

# PROMOTING KYRGYZSTAN'S YOUTH COHESION AND INTERACTION TOWARDS UZBEKISTAN

Project evaluation brief





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The project was initiated in 2018 by UNICEF, UNDP, and UNFPA in response to the call for proposals for the United Nations' Peacebuilding Fund Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative, which supports the empowerment of women and young people to ensure their inclusion and participation in peacebuilding and decision-making processes at all levels. The intervention was planned for 18 months, starting on 14 November 2018, and was extended for five months until November 14, 2020. The total budget of the project was \$ 1,500,000. All project activities took place on the territory of Kyrgyzstan with some activities involving youth and authorities from Uzbekistan. Activities were conducted at central government level, and locally along the Southern Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, in the provinces of Osh (Kara-Suu, Kashkar-Kyshtak, Tepe-Korgon), Jalalabad (Kerben, Kashka-Suu, Kok-Serek) and Batken (Aidarken, Birlik, Suu-Bashy).

## THE PROJECT

The overall purpose of the project was to improve social cohesion in border areas, and beyond across the entire country. Based on this purpose, the project included one outcome: "Kyrgyz youth and relevant government agencies collaborate and further develop cooperation plans to improve positive interactions with their Uzbek counterparts," served by three outputs:

1. Young people have improved critical/design thinking and demonstrate support for diversity and equal rights by initiating projects that contribute to the implementation of plans for local development and positive cooperation of youth between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.
2. Parents of young people, community members improve their understanding of diversity, have enhanced knowledge and tools to support and participate in youth-led initiatives.
3. Government representatives have strengthened capacity to provide services in cross-border communities and commit to support youth-driven initiatives aiming at improving the cross-border cooperation.

The fertile Ferghana valley, now split between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, has long crystallized tensions over access to, and share of, natural resources. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the unresolved border delineation has plagued inter-State relations. The areas of Kyrgyzstan which border with Uzbekistan feature communities of varied cultural background, which rely on resources that are spread across disputed borders. They are economically deprived, remote from the country's capital, and marred by unemployment and labour migration. In these areas, cross-border and domestic conflicts among communities have erupted regularly since the 1990s.

The United Nations Country Office in Kyrgyzstan and the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office have conducted conflict analysis, materialized in the Peacebuilding Priority Plans 2013-2016 and 2017-2020. This analysis acknowledges the importance of social cohesion, economic opportunities, civic participation, and the inclusion of all categories especially the youth, towards sustainable peacebuilding in these regions. The analysis further highlights the mutually reinforcing role of inter-State relations on the one hand, and interactions among people on the other hand.

The project "Promoting Kyrgyzstan's Youth Cohesion and Interaction towards Uzbekistan" echoed this analysis and aimed to support social cohesion in the border areas of Kyrgyzstan, and beyond, nationally. To this end, the project built on the National Youth Agency's strategic documents, the existing national strategic documents for rapprochement with Uzbekistan, and a favourable diplomatic context, to foster positive interaction of Kyrgyz youth, their communities and relevant public authorities, both within multi-cultural communities in the country, and towards their counterparts in Uzbekistan.



The project consisted of a series of small-scale local initiatives mobilizing tried and tested youth empowerment tools such as the UPSHIFT and Leadership and Innovation Academy programmes, focused respectively on youth participation and on youth leadership through capacity building, mentoring and engagement; legal aid initiatives involving youth in local communities; mini-grants supporting local projects led by the youth; support to access to local services including one-stop-shop in local administration; capacity building for a variety of duty bearers in the border areas; and a series of cross-border events involving the youth and the representatives of national and local administration.

With these activities, the project engaged the youth (from 14 to 28 years old) in the border areas of Kyrgyzstan, their parents and teachers, local communities, as well as local and national duty bearers at central, province and municipal levels. The project selected seven implementing partners, including six civil society organisations and one company, who conducted the bulk of these activities. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, from early 2020, the project activities moved online. All activities took place on the territory of Kyrgyzstan, with a focus on the provinces of Osh, Batken and Jalal-Abad, which border with Uzbekistan.

Conflict is a recurrent concern for UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP in terms of children's, youth's and vulnerable populations' equitable access to their rights. The project therefore targeted immediate (youth, central and local self-governance authorities and service providers) and final beneficiaries (communities in border areas of Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan). It became the first and the only Youth Promotion Initiative project in Kyrgyzstan which was implemented by Recipient United Nations Organizations (RUNOs), while other Youth Promotion Initiative projects in the country have been implemented by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

UNICEF Kyrgyzstan was the lead agency for the coordination of the project and organized the process of joint planning of the project as well as joint monitoring and reporting. UNICEF organized systematic coordination meetings with participation of the RUNOs as well as Implementing Partners (IPs) of the project. Together with UNDP, UNICEF brought the experience of a similar and recent PBF-funded project at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. UNFPA mobilised expertise on inclusion, with particular attention to women and young people.

# THE PROJECT GEOGRAPHY

## KYRGYZ REPUBLIC



### Jalal-Abad province

Kerben town  
Kok-Serek  
Kashka-Suu

### Batken province

Aidarken town  
Suu-Bashi  
Birlik

### Osh province

Kara-Suu town  
Tepe-Korgon  
Kashkar-Kyshtak



## PROJECT COMPONENTS



The project delegated the output on youth empowerment to six implementing CSOs and one private company selected through a competitive process:

- Public Association "Youth of Osh"
- Accelerate Prosperity
- Public Fund "International Debate Education Association in Central Asia" (IDEA CA)
- Association of legal clinics of Kyrgyzstan
- Public Fund "Tvoe pravo"
- Public Fund "Women's Peace Bank"
- John Galt Venture Capital & Private Equity (private company)

# EVALUATION SCOPE

The evaluation was mostly summative (as relates to understanding the effects of the projects and ensuring accountability), and to some extent formative (as relates to organisational learning and informed decision making). The evaluation followed a theory of change-based methodology.

## The objectives of the evaluation were:

- 01** To assess whether the project has met its objectives, and whether its objectives were relevant to the context.
- 02** To assess the circumstances influencing the project's achievements and the challenges that hindered it, and generates findings, lessons learned and recommendations regarding the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the project results.
- 03** To measure the result of the project in terms of outcome and outputs it has delivered to target groups and beneficiaries.
- 04** To assess the contribution of the project to UN peacebuilding efforts, and conversely the value of peacebuilding as a driving conceptual framework federating the efforts of the UN agencies involved in programming and implementation.

## The evaluation answered seven overarching questions:

<b>Relevance</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. To what extent were the project results relevant to the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries, especially of the young women and men?</li><li>2. To what extent is the project based on a logical Theory of Change and how coherent was it in practice?</li></ol>
<b>Effectiveness</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. To what extent have the expected results of the project been achieved on the output level?</li></ol>
<b>Efficiency</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>4. To what extent have the project implementers optimized their assets and comparative advantages?</li><li>5. To what extent were interventions under this project complementary, harmonized, coordinated with the government's and other peacebuilding actors' interventions?</li></ol>
<b>Impact</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>6. How effective have the project strategies and approaches been in contributing to peace and stability in border areas?</li></ol>
<b>Sustainability</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>7. How likely is it that UNICEF's contribution to peacebuilding at the Kyrgyz/Uzbek borders will last in the long run?</li></ol>

## EVALUATION DESIGN

The evaluation was conducted in the period of October 2020 – March 2021 in four sampled target municipalities in Osh (Kashkar-Kyshtak), Jalalabad (Kok-Serek and Kerben) and Batken (Aidarken) provinces using mixed-method of design.

## DATA COLLECTION METHODS



95 people interviewed



Focus groups (14 participants)



Social media analysis



Consultations with Evaluation of Reference Group



Project documents analysed



Due to COVID-19 restrictions in the country, the evaluation was done entirely online.

## KEY PROJECT RESULTS



More than 1000 community members engaged with the project



78 parents received training on adolescent psychology and parent-child communication



238 young people participated in various project activities



735 community members received legal services



Community engagement: young people developed and implemented 9 initiatives



4 border checkpoints improved services and basic infrastructure



949 young people received psychological support services during COVID 19 lockdown



One-stop-shop approach of municipal service delivery initiated in 9 pilot municipalities

# KEY FINDINGS

## Relevance and Coherence

- Finding 1** The empowerment approach to peacebuilding at grassroots level is relevant, as it responds to the most urgent need of the beneficiaries.
- Finding 2** The link between youth empowerment and peacebuilding is not clearly perceived by beneficiaries.
- Finding 3** The project document diplomatically formulated this project as a cross-border initiative, but concrete activities formed a mostly interethnic programme within Kyrgyzstan.
- Finding 4** Labour migration issue was overlooked.
- Finding 5** Gender equality and empowerment of women was best targeted within the equity-focused approach of the project.
- Finding 6** The project design was based on conflict analysis and PBF expertise.
- Finding 7** The actual theory of change was internally coherent, but its formal expression in the project documents required adjustments.
- Finding 8** The shift to online activities due to COVID-19-related prevention measures was handled swiftly, presenting constraints but also unexpected opportunities

## Empowerment of youth and communities

The project approach chose the empowerment of the youth and their communities as the key vehicle to elicit positive interactions at grassroots level, leading to improved social cohesion. It assumed that social cohesion, along with improved inter-State relations, were essential to peacebuilding. [The project design corresponded to the priorities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Priority Plan and its in-depth and agreed-upon conflict analysis.](#)

## Labour migration in the target areas

The project further sought to match this robust conceptual framework to the local realities, particularly the local drivers of conflict. To this end, the project implementers analysed the needs and aspirations of its beneficiaries in a participative manner, which enabled to adequately capture the needs and expectations of the targeted communities: empowerment of the youth through novel interactions and capacity building, participation in local decision making, employability, and creation of social and economic avenues locally. Gender equality and empowerment of women were an integral part of the project approach, because the theory of change, with social cohesion among its core intended impacts, was equity focused. [However, the project did not fully integrate the prominent phenomenon of labour migration, especially among the youth beyond school age.](#) During implementation, the project adequately retargeted some activities towards the younger share of its intended beneficiaries, who were more present in the selected provinces.

## Cross border vs inter-ethnic programming

During the project design phase, and throughout implementation, UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP, along with their implementing partners, analysed the nexus between three phenomena: interethnic relations as the pivotal aspect of the conflict; unresolved border issues as a key factor fuelling tensions; and the most urgent and unfulfilled needs expressed by the beneficiaries, which acts as a catalyst of these tensions. Although the beneficiaries themselves did not clearly perceive this nexus, [this analysis proved particularly relevant and instrumental to the coherence of the project and its theory of change.](#)

The project further engaged the national authorities, particularly the Youth Agency of Kyrgyzstan who actively contributed to the project's strategic approach. This effort secured commitment and enabled the activities to dovetail on political will. At the same time, the position of Kyrgyzstan's Executive somewhat disregards the prominence of interethnic relations within the country, and the project documents had to find a diplomatic compromise: the documents defined the project as a cross-border initiative complemented with local community support, but concrete activities mostly aimed at interethnic and social cohesion within Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, while the theory of change behind the project was internally coherent, its formal expression in the project documents was incomplete. This situation demanded adjustments throughout implementation, which materialized in the adaptation of the activities and of the project's monitoring framework.

## Coherent work approach

The United Nations agencies made the most of their assets within the country, particularly local offices and their network of CSOs, to reach out to underserved regions with a large panel of activities, within a modest budget. There was a good alignment of strategic objectives between the project and implementing partners. While the conceptual frameworks of the United Nations agencies and the Government were not perfectly aligned, their strategy in terms of target groups and actions to be taken were fully compatible. Federated by a common peacebuilding approach, [UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP](#) in Kyrgyzstan achieved deep cooperation. They pioneered genuine joint implementation, from procurement to monitoring. They [translated the "delivering as one" approach into concrete processes and procedures.](#)

## COVID-19 impact on the project

While these took lengthy negotiations and slowed down the first phase of the project, they constitute worthy precedents that now need to be perfected and reproduced. The COVID-19 crisis amplified these delays and created obstacles to the implementation of key activities, leading to a final rush, but UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP and their implementing partners proved particularly flexible, committed and creative, and successfully completed the project within a reasonable timeframe and with limited resources. Cross-border activities proved particularly

challenging to organise administratively. The project design overlooked valuable synergies with sister projects across the borders of Kyrgyzstan, which could have alleviated these difficulties.

The integration of the local needs and expectation, the robustness of the theory of change, and the ability to adapt project design to the circumstances resulted in a relevant and efficient project met by the overwhelmingly positive perception of stakeholders. What is more, the shift to online activities due to COVID-19-related prevention measures was handled swiftly, presenting constraints but also unexpected opportunities.

## Effectiveness

<b>Finding 9</b>	There is conclusive evidence of youth empowerment created by the project, which was an unexpected and new experience for all involved.
<b>Finding 10</b>	There is anecdotal evidence of progress regarding the interethnic component. Self-censorship is symptomatic of conflict structure.
<b>Finding 11</b>	A large share of girls participated in the project activities, and the transformative results of the activities are particularly visible for them.
<b>Finding 12</b>	Success stories emerged from the project activities where municipalities supported youth initiatives.
<b>Finding 13</b>	The pilots projects concerning service delivery in municipalities were well received, but they remain modest and scattered.
<b>Finding 14</b>	National level duty bearers and their regional level representation became better connected with the final beneficiaries' aspirations and realities.

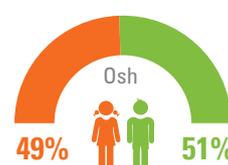
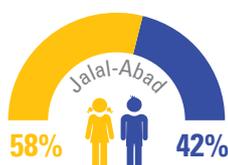
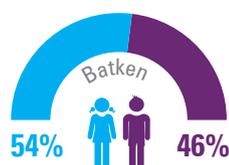
## Transformative results for girls and boys

There is conclusive evidence that the project effectively resulted in increased youth empowerment. The share of girls who participated is high, and the transformative results of the activities are particularly visible for them. [Many participants perceived this project as a passage to adulthood, or a self-revealing experience.](#) This happened because the project activities created unexpected and new experiences for the participants: travel and exposure to high quality training products and venues, new forms of interactions, recognition of the leadership role that the youth can play within their community, as well as mutually respectful relations among peers and with local self-governance bodies.

**238** young people  
participated at  
the leadership Innovation Academy,  
Make-Athon, UPSHIFT



The results of the project are therefore very apparent among the direct participants in terms of personal and professional development within their community. Beside teachers and other coaches, the project remarkably engaged the parents of the participants, which proved instrumental to success: they acted as facilitators for the project results to expand beyond the youth and to the rest of the community.



UPSHIFT  
Programme  
Participants

90 young  
people

7 mentors

## Efficiency

- Finding 15** Federated by a common peacebuilding approach, the recipient United Nations organisations achieved deep cooperation, but missed some synergies with sister projects across the borders of Kyrgyzstan.
- Finding 16** The recipient United Nations organisations made the most of their assets within the country, particularly local offices and their network of CSOs, to reach out to underserved regions with a large panel of activities, within a modest budget.
- Finding 17** The slow start of the project due to inter-agency coordination and then the COVID-19 crisis led to a final rush.
- Finding 18** On paper, there is an alignment of project and Government strategy. In practice, the UN vision also incorporates interethnic relations, which are not an explicit objective of the Government.
- Finding 19** There is a good alignment of strategic objectives between the project and CSOs/implementing partners.

## Impact

- Finding 20** Most significant changes are at individual level: more trust, more confidence, more hope.
- Finding 21** Youth prove a good catalyst for impact.
- Finding 22** Youth agencies on both sides of the border increased their cooperation.

## Individual level results

The individual and community-level empowerment efforts of the project were particularly effective, and the youth proved a good catalyst for impact. Youth interaction and initiatives have outlasted the closure of the project, even though their frequency and intensity have diminished. However, there is no guarantee that their broader effects will be sustainable: [the most significant changes happened at individual level](#). This is particularly true of interethnic relations. There is anecdotal evidence of progress: many participants reported new perceptions of their peers across the border or in culturally different communities. Social media and interviews showed that the attitudes of the youth and their immediate social circles towards cultural diversity may have evolved. However, self-censorship is still very prevalent among rights holders and duty bearers alike, which is symptomatic of a latent conflict. To overcome these barriers and address the root causes of the conflict, the United Nations will need to continue addressing both interethnic and cross-border relations – from the national to the community levels.

## Sustainability

### Finding 23

Youth interaction and initiatives have outlasted the closure of the project, even though their frequency and intensity have diminished.

### Finding 24

Local self-governance units are supportive of youth-led initiatives and ready to carry on, but will require continued support from national authorities and from international cooperation partners to do so.

### Finding 25

With a wide variety of fields and methods, the project was exploratory. Impact will require follow up and prioritization.

## New local venues for peaceful claiming rights платформалар

With its legal aid component and capacity building for local duty bearers, the project further created new local venues for peaceful and effective pressing of claims for access to services, settlement of disputes and recourse mechanisms. Enhanced service delivery in municipalities, as well as enhanced consultation and cooperation with the youth, were well received. Success stories emerged from the project activities where municipalities supported youth initiatives. National level duty bearers and their province-level representations became better connected with the final beneficiaries' aspirations and realities. Youth agencies on both sides of the border increased their cooperation.

However, these components of the project still qualify as pilots: their systematisation would require broader reform strategies. Local self-governance units are supportive of youth-led initiatives and ready to carry on, but they will require continued support from national authorities and from international cooperation partners to sustainably reap the benefits of these experiments. With a wide variety of fields and methods, [the project was exploratory: it will require follow up and prioritization](#).

# LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

## 01 **Conducting project events to unpack the Theory of Change at an earlier stage of the project**

A streamlined, precise focus is difficult to define in peacebuilding projects because the realm of factors that influence conflict or peace, and that can be acted upon, is very broad. The stakeholders of peace are varied and likely to have diverging priorities. Peacebuilding projects therefore must often compose with dilemmas through complex decision making, and a fluctuating environment. In reaction, this project acknowledged its dilemmas and addressed it with a strong institutional learning moment: the mid-term monitoring workshops were the occasion to 1°) discuss terminologies, 2°) unpack the theory of change and 3°) adjust indicators against the backdrop of the realities of the project. [Re-tracing the logical links between the levels of the theory of change at an early stage enables a project team to consciously identify the specific strategies and problematic points.](#) In this project, these events were organised late: organised at the end of an inception period, they would have had better effects on the alignment of the actors, on reporting, and possibly on swift decision making including on administrative aspects, but in future project collaborative reassessment of the monitoring and implementation framework with the implementing partners can start in the early stages.

## 02 **Better aligning of internal processes to avoid delays in project implementation**

UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP embarked on this joint project with a high level of cooperation (beyond mere coordination or parallel implementation). While this is clearly a good and rare example of the “delivering as one” approach, in which the three United Nations agencies displayed genuine good will and creativity from Country Team to field office level, [they faced the constraints of their different internal processes and procedures.](#) Joint tendering, while absolutely worthwhile as it catalysed synergies, was particularly lengthy. It resulted (compounded by the COVID-19 crisis) into delays in implementation, an unreasonable rush during the last few months of the project, and unnecessary strain on the implementing partners.

## 03 **Lack of cross-border cooperation within the UN Office in Uzbekistan**

The project, while targeting cross-border interactions and anticipating difficulties in mobilizing partners from the Uzbekistan side, did not involve the United Nations Office in the neighbouring country. This was a missed opportunity. [In any project with a cross-border component, United Nations agencies need to systematically consult with their peers in the neighbouring country during project design, coordinate and exchange regular information during implementation,](#) and build on the existing network and partnerships of the neighbouring Country Team to gather support to mobilize counterparts across the border.

## 04 **The project spread itself too thin.**

The project was intended as a door opener, and it indeed opened many doors, but in doing so it spread itself too thin. Each initiative had a small budget, which created expectations and momentum, but also risks eliciting disappointment. Grassroot level peacebuilding projects, while

hearing and understanding the needs and aspirations of the stakeholders, cannot cater to all: they need to prioritize, at least to some extent, from the onset. For instance, while the one-stop-shops were an interesting experiment, they did not receive sufficient funding, preparation and holistic attention to have meaningful and sustainable impact beyond individual human stories. The project prepared guidebooks but the regulations are not in place. Only a full-fledged public administration reform and decentralisation programme is in a position to address these needs. [Peacebuilding projects can make inroads into systemic changes, in areas that directly address the key conflict drivers in targeted areas locally – but they cannot serve to test other, broader reform projects that do not directly relate to peacebuilding.](#)

## 05 **Better approaches to systemize youth empowerment.**

The project recognised that parents, community members and influencers such as teachers, can impede children's participation, empowerment, and interethnic interactions, unless they are prepared. It was excellent practice to assume parents could instead act as accelerator, to involve them in several key activities, and to offer them empowerment and capacity building. At the same time, the project's action on other part of the assumption, that is to say the involvement of teachers and schools, lagged behind. Collaboration of the Ministry of Education is necessary, and in this case their reluctance could not be overcome. [Youth-oriented projects need to strongly engage education institutions from the start as relays and multipliers, in an effort to systematize youth empowerment activities with them.](#)

## 06 **Youth participation as a good practice**

Conflict analysis states that youth unemployment counts among the biggest threats to peace. However, the project easily avoided the pitfall of menial and precarious employment from the design onwards, by putting [strong emphasis on consultation and focusing on youth participation and empowerment rather than just employability.](#) This was due to consultations with beneficiaries and using these insights in the design of the project. This good practice could be transposed whenever peacebuilding is approached via youth empowerment.

## 07 **Systematic approach to project data collection**

The evaluation team missed explicit data on ethnicity of participants. If ethnic inclusion is one of the objectives of the project, then it must be systematically measured, as it was for gender in an exemplary manner.

## 08 **Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative as a competitive process**

The initial consultation of youth during the design phase increased relevance and enabled to target employability along the youth's aspirations while avoiding the common pitfall of menial, unqualified work. This was due to the Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative (GYPI) funding is a competitive process, and integration of GYPI guidelines in the theory of change of the project, but this approach can serve as good practice for other projects, regardless of the source of funding.

## MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

### Peacebuilding Fund

1. To capitalize on the opportunities created by this project, the Peacebuilding Fund should continue supporting youth empowerment projects as vehicles for peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan along with neighbouring countries.
2. The Peacebuilding Fund should consider setting up an online community of practice on peacebuilding projects accessible to its recipients.

### UN Country Team

3. The United Nations Country Team in Kyrgyzstan (UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP and any other relevant agency such as UN Women) should initiate a regional, modular follow up youth empowerment and peacebuilding programme with its peers in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.
4. The United Nations Country Team in Kyrgyzstan should streamline pilot initiatives into systemic, peacebuilding partnerships with key duty bearers.
5. The United Nations Country Team in Kyrgyzstan should introduce gender transformative results to the successor project, based on gender analysis and in consultation or cooperation with UNWomen.
6. The United Nations Country Team in Kyrgyzstan should re-define target age groups of youth empowerment programmes in border areas towards adolescents and very young adults (up to 20 years) in addition to the original target group (up to 28 years), with emphasis on women/girls and vulnerable groups, and tailor activities accordingly.
7. The United Nations Country Team in Kyrgyzstan should maintain selected activities online beyond the COVID-19 crisis.
8. The United Nations Country Team in Kyrgyzstan should anticipate and accelerate joint procurement and other administrative processes linked to joint implementation.

### Duty bearers: Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, Municipalities and Service Providers

9. The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, in particular the State Agency for Regional Development should support the decentralisation efforts of the State Registry Service of Kyrgyzstan and Ombudsperson's office.
10. The Government of Kyrgyzstan, the Presidential Office, and Ministry of Education should facilitate and support systematic involvement of educational institutions in peacebuilding initiatives and youth empowerment, especially in border areas.
11. The Government of Kyrgyzstan should consider the creation of a peacebuilding national platform.

### CSOs and other implementing partners

12. Implementing partners should continue to develop their capacity to reach out to remote, vulnerable groups in border areas.

## HUMAN INTEREST STORIES FROM PROJECT PARTICIPANTS



### Mirlan Ubraim uulu: Mentoring as a way of life.

*Despite his young age, 25-year-old Mirlan Ubraim uulu has the diverse background of a migrant worker, a healthcare professional, a certified teacher and a young leader in Kerben town of Jalal-Abad province, Kyrgyzstan.*

*Mirlan is grateful that he had the chance to be a mentor for “Friendship has no Limits” project implemented in his community from 2019 to 2020 by UN agencies and partner organisations. He is also a Chairman of the Youth Committee of Kerben town, which was established in 2019. Mirlan interacted with international organization such as UNICEF and civil society organisations like “Youth of Osh” for the first time.*

*The project “Promoting Kyrgyzstan’s youth cohesion and interaction towards Uzbekistan” (non-official title “Friendship has no Limits”) was implemented in the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border communities of the Kyrgyz Republic from January 2019 to November 2020. The project was carried out jointly by UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP. The project was funded by the Peacebuilding Fund and aimed at supporting the national government, local self-governments and youth in their efforts to establish and promote youth cohesion and positive interactions in border areas with further catalytic effects for the entire country. All project activities took place in Kyrgyzstan with some activities involving youth and authorities from Uzbekistan. Activities were conducted at national level, and local level namely, in the provinces of Osh (Kara-Suu, Kashkar-Kyshtak, Tepe-Korgon), Jalalabad (Kerben, Kashka-Suu, Kok-Serek) and Batken (Aidarken, Birlik, Suu-Bashy).*

*Kerben, where Mirlan lives, is a small remote town in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan with a population of less than 15 000 people. The town was selected at the initial project site selections stage due to a high percentage of labour migrants and of unemployed youth, and the openness of the local authorities and youth leaders. Mirlan graduated from*

*the Medical College of Osh State University in 2016 as a paramedic. After graduation he returned to his hometown to start his career in healthcare. But his first experience crashed against the reality of everyday life in a remote community. Even though he had graduated with distinction, he was not welcomed as a young professional and faced different constraints.*

*After a passage through the Russian Federation, he now combines professional development working as a half-time paramedic at the local healthcare unit, and voluntary activity leading the Youth Committee. As project mentor he supervised 15 young people during the project: seven boys, eight girls. Since he is a trained teacher, he thought that he knew how to interact with young people. The project invested in his practical skills of effectively working with adolescents, as a peer rather than a teacher, to better understand their needs, to have fun and satisfaction in this interaction. Mirlan says "Mentors' work is very important as we need to inspire youth and motivate them. Unfortunately, the young people have no place to get this motivation. Most of the teachers in the rural areas have limited skills to positively interact with young people. Teachers instruct kids and tell them what to do. But this way we fail to discover kids' potential or their leadership. A mentor is different: he tries to enter the inner world of kids, understand what they are going through and open up their potential." The young people under his mentorship were from various backgrounds: some of the kids were from vulnerable families, when one or both parents were in Russia as labour migrants "...and when you give encouragement, they open up" he points out.*

*His mentoring goes beyond the project, now he utilises the new skills he acquired in everyday life "mentoring" his family members, friends, community members: "I try to motivate people, especially when there are real tangible immediate results. I have clearer goals now" he says. He is planning to take classes in one of the local schools to keep interacting with young people.*

*According to Mirlan, there are still very remote communities in the mountains in the region where he lives. Young people are at a disadvantage there, especially girls and young women. Neglect, abuse, including sexual abuse, no access to development opportunities, deteriorating infrastructure are among numerous problems there. "There is no bright future for us unless we start investing in our youth. Now the youth work is more important to me," concludes Mirlan.*

*Mirlan looks favourably upon the idea of the project of positive interaction with the youth across the border. He maintains contact with the youth leaders from Jangi Korgon region of Uzbekistan and even developed further plans with them such as conducting a camp with the youth from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2021, ensuring funds from the Mayor's office for this.*



## Reimagining brighter future with Takhmina

*Takhmina is a 17-year old girl in a border town of Aidarken in Batken province. She concedes rural communities in Kyrgyzstan are not always able to offer diverse development avenues for young people: boys go to Russia as labour migrants, girls get married in their early twenties. Border communities have even less capacity to do so, as they are often isolated; few people pass by them. It is thus no surprise children in these communities lack role models to follow, which would help them imagine lives they can live. Takhmina admits that a year ago she used to be a shy and timid girl too, concentrated only on her studies and rarely thought of her future.*

*Then Takhmina's teacher suggested she participate in the project "Cheksiz dostuk" (Borderless friendship), initiated by UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA. Within the project, about a hundred young people of 15-25 years old from nine border communities of Osh, Batken, and Djalal-Abad provinces were empowered to participate in peacebuilding and decision-making. This way UNICEF is abiding by its mission to enable the youth to enjoy their rights fully. Throughout a year, Takhmina, along with her 15 peers from other border communities had trainings on public speaking, design thinking, and debating organized by UNICEF and UNFPA. They played games with mentors, visited different places and learnt to interact with local authorities. It was at the project events, that Takhmina met young people who spoke English, studied abroad, and had professions she had never heard before, like IT and marketing.*

*Within a year of being part of this project, Takhmina says she has changed. She is much more confident and outspoken. A friend from "Cheksiz dostuk" project, himself a resident at Kashkar-Kyshtak village, suggested to Takhmina to apply for the "School parliament" project, and she got in. Another "Cheksiz dostuk" friend from Padysha-Ata village got high score at the Republican school test last year, and now she helps Takhmina to ace the test. With her new friends, Takhmina discusses books, professions, and studies. She has already finished reading her fifth book this month!*

*On top of that, after Takhmina's team opened a media center for the local community, she realized she could manage the social media pages of Aidarken town mayor's office. Takhmina has been doing the job for a year already. She is keen about learning Social Media Marketing and design. Her eyes shine brighter when she talks of logos and patterns. She says she couldn't imagine such an interesting life a year ago. Now Takhmina has dreams: she wants to study IT and see the world.*



## Rethinking leadership with Nursultan

*A 15-year old Nursultan resides in Monok village, Kara-Suu district, Osh province, Kyrgyzstan. The village borders with Uzbekistan and numbers 3,500 residents.*

*Nursultan is a self-described leader: leading comes naturally to him. However, without compelling role models to inspire and guide him, Nursultan saw no new horizons for own development.*

*With "Cheksiz dostuk" project Nursultan had an opportunity to discover new dimensions of his leadership capacities, to lead wider and diverse audiences, and to learn to manage team dynamics. "Cheksiz dostuk" is a joint project of UNICEF, UNDP, and UNFPA aimed at strengthening social cohesion in border communities of Southern provinces through empowering women and young people and ensuring their participation in peacebuilding and decision-making. Through this project, UNICEF strived to further push its agenda of ensuring youth's access to their rights.*

*Within the project, around a hundred teens from several border communities in Djalal-Abad, Osh, and Batken provinces underwent a series of trainings, conducted research on their own community, and drew up development project proposals for their own villages. Successful project proposals were to be selected for funding. Nursultan and his teammate found out that their fellow villagers had to travel to a neighbouring village in order to get their documents printed. They proposed to set up a printing studio, and were selected for funding.*

*Encouraged by the positive community response to the printing studio, Nursultan and his teammate intend to open a hairdresser's salon for the village. Without such a service, villagers have to travel to neighbouring communities to get a haircut. Moreover, a salon would provide at least 2 jobs for local residents, and would be the first business endeavour for Nursultan and his friend.*

*Nursultan's leadership found a new direction: he realized he can lead teams and get meaningful causes implemented that benefit whole communities and help set up jobs. Now he sees how he can develop, what he needs to learn, and what kind of a leader he can become.*