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Changing minds and attitudes: cross-sectoral working groups in Tajikistan



Project participants prioritise community security issues in Isfara. ©Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. In Tajikistan, Saferworld works with partner civil society organisations Association of Scientific and Technical Intelligentsia of Tajikistan (ASTI), Zarshedabonu, Marifatnoki, and Lawyer Association of Pamir (LAP) to facilitate and build partnerships between communities and relevant actors at different levels. We provide capacity building opportunities and address different community security concerns and grievances through community action plans and outreach.

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What is a cross-sectoral working group and why is it important?

‘Cross-sectoral working groups’ (previously called ‘inter-governmental working groups’, which were originally set up to conduct outreach on countering the influence of violent groups) are groups made up of representatives of different government agencies and civil society, as well as local activists and youth, who come together as a single organised body to collaborate on community security issues. Saferworld works with cross-sectoral working groups (CWGs) in five regions of Tajikistan: Isfara, Kushoniyon, Nurobod, Vanj and Hamadoni – with each choosing a priority community security problem specific to the local context. Initially, the intergovernmental working group worked solely on issues around violent extremism. After engagement with Saferworld, including learning about community security approaches and with new members of society joining the groups, there was a gradual shift in the work of the CWG. Groups moved from working with the perceived problem of extremism to looking at the underlying drivers of insecurity in communities. Examples of these issues include: corruption, domestic violence, poor cooperation between communities and authorities, and issues with the delivery of the rule of law.

With the Citizen Narrative Campaign project, Saferworld aims to increase understanding of the underlying drivers of insecurity and violence, including those that contribute to recruitment into or support for violent groups, and address these causes through CWGs. We also carry out outreach and strategic messaging campaigns and dialogue with the aim of changing the attitudes and behaviours of communities to be more conducive to peacebuilding and cooperation.

Changing minds and building understanding and tolerance in the government, civil society and communities is not always an easy process, because it means addressing ingrained beliefs and perceptions of highly sensitive issues. Despite these challenges, there have been encouraging shifts because of the work of the CWGs. Some of these changes are highlighted here.

From violence to baking: support for women facing abuse

In Isfara, women are often seen to play only a domestic role as housewife, making women fully dependent on their husbands both psychologically and financially. This position of dependence can often lead to violence in the family when tensions arise. Because of their over-reliance on their husbands most women have no other choice but to tolerate these conditions, further entrenching violence against women as a social norm.

An outreach campaign, as part of Saferworld's project, aimed to address the issue of domestic violence by raising awareness of gender stereotypes, helping women understand their legal rights, promoting gender equality and advocating for respect in the family. Several stories have emerged from the project as a result.

Following awareness raising meetings in Navgilem, a woman approached a CWG member and asked for support in addressing violence within her family. During their discussion, the CWG member responded by telling the woman about some of the drivers of the violence in families, and they discussed socio-economic issues and health problems of the husband. They also discussed how the woman has one son and a husband who is an alcoholic, who often commits violence after drinking. She said that with her three children she had no other place to go or ways to earn money, so had no other choice but to live in violence.

As a first step, the CWG member connected the woman with a specialist who could provide psychological consultation. Second, after several consultations with the specialist, the CWG found a free vocational school that taught different classes, including baking. With the support of the CWG members the woman enrolled in the baking class to gain more skills that would help her earn money. They also mobilised small funds to buy some initial baking ingredients so she could bake and sell her bread. The new job not only helped her to become financially independent but also to become an active person in her community, advising her neighbours who were in similar situations to also seek help. "The guidance [from the CWG] has given me hope again," said the woman. The chairperson of the women's committee in Isfara district Ms Shahlo Abdumanonova, also noted a change: the focus had shifted, she said, from just awareness raising meetings to also encompass collective action on individual cases – engaging a range of groups and people to make change happen.



Women selling bread in the central bazar of Isfara. ©Saferworld

Cross-sectoral working groups as spaces for collaboration

The collaborative spaces of the CWGs have in turn led to other connections, especially with major stakeholders in the community who can mobilise community resources. The best example was in Nurobod district, where plans were made to create a sports field in the village of Kabutiyon, Safedchashma jamoat (municipality) as part of the outreach campaign. The village head, Kudratsho Majidov, was able to get in-kind donations of construction materials from local entrepreneurs, and volunteer labour from up to one hundred young residents, in addition to the government's in-kind contribution of construction equipment. The success of these efforts expanded the scope of the construction beyond what was originally planned by the CWG. Motivated by its success, a young CWG member named Eshanjon mobilised resources in his own community of Komsomolobod for a second sports field, which was completed using the same approach.

Religious leaders: you yourself can change when you work in an inclusive environment

Religion is a contentious issue in Tajikistan, so the inclusion and participation of religious leaders in the CWGs is considered a success for ensuring inclusive peacebuilding efforts. In Saferworld's work, an interesting finding was presented by religious leaders themselves. In one case in Kushoniyon District, they expressed their previous reticence to engage with intergovernmental and civil society groups because they feared being seen as a target for securitisation.

Senior imam Khatib of Kushoniyon District, Isroil Kalandarov, began to overcome his hesitation and became an active member motivated by the positive role he could play in addressing community security issues. Mr Kalandarov explained how his and his colleague's participation in the CWG had made them feel more comfortable working with security forces, government and civil society: "Before, we were not very open with the police," he said. "In fact we were very closed. We didn't want to talk to them. And usually when people saw me, on the street for example, they would be very polite, but they would stay away. Now, I feel more approachable, and more approached." Additionally, Mr Kalandarov learnt about some issues around gender, especially relating to women's security concerns, because of his participation in the group. He said he is more willing to engage publicly with women as a result.

CWG in Kushoniyon working on the development of the outreach campaign activities. ©Saferworld



Moving away from one-way communications to a more interactive approach

CWG members said they had absorbed and largely adopted the interactive communications approach of outreach, emphasising that this was a significant change from the previous, one-way style of communication – which they described as a 'monologue'.

This shift has proven to have a high impact. When describing the change in their approach during outreach events, representatives from different government agencies of the CWGs in all five districts excitedly related the change they had seen in the response from community members. As these events have become more interactive, participants have become more engaged and have developed better relationships with government officials. Government officials also said they had taken on this approach for public engagements, and used the opportunity to raise awareness about community security issues and about the CWG. Although each CWG has conducted between eight and twelve specific community outreach events as part of the campaign, members emphasised that they reached a much larger audience – with events across all districts likely numbering in the hundreds – and potentially reaching tens of thousands. "From January to April, we conducted 12 outreach events – two meetings per jamoat," said Rustam Shekhzoda, the Vanj Deputy District Head and CWG leader. "But now when I or others go out for our other responsibilities, we are using these new communication approaches as well. So to measure the size of the impact we could easily say we have conducted more than 50 events."

The first outcome harvesting workshop with participation of the CWG members of Vanj district. ©Saferworld



Plaques and billboards for positive change

The CWG in Hamadoni District chose to focus on public corruption, and employed a number of public messaging platforms including billboards, banners, brochures and theatrical performances to tackle the issue.

This included plaques in public offices and community municipalities, with the message “a person with dignity avoids taking bribes and is not corrupted”. Posters also shared the official prices for government services, where corruption is considered to be rampant. The District Head and Deputy District Head provided their support in this outreach campaign. Analysis showed that ingrained attitudes reinforce the payment of bribes in response to requests to pay, but that the law punishes equally those who bribe and those who receive bribes. One method of tackling the issue was helping citizens have the confidence to refuse payment. Given the unique approach and the openness of the discussions, the CWG’s campaign received widespread attention from other groups, including the media. The local station, Channel 1, produced a news story about one of the group’s roundtable events on corruption, attended by officials from the government and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The national channel Safina TV also produced a short clip on a play put on by students at the Hyatt Regency hotel in Dushanbe on this issue.



Public awareness campaign in Hamadoni. ©Saferworld

ABOUT US

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

For further information on our work in Tajikistan, please visit www.saferworld.org.uk/tajikistan or email us at general@saferworld.org.uk

You can keep up to date with our work by signing up for email alerts at www.saferworld.org.uk/stay-informed You can also follow us on Twitter (@Saferworld) or like our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/Saferworld).

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