your hobbies?
 - What challenges do you face?
 - Is the opinion of young people taken into account when making decisions in the family / village (city) / country? Give examples (**PARTNERSHIP**)
2. What does "Peace" and "Security" mean to you? What does personal security mean to you?
 - Do you feel safe in your family, community and country? Or tell examples of your life or acquaintances (avoid gossip) (**PROTECTION**)
 - If yes, why??
 - If no, why?
3. What problems exist in your city / county / country? Which of these problems can lead to conflicts?
 4. What prevents the solution of these problems in your city / country / country?
 5. What could be done to solve them? (**PREVENTION**)
6. Do you participate in solving these problems / preventing conflicts in your community? (**PARTICIPATION**)?
 - If so, why and by what means of participation? Please tell us about any

creative / innovative / other types of projects and success stories.

- If not, why? What or who prevents?

7. Who do you usually cooperate with and with whom you would like to cooperate in the implementation of conflict prevention projects: with representatives of the local self-government bodies, NGOs or international organisations, donors, media, business sector? (**PARTICIPATION AND PARTNERSHIP**)

- If so, what motivates you to cooperate?
- If not, what are the main reasons for the lack of cooperation?

8. How do you think the partnership between youth and other actors (local self-government bodies, NGOs, international organisations, etc.) can be improved?

Specific questions for FGDs with youth activists:

1. Do you think that your projects / initiatives / ideas have a positive impact on the life of society, including vulnerable groups, and minimize the emergence of conflict? If yes, give examples of how your project has positively changed the life of the community? If no, why?
2. What major problems do you face when implementing your conflict prevention projects?
3. How do you cope with these problems / risks / obstacles?
4. How do you think, how can you increase the involvement of young people in conflict prevention and peacekeeping (decision-making, participation, partnership)?

Specific questions for FGDs with ethnic minorities and ethnic Kyrgyz:

1. Do you have any difficulties with employment, access to public services and other spheres of life?
2. Do you have any difficulties in participating in decision-making and in other life situations from the older generation (older than you)?
3. Do you have any difficulties in participating in decision-making and other life situations due to your affiliation with the female / male sex?
4. Do you experience any discrimination in participating in decision-making by society in connection with your practice of religion?