



Good practices and lessons learnt in building resilient communities in Kyrgyzstan



FOUNDATION FOR TOLERANCE INTERNATIONAL

Introduction

“Communities for Sustainable Peace” was a project implemented jointly by UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women in close partnership with strategic government and non-governmental organizations. The project aimed to build community resilience to violent and manipulative ideologies through the means of education, empowerment and dialogue. In order to promote critical thinking skill and citizenship values and to improve young people’s understanding about citizenship and its relation with the state, the project partners introduced a new educational subject named ‘civic education’ in educational institutions. Furthermore, in order to strengthen state-society-relations, various actors including religious leaders and civic activists were involved in dialogue with authorities and in decision-making processes.

The project also featured significant components on youth, multilingual education, and work with vulnerable women carried out by UNICEF and UN Women. This report is focused on demonstrating good practices and lessons learnt in UNFPA’s and its partners’ work on civic education in vocational schools, madrasas and community-level initiatives.

Issues of radicalization continue to pose challenges to Kyrgyzstan and other countries in Central Asia. This is related to the different terroristic acts and attempts in 2010 near the sport center and the Chinese embassy; political radicalization among different political elites and groups, regional or ethnic division which has driven revolutions and conflicts in the recent history; and clashes over traditional and liberal values. In most cases youth get involved in such events based on specific recruitment or manipulation activities.

This is consistent with global evidence on recruitment into groups propagating violence: Findings from the research “Journey to Extremism in Africa” shows that education must provide life alternatives, and as far as possible instill critical thinking, respect for diversity and citizenship values in preventing extremism.¹ A strategic study by Search for Common Ground (SfCG) concludes that improving state-society relations in addition to intercommunity and intergenerational ones is critical to building community resilience to violent extremism.² Research conducted by International Alert in Tunisia and Kenya in recent years has confirmed that interactions between state and citizens that strengthen confidence, competency and a sense of responsibility on both sides are vital for reducing vulnerability to violent extremism. This is particularly critical for young people, who, as mentioned above, are particularly susceptible to recruitment.³ Studies in the Kyrgyzstani context have confirmed the important role of local government, administrative and educational institutions in reducing vulnerability and strengthening people’s resilience to violent extremism.⁴ These findings provided the basis for the project whose intervention is discussed in further detail below.

The project “Communities resilient to violent ideologies” is part of the larger PVE (Prevention of Violent Extremism) program implemented by different UN agencies and state partners. UNFPA is one of the implementing agencies that closely worked with implementing partners on three main components that focused on introducing and integrating civic education in 8 vocational schools and 11 madrasas, as well as promoting participation of religious leaders

¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Africa: “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point” p. 38-40: <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/> last entered 20 Sept, 2017

² Margaret Williams, “Working Together to Address Violent Extremism: a strategy for youth-government partnerships” Search for Common Ground (2016). https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/YouthGovtCVE_StrategyDocument_122116.pdf

³ International Alert, “We Don’t Trust Anyone: strengthening relationships as the key to reducing violent extremism in Kenya” (2016). http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Kenya_ViolentExtremism_EN_2016.pdf.

⁴ See, for instance, Emil Nasritdinov, Zarina Urmanbetova, Kanatbek Murzakhailov and Mametbek Myrzabaev, “Vulnerability and Resilience of Young People in Kyrgyzstan to Radicalization, Violence and Extremism: Analysis across Five Domains”, CAP Paper no. 213, Central Asia Program, George Washington University, 2019.

and civic activists in PVE-related activities and wider societal dialogue. The intervention on integrating civic education started with a needs assessment in pilot vocational schools and madrasas. A team of authors comprising project staff, state partners and experts developed a civic education guide, a student workbook, and an evaluation system and other supporting media materials that were continuously improved throughout approbations and the monitoring of teaching activities. Teachers were trained on how to deliver the new content. Mentors helped both students and teachers to elaborate several topics.

As a result, post tests show changes of students' mindset on tolerance, respect to diversity and soft skills, and an improvement of their understanding of key government functions and correspondingly, higher trust towards the government. Teachers became supportive and classes became interesting thanks to the use of interactive methods and real-world examples clarifying the relevance and importance of contents. Partners at the national level are endorsing the use of civic education guides in other vocational schools and madrasas. The work with local communities in the third component served for both male and female religious leaders and civic activists to improve their understanding on tolerance, peacebuilding and PVE, as a result of which they implemented initiatives dedicated to the solution of priority issues, such as rights of girls to education, women's empowerment, domestic violence, child marriage and information campaigns on prohibited extremist groups. These initiatives improved the attitude of participants to gender equality, PVE, the government and the police and also strengthened these parties' partnership and dialogue.

The report continues with the presentation of the good practices and lessons learnt by UNFPA and its partners for each of the three components of

- I) Integrating civic education in vocational schools;
- II) Integrating civic education in madrasas; and
- III) Promoting partnership among religious leaders and other stakeholders.

The presentation proceeds by

- 1) introducing into the respective context,
- 2) describing measures undertaken within the project and, finally,
- 3) illustrating key problems encountered in the project implementation and solutions found to deal with them, which are further developed into
- 4) recommendations for actors working in each component. The report concludes with reflections and broader recommendations for preventing violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan.



I. Integrating civic education in vocational schools

1. Context

According to the latest data of the National Statistics Committee, there are 98 vocational schools in Kyrgyzstan.⁵ Only 30% of school leavers enroll in them, while the majority pursue their education in secondary schools or proceed directly into jobs in the lower skill segment. Every year, about 30,000 people enter state-funded vocational schools, while 10,000 people attend short-term courses.⁶ The duration of the secondary education curriculum (i.e. from the 9th grade onwards) is four years while the post-secondary education program (from 12th to 13th grade) is two years long⁷.

It is worth noting that young people in Kyrgyzstan as a rule enter vocational schools due to lack of finances or not getting a high enough score in the General National Testing to be admitted to university, or sometimes at the urging of their parents who wish them to become employable and start working as early as possible. Only a small number enter vocational schools on their own initiative. There is a stigma attached to vocational schools in Kyrgyzstan that has existed historically since the Soviet times. Vocational schools used to be considered as last

resort for troubled students, “academic failures” who would be sent there by schools to further their studies after the 9th grade. There is also a high level of domestic and international labor migration among students of vocational schools. Their continued dependence on labor migration as a source of income can make vocational school students a vulnerable target for manipulative and violent ideologies (meaning international extremist and terrorist movements). In addition, it is believed that poor teaching standards and focus on rote learning (memorization of facts) rather than developing functional literacy and civic competencies (such as critical skills, self-reflection and communication) limit young people’s resilience to the propaganda of violence. Taking into account these vulnerabilities, the project aimed to help young people who study in vocational schools to improve their education and life skills and more positively engage them within society increasing in this way their resilience to radicalization and violence.

2. Overview and results of project activities

In order to improve the critical thinking, communication skills and tolerance of students in vocational schools, the project implemented

the following activities in 8 vocational schools from all regions of Kyrgyzstan.

⁵ <http://www.stat.kg/en/opendata/category/279/>

⁶ <http://kabar.kg/news/proftekhhobrazovanie-v-kyrgyzstane-sostoianie-i-perspektivy/>

⁷ Out of school children initiative, UNICEF, report, 2012, p. 14

⁸ More than 80% of the country’s students displayed reading skills below a level at which they “begin to demonstrate competencies (.....) that will enable them to participate effectively and productively in life”. Stated in the Youth and Public Policy in Kyrgyzstan, p. 27



A participatory research was conducted among students of the pilot schools to determine their needs and requirements. The research mainly focused on identifying students' critical thinking skills, tolerance, interest in the subject of civic education, etc. to inform the new contents and materials to be produced and measures to be carried out within the project. These are listed in the following table and discussed in detail thereafter.



Based on the results of the research, a Teacher's Guide and further materials (Student's Workbook, Competence Assessment System) on 'Civic education' was developed jointly with the representatives of the Republican Scientific and Methodological Center under the Ministry of Education (RSMC MoE) and was added to the subject 'Legal basis of professional activity'. The content of the guide included topics related to discrimination, tolerance, gender equality, human rights, etc. As the initial research results showed, these topics had not been part of the subject before.



After being tested in pilot vocational schools taking into account feedback of trained teachers and students the Teacher's Guide was further improved to include the elements of interactive learning, real life examples and with simplified language. The Teacher's Guide, Students' Workbook and an assessment system were recommended for launching in 101 vocational schools starting from the 2020-21 academic year.



A series of training were provided for teachers, curriculum developers, administrators of vocational schools on new and interactive teaching methodologies and student's knowledge assessment.



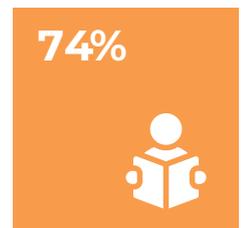
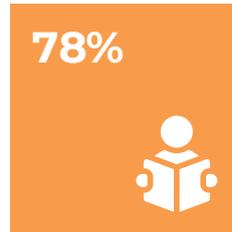
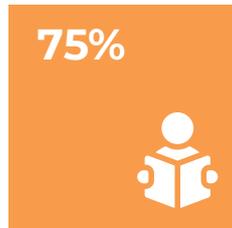
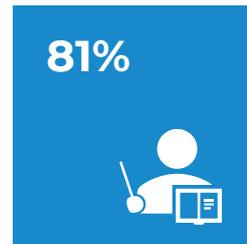
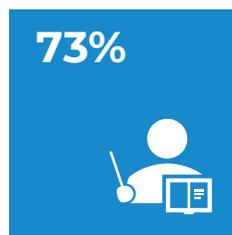
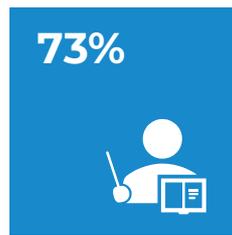
With the COVID-19 pandemic and transition to distance learning podcasts, animated video and video tutorials were developed and a number of online events were conducted on topics such as COVID-19 pandemic, media literacy, tolerance that not only increased awareness of teachers and students about these topics but improved their digital skills as well.

Results of end-line survey and interviews

The following statistics and quotations from project's the end-line survey attest to the positive effect of the project intervention in this component. Roughly three quarters or more of respondents among both teachers and students stated that thanks to the

project they had improved their soft skills and conflict resolution capacities and appreciated the value of tolerance, respect for diversity and human rights as well as gender equality.

teachers
students



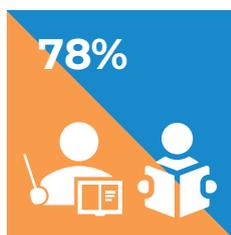
in pilot vocational schools have improved their soft skills and better understand their importance.

support and show tolerance, respect for diversity and human rights.

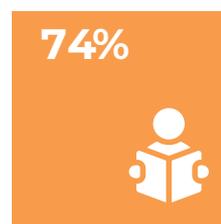
resolve and/or prefer to resolve conflicts through peaceful non-violent means.

“ We felt not like a teacher and student, but like we were in one family and as if we are discussing very important issues. Students had many questions regarding each topic we discussed. They were asking to hold more seminars and initiating presentations and discussions on various topics. To our class on “Domestic Violence” we invited a guest speaker, a lawyer here in Kizil-Kiya city. This class was very live and both lawyer and students enjoyed it very much. During our other class we discussed the topic on stereotypes and I sent video-classes to my students. After watching it, they had so many questions about this topic.”

Gulumkan, vocational school 70,
Kizil-Kiya, Osh oblast



support equality and the enhancement of women’s rights and freedoms.



believe in self-actualization and understand its importance.

According to a student of vocational school number 70 who has taken this course, it helped her to change her life:

“ During this class I learned how to freely express my opinion and human rights which changed my worldview. I also learned that there are other opportunities to change my life. Because I want to be a teacher and a deputy of a local council in the future. This is because during this class we met with various state institutions and deputies.

After these meetings I decide to protect the rights of youth and every citizen by listening to each of them and develop Kyrgyzstan. For this decision the influence of my human rights teacher on me is huge. Because the teacher's attitude to students, teaching method, willingness to listen to each student during classes were of great importance."

The following statements from teachers who participated in the project bear testimony to the suitable addition made by the 'Civic education' curriculum and especially the method and interactive approach it offers both in offline and online teaching which became necessary during the Covid-19 pandemic:

“ This course was very interactive and useful for our students. We used debates, discussions and team work during this course. Students also visited local municipalities and have learned how they function and what they do. Our students also visited other cities in Kyrgyzstan. For example, we visited the Youth Center in Ak-Dobo village and other social institutions there. This course is very important.”

Alimkan, teacher at vocational school 13, Kara-Buura, Talas, Talas province

“ While we were teaching this course, the pandemic started and we conducted classes online and it was difficult to teach this course online. Because teaching offline is totally different than online where students can see and hear everything. I organized a tour to our local municipality for my students where they learned how it works. I would recommend launching such courses more and at other colleges and lyceums, too. I would also recommend increasing the credit hours of this course, because students have so many questions and we cannot discuss all of them during our class”.

Gulzina, teacher vocational school 112, Aravan, Osh province province

3. Difficulties and solution strategies

Problem #1 One of the difficulties was related to the understanding among the national partners about the importance and necessity of civic education, and particularly its sub-topics of discrimination, family law with a focus on gender equality, crimes and offenses, corruption, extremism, and media literacy in the curriculum, in the vocational school curriculum. Especially the fact that a subject named 'Legal basis of professional activity' was already being taught.

Solution #1 After a series of meetings, it was decided to conduct joint research and needs assessment among the pilot vocational schools (for more information see the research report). The results showed that, according to surveyed teachers and students, the existing subjects did not provide the required practical knowledge, especially on soft skills, tolerance, gender equality, etc. This helped to carry out evidence-based conversations with the national partners and develop a common understanding on next steps to integrate civic education in vocational schools. As a result, additional topics on soft skills, tolerance, gender equality, discrimination, media literacy, etc. were added to the 'Legal basis of professional activity' subject. The subject was thus made to address the real needs of students and is expected to improve young people's resilience to violent ideologies.

Problem #2 The second difficulty was related to the fact that the project did not work with the students primarily in the initial phase. It focused mostly on the teachers, the administration of vocational schools and national level partners, while students were not primary participants of the process. This was mostly related to the fact that the integration of the civic education process required a policy level participation and therefore involved mostly the partaking of decision-makers.

Solution #2 The explanation, rather than a solution to this problem, is that sometimes projects may not be able to involve beneficiaries as much as necessary. Yet, once the project team realizes this, it is necessary to use any existing chance to involve them. In order to fill this gap, the project team used the available platforms to involve students. First and perhaps most importantly, the needs assessment covered students as well. Further work on integrating civic education in vocational schools is based on the results of this research and therefore presents a crucial link between youth needs and interests and new educational contents. Second, during the monitoring visits, the project team could monitor lessons and talk not only to teachers, but also students. Third, the project involved mentors to help students in their process of studying the civic education subject.

Problem #3 The involved mentors and teachers were not always sufficiently knowledgeable on the aspects of civic education that were of special importance for students. Some lessons within the civic education subject required knowledge on legislation, the judiciary and psychology. Both mentors and teachers were not able to explore these subjects. Furthermore, teachers also had low digital capacities that impeded conducting online meetings and training during the pandemic.

Solution #3 As a solution, external experts were invited to the classes. For example, representatives of human rights organization "Spravedlivost" were invited to elaborate such topics as "Human Rights", "Stereotypes and discrimination" or "Crime and offense". Conducting trainings for teachers on digital skills, using Zoom, Google Meet, and other platforms helped them to fully master and conduct relevant activities.

Additional lessons learned:

- The interest of the teachers themselves helped in the implementation of civic education in vocational schools;
- Openness of the teachers to change led them to use interactive methods and conduct lessons based on the needs of students. This also improved the relations between students and teachers;
- A comprehensive approach leads to better results. The project took such an approach as it covered students, teachers, school administrations, national partners, mentors, and experts.

4. Sustainability and recommendations

The project has made an important intervention which has the potential to secure a lasting change in the way vocational schools ensure the resilience of young people to violent ideologies. First, the Republican Scientific Methodological Center adopted a decision to teach the given subject based on the civic education guide and supporting methodological tools. RSMC has also copyright to publish and disseminate civic education guide, students' workbook and use evaluation system developed jointly with the project team. The second sustainability factor is that teachers participated in the training on teaching discipline on civic education on the basis of the civic education guide. They can use their knowledge not only in teaching this subject, but also training teachers from other vocational schools. Teachers also learnt to use digital platforms to conduct online meetings and trainings. All the topics and new exercises were interesting to them. Teachers have switched to the mentoring model and worked on the «peer-to-peer» principle.

In order to sustain these efforts and results, the following actions need to be undertaken by the state partners:

- Integration of civic competencies in the existing discipline 'Legal basis of professional activity';
- The subject 'Civic education' within the 'Legal basis of professional activity' curriculum should be taught based on the guide produced by the project partners, as agreed with the national authorities, based on the decision of the RSMC;
- In order to maintain the quality and continuous education process in vocational schools, it is necessary to increase the capacity of teachers on digital skills, new technologies for distance learning, and to create infrastructure conditions for distance learning;
- Advanced training courses for teachers of the 'Legal basis of professional activity' curriculum based on the civic education guide would help to integrate the civic education subject completely in all 98 vocational schools;
- It is necessary to establish sustainable partnerships of the primary professional education system with the Association of Legal Clinics of Kyrgyzstan, the Association of Lawyers of Kyrgyzstan and the Public Civic Legal Aid (GGYUP) System to ensure support for teachers in elaborating topics related to human rights, discrimination, crime and offence.



II. Integrating civic education in madrasas

1. Context

In the post-Soviet space, religious education was absent from the general education system for a long period of time. Only after the collapse of the Soviet state, religion and religious education started to revive in the territories of the former Soviet republics. In Kyrgyzstan, religious education developed separately from secular education, and primarily in so-called madrasas, i.e. religious schools for children in school age. Based on this, society began to develop in secular and more religiously oriented ways of life, which led to significant disagreements in societal and political questions.

As the needs assessment conducted in the beginning of the intervention shows, around 39% of surveyed students did not associate with religious tolerance, as they stated that they would not accept representatives of other religions as equals. Furthermore, the youth of madrasas appeared to be less active in politics, as 20% among respondents stated to not be interested in the elections and to think that civic participation was not important (50%). Most girls are discouraged from pursuing secondary education and a professional career, possibly because their families subscribe to patriarchal role divisions. Most respondents (83%) considered human rights and knowledge of the political system (39%) to be important. The most necessary soft skills indicated by students were self-evaluation, problem-solving and interpersonal skills. First attempts to prepare madrasa students for professional life and societal interactions have already

been undertaken. In 2015, secular subjects such as Russian and Kyrgyz languages, Kyrgyz history, and technical skills were introduced into the madrasa curriculum with the support of international donors. According to the director of the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA), 80% of registered madrasas introduced secular subjects and there is a special provision (polozheniye) introducing mandatory secular subjects in madrasas. However, there are diverging accounts of how many secular subjects have in fact been introduced in how many madrasas.

In parallel with the first component, the project aimed to introduce the secular subject 'Civic education' in 11 madrasas across the country. The aim of this activity was to improve the understanding of religious youth about government functions and structure, human rights, existence of legal frameworks, to improve tolerance among youth, and finally, to strengthen the soft skills and critical thinking skills of youth, to thereby enhance their resilience to violent ideologies. The project team collaborated with the Muftiyat (Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan) and the administrations of participating madrasas on the one hand, and with interested students, on the other. Special care was taken to promote the idea of tolerance and to build dialogue which helped to avoid putting the authorities into an antagonist position vis-a-vis religious institutions and societal groups.

2. Overview and results of project activities

The project introduced a civic education model into madrasas that provided young people with context knowledge and critical thinking skills to make them

resilient to manipulative messages. The newly introduced 'Civic education' subject was tailored to the context and included the topics of state structures

and functions, the rule of law, and common values expected to reduce distrust and increase the sense of belonging to society among religious youth. Initially, the project team conducted a needs assessment among 405 students and teachers in the 11 pilot madrasas. Further, a 'Civic education' guide was developed jointly with national partners (including the Muftiyat and State Commission on Religious Affairs) and contained the above-mentioned topics and specifically parts on gender equality and media literacy. The civic education guide was introduced to the administration of madrasas and teachers, who were also trained how to deliver civic education lessons with interactive methods. These lessons were monitored by experts, state partners and the project team, who constantly improved the guide based on feedback from beneficiaries. Later, a students'

workbook was developed which enabled students to study civic education in a more interactive way. During the Covid-19 pandemic, training on civic education was replaced with the production of a series of video lessons. These became the main resource for the teachers of not only pilot madrasas, but also of other madrasas where 'Civic education' subject might be introduced in the future as planned by the Muftiyat and State Commission on Religious Affairs. Developing critical thinking during this course allows madrasa students to become more resistant to extremist ideologies and is therefore a very effective measure for preventing religious radicalism.

Key activities at one glance:



Results of end-line survey and interviews

Similar to the first component, the project intervention had a positive effect on the majority of respondents (101 students and 79 teachers) across all indicators.

The highest values were reported in people's changed attitude on gender equality, women's empowerment, tolerance, respect for diversity and human rights.

81%

indicated that they express and demonstrate support for gender equality and women's empowerment.

76,6%

indicated that they express and demonstrate tolerance, respect for diversity and human rights.

60%

indicated that they have improved their self-awareness.

68%

indicated that their administration and teachers demonstrate support and promote civic competencies.

48,9%

noted that they improved their knowledge of government and social services on.

55,8%

indicated that they have improved their soft skills and value their importance.

Further indication of the positive effect of the project activities is given in the subsequent quotes from qualitative interviews.

One student from a pilot madrasa shared her story about how the interactive teaching skills training conducted for teachers and the administration improved their teaching:

“ Our teachers began to conduct lessons in an unusual format with different games and cards, so the topics became much easier to learn. Thanks to the new subject, we began to express our thoughts openly, without fear of others' opinions or judgment, and to understand the essence of citizenship.”

*Asema, student, Azreti Usman madrasa,
Kyzyl Kiya, Batken province*

One student told how she took inspiration from 'Civic education' lessons to fight for her sister's right to worship after she was forbidden to wear a headscarf in her secondary school:

“ At the Civic education lesson I realized a lot, and most importantly, that a «right» is not transmitted by someone, and a person from the moment of birth has the opportunity to dispose of their rights. Having gained knowledge on Civic Education, I was able to help my little sister solve her problem. The principal of the school where she is studying forbade her to wear a headscarf in class. After discussing this issue with our family, I personally wrote a statement about the violation of her rights and appealed to the relevant law enforcement agencies, from where we soon received a positive result regarding our issue... In accordance with the work done by law enforcement agencies, the school Director, who had banned the wearing of a headscarf, allowed my sister to wear a white headscarf to comply with the school uniform... My sister's and my defense of our right to worship influenced the decision of many students around my sister. I'm sure that our students and teachers of the madrasa got good knowledge which will be useful to us always.”

*Tanzilla, student, Azreti Usman madrasa,
Kyzyl Kiya, Batken province*

This quote from a history teacher shows how the project positively affected the engagement of students of pilot madrasa to improve the level of demonstration of the civil position in society:

“ Both boys and girls study in our madrasa. This project has had a very positive impact on our students. They became more relaxed and became more actively involved in various events and projects taking place in our city. After studying Civic education, students began to better understand the structure of the state and feel like citizens of their country. They began to show more love for their homeland and to participate more actively in the social and civic life of the country.”

*Osmon, history teacher, Ali Ibn abi Tolib madrasa,
Talas, Talas province*

3. Difficulties and solution strategies

In general, the project was difficult and time-consuming due to the fact that the subject «Civic education» was not previously taught in the madrasas. This foregrounded a number of challenges that are discussed in turn.

Problem #1 There is a lack of competent experts in Kyrgyzstan who understand both religion, law, and gender issues at the same time. This impeded the project implementation, since it was necessary to build such a capacity among relevant partners before integrating civic education in the madrasas. This issue also revealed that there are no relevant joint platforms and gaps in the understandings of these issues on part of the national partners.

Solution #1

First, the project team took a top level collaboration approach to ensure support and correct tailoring of the guide and measures. Religious leaders from the main office of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (Russian acronym: DUMK), namely, the head of the Department in charge of mosques and madrasas, and the head of the Fatwa Department and other experts participated in the meetings and trainings on gender equality, rule of law, and religion. Second, separate meetings took place in order to introduce civic education in madrasas, promote it in the policy of the DUMK structure, report it to the Ulema Council⁹, and enable them to engage in joint project activities with experts. On the other hand, separate meetings took place with experts on religious issues. The head of the analytical Department of the State Commission on Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic provided great assistance. The SCRA served as a platform to bring together the SCRA and expert theologians and secular experts for discussing the project.

Problem #2

Another difficulty was that the competent experts on Kyrgyzstan are mainly Russian-speaking, while DUMK staff are mainly Kyrgyz-speakers, so that a lot of resources and time were spent on translations and various explanations. This created a high workload as each topic for the textbook on civic education guide was supposed to immediately pass a triple examination through the prism of Islam, gender and human rights, which multiplied the workload in translation and negotiation.

Solution #2

To structure the process in the least time-intensive way, at first, separate discussions with the State Agency were organized. Thereafter, separate meetings took place with Muftiyat members and separate work was done with experts on gender and human rights. After these preparations, all experts gathered together to develop concepts and later the guide on civic education. UNFPA organized regular meetings for more than six months, where everyone and each topic of the CE guide was discussed taking into account every opinion. Therefore, work on the guide on civic education was still slow and intense, but the process was structured in a way to find a common denominator among different viewpoints in the most efficient way. In this sense, the solution to dealing with the workload of negotiation and exchange was to arrange for enough time to accommodate the positions of all actors involved.

Problem #3

Many madrasa teachers were remote from the topics of civic education and did not fully understand, for example, the meaning and importance of human rights. One trainer working with madrasa teachers explained the difficulties faced in this work:

“Teachers in madrasas did not welcome and accept us easily as we were wearing secular clothes. Women in madrasas refused to talk about men, about critical thinking, cultural diversity and tolerance in religious communities. They think these topics are part of Western ideology and are not related to them and do not fit their mentality. However, at the end we could achieve the aim of our project. The topic of civic engagement and participation in political and community life was really hard to explain to them, because they thought that and are still thinking that religion is separated from state. They perceived it totally differently.”

⁹ The highest Muslim clerical body in the country, which was created in 1998. The underlying idea is to unite all Muslims of the republic into a single community so that no group would remain outside the structure of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (DUMK) and Provisions of the State Agency on Religious Affairs under the Government of the KR in developing and implementing state policy in the religious sphere.

Solution #3 As in other cases, the way to overcome skepticism and reluctance on part of teachers was to work with intermediaries who could connect better with the target group. The trainer quoted above further explained how one implementing colleague from a faith-based organization helped them to overcome initial difficulties, as she acted as “a bridge between us and our target groups. She was always running and building relationships and prepared the field for us so that we could enter it.” That way, it was possible to train the teachers the necessary basics in teaching civic education classes. The guide was revised, taking into account the needs of the teachers and thus demonstrating that their opinion also mattered.

Problem #4 The active participation of religious women in civic education classes was low. Many religious leaders and employees of madrasas did not participate in events to share the results of the project. It was because they were shy, had no public speaking skills, but also because their husbands did not allow them to participate¹⁰. This presented a challenge, as active participation of the target group is a precondition of successful project implementation.

Solution #4 A first part of solving this problem was that representatives of the Muftiyat helped to talk to the husbands of participants. Secondly, the project team, comprising female staff members, met and talked to the mother-in-laws of the participant girls and women. As a result of such personal meetings, it was possible to encourage and convince girls and women to become involved. Thirdly, a series of TV meetings and online meetings with successful women religious leaders were organized. These meetings were devoted to motivating women not only to practice religion, but also to focus on education to promote civic activism. All these efforts contributed to involving women and girls from madrasas in the project activities.

Additional lessons learned:

- Flexibility in building partnership relationships with state partners is very important, especially if it is related to sensitive issues. UNFPA had trustful relations to partners and a long-standing cooperation with the SCRA and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (DUMK), even though DUMK cooperates with donor organizations rather rarely;
- A series of meetings to identify real needs and entry points for cooperation is the best starting point. Initial separate meetings on the subject with each stakeholder served to carve out a certain vision of the project’s benefits and “buy in” on their part. As a result of this approach, each stakeholder shared a desire to introduce the ‘Civic education’ subject in madrasas;
- Conducting joint research among madrasas helped to increase ownership and understanding of the significance of civic education. Initially, there were conflicting opinions about its introduction, but based on the research results, everyone came to a shared understanding, which also resulted in the

¹⁰ See Samara Papiieva and Philipp Lottholz, “Engaging Women Religious Leaders in PVE Work in Kyrgyzstan. Reflections and Good Practices”, UNFPA Eastern Europe & Central Asia, 2019, for further description of such problems.

development of the learning guide. The survey made it possible to see the needs of madrasas and gaps in their work. It also helped to strengthen interaction with partners, as everyone had a complete picture of what was happening.

4. Sustainability and recommendations

- The project produced three products, while integrating civic education in madrasas. The first product is the Civic education guide in Russian and Kyrgyz, which can be used not only from the point of view of the Islamic religion, but also by other religions with their own amendments in the theological content. The second product is a workbook for madrasa students, and the third, most significant one is a video course with thirteen lessons, where religious leaders talk about civic education and address topics such as secularism, religious freedom, and legal frameworks. The SCRA is very interested in extending Civic education nation-wide and are looking for funding to introduce this subject to all madrasas, Islamic institutes and the Islamic university;
- To sustain the project results and scale up its positive impacts, the following measures are the most important ones:
 1. The Civic education subject should be introduced and integrated into the “Concept of State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere” for the period 2021-2026;
 2. The Civic education guide, workbook, video courses and mobile application should be integrated into the curriculum in the remaining 96 madrasas, 10 Islamic institutes and the Islamic University.



III. Promoting
partnership
among religious
leaders and other
stakeholders

1. Context

As was mentioned earlier, the project aims to build community resilience to violent and manipulative ideologies, including those exploiting faith, through the means of education, empowerment and dialogue. According to the project’s logic of change, the key to realising this aim is to create a situation where “Women and men, boys and girls in target communities take a more critical stance on ideologies instigating violence and have a better sense of

belonging to their communities and participate in local development and dialogues over PVE”. This part of the report focuses on activities on community-level religious leaders’ and civic activists’ participation in local development and dialogue. These groups were expected to promote the idea of tolerance and gender equality and to involve other community members in dialogue and cooperation through local initiatives.

2. Overview of project activities

11 target municipalities were selected based on such criteria as representativeness of each province, existing issues of radicalization and extremism, willingness of the local government to take part in the project and a minimum size of 3,000 residents. The selection process showed that some communities had issues with activities of forbidden extremist groups, isolation of women from communal life, early marriage, reluctance of communities’ cooperation with police, and lack of cooperation of local government with religious groups, even though most communities’ representatives stated that they actively collaborated with the local government. The religious leaders included both male and female leaders. Civic activists included representatives of the youth and women committees, courts of elders, NGO workers and other community members.

- Civil society activists and religious leaders were trained in the basics of conducting

preventive activities based on the principles of civic responsibility and tolerance. Trainings were conducted in partnership with the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA), the Service for countering extremism and illegal migration (SPENM) under the Ministry of internal Affairs (MIA) of the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (DUMK);

- Target groups were given the opportunity to conduct awareness-raising activities, such as [two three examples] in the communities on the problems of radicalization, problems of spreading ideas of violence among the population;
- Religious leaders and activists developed joint initiatives aimed at engaging various community residents in public dialogue. The initiatives were carried out with the participation of invited specialists from relevant state bodies.



33 initiative groups across the country were involved in the project activity.



More than **150 direct beneficiaries** and **5,000 ultimate beneficiaries**.



A mobile group on early marriages and security consisting of civic activists, religious leaders, LSG, police, social protection staff.

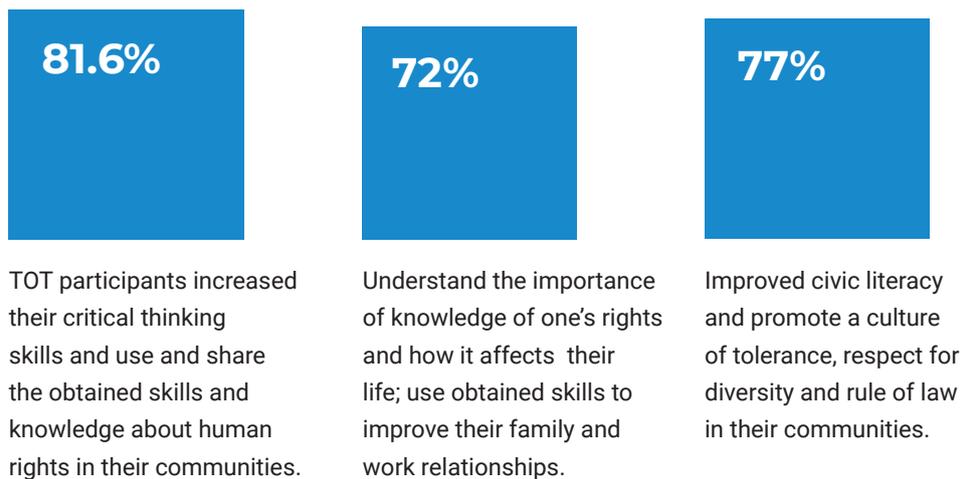


Over **8-online lectures** and training courses.



Results of end-line survey and interviews

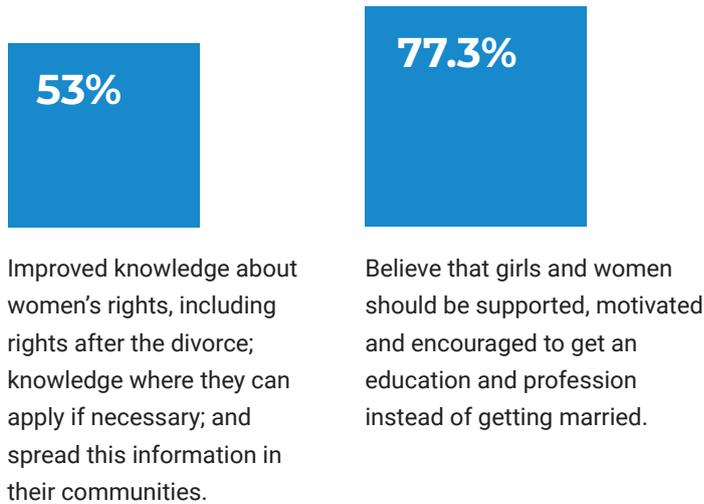
General values and tolerance



Cooperation and conflict resolution



Girls and women's rights



Umida, a mother of two children and Arabic teacher at a madrasa in Jalal-Abad region, how participating in the trainings organized for local actors changed her life:

“ I began to separate true information from false and tell people that the news should be checked or it should not be believed. Many people say that a woman should stay at home, not talk much, not get an education, but in Islam and under the Constitution, women and men are equal. Everyone has the right to express their opinion and if everyone understood this, life in families and at work would be better. You should never be afraid to express your opinion, even if you are sitting at home, you should get an education. If a woman is educated, she will find her place in life. I want all women to get an education and move forward. You can never stop, because life goes on.”

Umida, Arab language teacher, Bibi Rabiya madrasa, Suzak, Jalalabad province

Daniyarbek has been serving as an Imam for the sixth year – five of them he worked in a local mosque, and the last year he has served as the chief Imam for all mosques of the Amir Timur district in Osh. He also attended trainings:

“ I tell everyone to teach children at universities, not only boys, but also girls. So that they don't take girls out of school after the 9th grade and make them stay at home. We in the village need doctors, gynecologists, teachers, people need to learn. Every citizen of Kyrgyzstan, whether he is a Muslim, Imam or someone else, must comply with the laws of the country. And Imams need to know not only religion, but also learn other things. You need to be versatile. I tell this to my wards, friends, and Imams of other mosques.”

Daniyarbek, Chief Imam of Amir-Timur Public Council of Mosques, Osh city

“ I thought that since people live for so many years, they should know such things. But, it turns out, no, they don't. It turns out that you need to tell people. Thanks to the project, we have enlightened ourselves and informed others. I was so amazed at the strength and leadership that women can be when they come together. Women do big things: they join local councils, solve problems, help women find jobs, and help divorced people with documentation. I didn't expect this from us. It turns out that women are very strong in explanatory work, in the organization.”

*Rahatay, head of “Mothers' School”,
Yusupov village, Osh province*

Nursalkyn Ozubekova is an activist from the Kelechek housing estate on the outskirts of Bishkek, who previously dealt with housing issues and was the first to organize garbage collection in her community. Now Nursalkyn directs and works as a teacher in the kindergarten «Boboktay», which is attended by 25 children, many of whom live on benefits. She took part at trainings which changed her mind and worldview:

“ For example, I did not like or accept Kyrgyz people who adopted another religion instead of Islam, such as Jehovah's witnesses. After training, I thought about it and realized that everyone has their own path and choice, which I should not oppose. We must be aware, then our country will develop and grow.”

These principles she uses in her work in kindergarten «Boboktay» and teaches children to find common language, accepting each other's differences and being confident in themselves. According to Nursalkyn, the children in her kindergarten are kids of domestic migrants from the regions and are often afraid to say their opinion. At Boboktai, she organized a “School for mothers”, where she tells parents about the diversity of children, respect for them, and trusting relationships:

“ It is very difficult for parents, they themselves grew up in a family with a violent upbringing. I tell them that now we already witness another generation and the old methods can not be used. When I have new information about family relationships, parenting, and understanding, I send them to parents.”

3. Difficulties and solution strategies

In general, the project was difficult and time-consuming due to the fact that the subject «Civic education» was not previously taught in the madrasas. This foregrounded a number of challenges that are discussed in turn.

Problem #1 Involving religious leaders from minority groups to the project was difficult. They were skeptical about the project and saw a risk that something might go wrong and lead to misunderstanding of religious leaders with both the Kaziyat (local-level religious institution) and police.

Solution #1 First, the project coordinators invited religious leaders to the Office of the Kazyiat, where they presented information about project activities and trainings. It was also mentioned that imams will work together with the Kazyiat and police as one team. This way, it was possible to soften this difficulty and increase participation of religious leaders to the project. Another step was to involve religious figures, whom local imams trust. Those people were prominent religious leaders, teachers and representatives of Khattibiyat (representative of Muftiyat in rayon level). The project team realized that there is an internal procedure or hierarchy to follow. These leaders were contacted and briefed about the project. Thus, the leaders could help with mobilizing local imams.

Problem #2 Relations among religious leaders, police, local government and teachers were characterized by skepticism and reservations vis-a-vis each other. During the project, while working with different stakeholders, different actors interacted in reluctant ways or avoided cooperation in the first place.

Solution #2 First, the project enabled and supported the conducting joint meetings on common issues. For example, in Jalal-Abad school teachers and religious leaders jointly discussed about students' skipping classes during Friday prayers. A helpful element in such meetings was the invitation of experts to speak on the respective topics, such as representatives of local administrations, of medical institutions, social services, educational structures or from law enforcement agencies, among others. Getting an in-depth perspective on the discussed problems and different viewpoints improved mutual understanding and trust.

Second, different stakeholders jointly worked on certain issues. When representatives of local government worked with imams, they learned that only certified imams read the *nike* to marry couples according to Islamic law and report these activities to religious authorities like the *kazyiat*. After learning this, the local government started to cooperate with the *kazyiat* and imams on preventing early marriage.

Third, the project team established non-formal relationships between religious leaders and the police. Their initial mutual skepticism decreased due to the above-mentioned formal relations, cooperation, but also thanks to informal activities, such as playing soccer and volley-ball and organizing joint dinners. This way, both formal and informal relations improved mutual understanding, trust, openness to cooperate among religious leaders and other local actors. By designing and implementing community level initiatives on gender equality, child marriage, girls' education, and tolerance, the involved parties built up and strengthened their partnership and disseminated the knowledge and information gained during the project in their respective institutions and networks.

Problem #3 There was a lack of willingness to conduct joint meetings of male and female religious leaders within the project was well understood.

Solution #3

A first and key solution to this challenge was the organization of exchange visits to religious leaders in other communities. These helped women religious leaders to improve their motivation to exercise their leadership skills, organize joint sports practice, or open a business. Such activation and motivation also led to improved collaboration between female and male religious leaders.

A second approach was to invite both female and male religious leaders to events, e.g. round-tables, in the local administration to discuss common issues faced by the respective community. For example, in Kara-Suu women religious leaders suggested conducting a training on legal mechanisms in PVE for women to raise their awareness on prohibited movements.

The third solution strategy was to strengthen women religious leaders; partnership with local government and other actors through their charity activities. These are often traditionally undertaken but not recognized by the wider community, so dialogue and coordination was helpful in pointing out women religious leaders' positive contribution to communities and the interests they had in common with local government and other actors.

Fourth and finally, the Covid-19-related restrictions help to make some interactions in fact more accessible to women. Online meetings and events were organized in a flexible manner, considering the schedule of religious women. Most of the project activities were held in the evening, when women were free from household chores, or could use the communication devices of family members.

Additional lessons learned:

- Increasing critical thinking skills and media literacy allowed civil activists and religious leaders to express their opinions and enter into constructive discussions calling for tolerance;
- Organized by WhatsApp groups, Zoom has become an effective platform for exchanging information for project participants. Separate WhatsApp groups were created among religious leaders and civic activists and main trainings were delivered through these groups, since most participants could only use WhatsApp. The trainings included sessions on tolerance, forbidden extremist groups and critical thinking skills;
- Working in the online mode due to the pandemic was difficult, since both staff and beneficiaries were not ready for it. It resulted in lowering the coverage of the events planned by the initiative groups, since beneficiaries, especially religious leaders, had not enough skills in using new means of communication. Furthermore, internet coverage can be very weak in rural locations across the country and thus restrict access and participation in project activities.

4. Sustainability and recommendations

The following features and outcomes of the project work point to the sustainable impact it had on the participating communities:

- In each community, the project team worked with a specific group of people from the beginning to the end of the project. All members of these initiative groups were community residents, who can build on the experience gained in implementing prevention plans and solving problems in their future activity;
- In the Territorial Administration Kurmanbek, Jalal-Abad province, a mobile group for the prevention of early marriages was organized. This demonstrates the readiness of residents to create structures according to the needs of their community, which were accommodated in a needs-based project framework;
- A group working on community security was set up to work on preventing radicalization in the city of Kyzyl-Kiya, Batken province after the project was completed. The security team includes civil society activists, religious leaders, representatives of local government, government agencies, and law enforcement agencies.

In order to sustain these efforts and other results, the following actions need to be undertaken by the state partners:

Local administrations can best ensure sustainability by:

- continuing the project's experience and involving trained project participants, including religious leaders and civil society activists, to carry out systematic work on the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism;
- increasing the capacity of local government employees and supporting religious leaders in building community peace and security, upholding human rights and religious tolerance, and identifying as well as preventing risks of radicalization;
- involving (female and male) religious leaders trained in the project framework in the activities of different community-based organizations, such as Local Crime Prevention Centers, women's councils, mobile groups, self-help groups, volunteer groups, among others;
- creating as many discussion platforms as possible for women in the community.

Law enforcement agencies can best contribute to the project's sustainability by:

- establishing close cooperation with religious leaders, conducting regular joint educational trainings and joint activities in communities to prevent radicalism;
- involving women religious leaders trained under the project in the prevention of radicalization among the female population.

Conclusion

Kyrgyzstan comprises a diverse people with different religions, ethnicities, and sets of values, while each citizen of the country has the right to be equally respected. A lack of awareness of human rights, governance frameworks, citizen duties, as well as insufficient critical thinking and media literacy skills will lead to a limited understanding among people and increase their susceptibility to violent ideologies and radicalization. The civic education course piloted in the vocational schools and madrasas was developed on the basis of the needs of students and teachers and comprised additional topics on tolerance, discrimination, gender equality, governance and human rights, which helped to increase their soft skills and trust in government. UNFPA's and its partners' work at the community level strived to create a partnership among different stakeholders, including female and male religious leaders, the police, civic activists and local government in order to improve their capacities in peacebuilding and cooperation in general.

The main lessons learned from this work are the following:

- **A participatory approach to project**

implementation enables to form a shared understanding, ownership and sustainability. The partners involved in the project conducted joint research that generated evidence, which led to a shared understanding of the importance of civic education in vocational schools and madrasas. This understanding enabled partners to carry out further relevant work.

- When making changes or additions in vertically integrated institutions like vocational schools or madrasas, it is necessary to sustain a regular **dialogue with national partners** in order to discuss

positions and interests of each stakeholder and come to a shared understanding of what is to be done and how it is to be done. Without such dialogue, the measures designed in the project and their implementation are unlikely to be effective.

- An **effective feedback system** allows to develop suitable products and educational materials based on the needs of various stakeholders. The project used such a system during the whole implementation phase, starting from identifying the needs of students, teachers and communities; piloting the civic education guides in both vocational schools and madrasas; and monitoring and collecting feedback through pre- and post-tests. This allowed the team to develop, constantly improve and finalize educational materials on civic education.

- The **facilitation of local non-formal platforms of dialogue among religious leaders, government and police** served to strengthen their mutual understanding and cooperation. For example, in Jalal-Abad religious leaders and the police play soccer and organize dinner in chaikhans (tea houses), while in Osh they play volley-ball. This led to better understanding among police and religious leaders, easing the skeptical relations, stereotypes and communication barriers inhibiting their cooperation before.

- **Exchange visits between local-level activists** are an important source of motivation and inspiration. For instance, when a female religious leader sees other successful female religious leaders, it can motivate her to cooperate among each other and with the local government, express their concerns freely and improve their self-confidence. The importance of such visits has already been pointed

out in earlier works of UNFPA and Saferworld, but it is worth stressing their importance again in light of the project experience.

In order to sustain the achieved results, it is crucial for the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (DUMK), State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA) and the Republican Scientific and Methodological Center (RMSC) under the Ministry of Education to continue integrating the civic education guide in the remaining vocational schools and madrasas based on their internal decisions. In addition, the Ministry of Interior and GAMSUMO (State Agency on Local Self-Governance and Inter-Ethnic Relations) should establish both formal and non-formal relations with religious leaders as showcased in the project, because this will improve mutual trust and cooperation in preventing radicalization and promote tolerance at the community level.

Notwithstanding the positive experiences and lessons learned, the present publication is also limited in a number of aspects which warrant brief reflection. First, as stated initially, the project this report is based on, “Communities resilient to violent ideology”, comprised three large components involving different UN agencies and partners. The current publication covered only one part of the project, which focused on the three areas of civic education in vocational schools and madrasas, respectively, as well as on promoting partnership at the local level. Relatedly, this report only reflects lessons learned based on the work in 11 municipalities, 8 vocational schools and 11 madrasas. Working with a larger number of such institutions and communities might yield different findings or require different approaches and practices, which lie beyond the scope of the report.

Second and relatedly, this report is based on the insights of the project team, opinions of implementing partners, as well as internal reports, such as needs assessment, pre- and post-tests, stories of the

project participants and interviews with some national partners. Whether the findings of the report represent the whole range of experiences, or if there are different points of view and experiences is subject to further in-depth research and continuous cooperation of the project stakeholders.

Overall then, it can be concluded that the project made a positive impact in the participating education institutions and communities as well as among the various stakeholders it aimed to bring together for sustainable cooperation. The decisive ingredients of successful project implementation identified in this report – namely, a participatory approach, regular national-level dialogue, local-level informal dialogue and exchange visits and an effective feedback system – will be of great value in carrying out further work to strengthen resilience to violent ideologies in Kyrgyzstan and beyond.

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