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# Young people's voices on peace and security in Kyrgyzstan

**Young people have a crucial role to play in building peace, but are often overlooked by decision makers. In Kyrgyzstan, many young women and men feel they are excluded from discussions on peace and security, and that their views are ignored. In 2018, Saferworld organised a participatory workshop to ask young women and men from southern Kyrgyzstan about the problems they face and hear their ideas for how to overcome them. The aim of this briefing is to bring their analysis and recommendations to the fore.**

In much of the world, young people make up a large proportion of the population. Yet their views are often sidelined, and they are labelled part of the problem rather than part of the solution. This ignores their enormous potential to bring about positive change in their communities, and instead alienates them and ignores any solutions they might have for improving peace and security.

Young people in Kyrgyzstan have a lot to say about the problems that they and their communities face. From tackling issues around education, ethnicity and religion to politics and gender, they want to have a say in building a safer and more peaceful society for future generations.

There is growing understanding that young women and men – who are aged between 14 and 28 according to Kyrgyzstani law and who make up about 30 per cent of the population in Kyrgyzstan<sup>1</sup> – have unique experiences of conflict and views on how to address not only so-called ‘youth problems’, but also broader issues that affect all of society. As such, they have a crucial role to play in building peace and should be supported and included in discussions related to peace and security.<sup>2</sup>

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Authorities in Kyrgyzstan have also begun to acknowledge the unique role of young people, at least in theory. On the back of the 2013–2017 National Sustainable Development Strategy, the government adopted a 'Development of Youth Policy for 2017–2020 Programme' that highlights the important role young people can play in tackling security and development challenges, and the need for the state and society to help them realise their potential.<sup>3</sup> However, despite this important recognition, the young people we spoke to often feel they lack a voice and are not always able to effect constructive change in their communities. Some, especially young women, fear their thoughts and ideas will be ignored or that speaking out will have negative repercussions for them and their peers.

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This concern is understandable. Globally, there is still a tendency to ignore young people's agency and to place them in simplistic and gendered categories: young men are seen as perpetrators of violence, while young women are passive, invisible victims. Young people's experiences of violence, injustice and exclusion are often ignored and their legitimate grievances dismissed or belittled by those responsible for supporting and protecting them. Not only does this affect their well-being, but can reinforce feelings of victimhood, powerlessness and purposelessness, and limits their potential to contribute to positive change in their communities.<sup>4</sup>

When leaders fail to recognise the complexity of young people's experiences and their abilities to enrich and progress society, there is a risk that everyone loses out on learning about their problems and misses crucial opportunities to address them.



Kyrgyz and Uzbek girls celebrate winning a volleyball tournament.

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# Methodology



School children watch performances on bullying and racketeering.

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This briefing draws on our work to elevate young women and men's voices, build their confidence to use them, and support them to show decision makers what could be gained by working with young people to contribute to sustainable peace and development in Kyrgyzstan. The briefing is based on a research methodology that brings analysis from young Kyrgyzstanis to the fore.

We made a conscious decision to focus on broader issues connected to young people's experiences of peace and security, regardless of what may be seen as pressing domestic and external national security objectives. This was to ensure that one issue in particular – the risk of 'violent extremism' – did not dominate the agenda and limit the overall focus of the forum.

This decision is informed by Saferworld's recent paper on the 'countering/preventing violent extremism' (C/PVE) agenda in Kyrgyzstan – which found that the threat of 'violent extremism' is inflated<sup>5</sup> – as well as the findings of the 2018 progress study commissioned by the United Nations (UN) Security Council, 'The missing peace: independent progress study on youth, peace and security'. This comprehensive review of the experiences, efforts and undertakings of young people working on peace and security pushes back on approaches that deal with 'young women and men on the implicit assumption that they are all at risk of joining violent extremist groups', citing evidence that some governments use the spectre of violent extremism to 'narrow or shut down the availability of civic spaces for dissenting youth voices; disregard human rights; and arrest, jail, and even target and attack youth'.<sup>6</sup>

As such, rather than pre-determining the issues to focus on and how they are framed, this research began and ended by asking young people about the problems they face and how they would like to address them. We did this in two phases. Saferworld and the Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI) organised a three-day youth forum in Osh in September 2018. The forum brought together 60 young women and men from Osh, Batken and Jalal-Abad provinces (*oblasts*). They were from Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik communities, between 14 and 19 years old, and were in high school or attending vocational courses. Many of these young people were deemed 'vulnerable' – meaning, for example, that they live in poverty, lack parental care because they are orphans

or have parents who are divorced or work abroad as economic migrants, or have struggled with family problems. They were selected by FTI in coordination with school administrators and were accompanied by their teachers. To ensure that participants felt safe expressing their thoughts and concerns, groups were divided by location and gender.

The forum had three parts. Starting with a visual 'problem mapping' exercise, participants drew maps of typical communities in their regions and signified places where they felt afraid or insecure, excluded or humiliated. In the second part, they analysed these problems further, mapping their causes and drivers as well as those responsible for driving and addressing them. After, the forum looked at ways to resolve these issues. Following a training session on how to translate these ideas and initiatives into effective and targeted advocacy, participants worked together to agree on strategies and identify the means and resources they could use to achieve their desired change.

The forum was followed by 24 key informant interviews conducted by FTI in December 2018 and January 2019 with 10 youth activists from Osh, Batken and Jalal-Abad and 14 participants from the original forum. These interviews looked into the roles that young people can play in resolving problems, the avenues that are available to them and what obstacles they face when trying to resolve them. The interviews with forum participants also gauged whether they had used, or were planning to use, any of the skills they learnt, and what sort of follow-up they would like to see for the trainings.

This report does not claim to represent the views of all young men and women in Kyrgyzstan, but it does aim to amplify the voices of some who often go unheard and feel excluded by their communities and authorities. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, we have left their quotes unattributed throughout the briefing. In addition, to reflect and contribute to ongoing discussions in Kyrgyzstan around the meaningful participation and representation of young people in decision-making, we conducted a literature review and referenced sources where appropriate.

# The problems faced by young people

Held back by poor education, limited social opportunities and mass unemployment,<sup>7</sup> young women and men in Kyrgyzstan face economic insecurity and exclusion and often feel they have been let down by society.<sup>8</sup> In rural and poorer communities especially,<sup>9</sup> this increases the pressure on young people to work from a young age, particularly in agriculture. Limited employment opportunities push parents abroad to find work, especially to Russia and Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan is one of the most migration-dependent economies in the world, with 13 per cent of its citizens working abroad.<sup>10</sup> As a result, between 11 and 15 per cent of children under the age of 17 have at least one parent living abroad.<sup>11</sup> This has led to what some call an 'invisible generation': children of migrants who are left with relatives who may not be able to care for them, or children who are placed in residential institutions (boarding schools or orphanages), where they are particularly at risk of violence, abuse and neglect.<sup>12</sup>

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Young people also experience high levels of violence in Kyrgyzstan but have limited access to protection and justice services.<sup>13</sup> Recently, violence against children and young people has made the headlines, with 1,473 cases of violence against children and 136 cases of cruel treatment of minors reported in 2018 (although it is likely that many cases are not reported).<sup>14</sup> This led to the government's decree 'On strengthening preventive measures to prevent the facts of violence and abuse of minors', which notably foresaw the creation of a database to identify and support young people left without parental care, as well as the creation of an interdepartmental expert group under the Ministry of Internal Affairs to discuss ways to prevent and respond to violence against children.<sup>15</sup> Young people themselves commit acts of violence, including against each other, leading to cycles of tit-for-tat reprisals. Some participants at the forum, mostly young men, highlighted problems of school bullying and racketeering (crimes involving coercion or extortion to get money or resources). Previous work by Saferworld and Civic Union highlighted that this is widespread and results in insecurity, high levels of violence and decreased school participation, as well as physical and mental health problems.<sup>16</sup> Among other things, school bullying and racketeering are caused by low levels of education, lack of discipline from parents (who may be working abroad), and poor socio-economic conditions of families.<sup>17</sup>

Young women are particularly vulnerable to certain forms of violence and discrimination. Conservative interpretations of traditions and of religion have often posited women as inferior to men, relegating them to specific supporting roles, principally in the domestic sphere. This has led to greater risks of gender-based violence (GBV), including domestic violence, early or arranged marriage and bride kidnapping.<sup>18</sup> It has also limited their access to security or protection, justice, legal rights, education and health services, or has limited their ability to get information on how to access these services.<sup>19</sup> At the youth forum, young women spoke openly about how deeply embedded patriarchal norms contribute to GBV in their communities – but due to the strong social stigma associated with GBV, some chose to speak of other issues during the plenary discussions.

In addition to physical violence, participants acknowledged the existence of dynamics referred to in 'The missing peace' study as 'the violence of exclusion'. This comprises 'a form of structural and psychological violence that is indivisible from their political, social, cultural and economic disempowerment . . . which manifests in both mistrust by young people of state-society relations and in mistrust of young people by their communities and wider society'.<sup>20</sup> Our work to date has highlighted the existence of these conditions – as one youth activist explained, "A problem is the absence of youth representatives among policymakers due to a lack of trust in and communication with governmental bodies. This leads to young people being ill-informed about the activities of the government and vice versa. This gap in turn causes other problems in society".<sup>21</sup>

Participants in the youth forum and the interviews emphasised problems caused by distrust of the very authorities responsible for protecting people and distributing opportunities, power and resources. Young men in particular stressed that they are vulnerable to targeting by security forces, and are largely distrusted by them. Generally, our work has shown that young people in Kyrgyzstan see security and justice providers as detached and corrupt, leading them to avoid contact with the security and justice systems altogether. This reinforces their sense of isolation, injustice and insecurity.<sup>22</sup> At the forum, participants stressed that if allowed to fester, these feelings would further lower the trust of young people in the country's institutions.

# Youth and participation

As highlighted in 'The missing peace' study, most young people link peace and security to feelings of belonging, dignity, well-being and happiness, as well as to living with hope and without fear. They believe that to have these things, societies should address social, political and structural inequalities, as well as drivers of poverty, corruption, inequality and injustice. To this end, they insist that young people be protected from violence and from criminal and violent groups, but also from 'suicide, substance abuse and other forms of self-harm associated with youth alienation'. They want to see relationships of trust emerge among young people, across generations and between young people and authorities.<sup>23</sup>

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The young people from southern Kyrgyzstan with whom we spoke believe that they could and should play a range of roles in building a more peaceful, just and inclusive Kyrgyzstani society. They say their experiences – shaped by the issues they face – place them in a unique position to solve their problems, as well as societal ones. In particular, they recognise their own liability for some of these problems and accept their responsibility in mitigating them. Young women and men who took part in the forum also told us that they should be supported because they are their country's future leaders. In this sense, there was a strong feeling that young people can ensure that present and future generations learn from past conflicts,<sup>24</sup> help support a break with practices that perpetuate conflict, and become role models – providing an alternative vision of leadership and agency.

During the forum, participants said they also need to play a more significant problem-solving role because they cannot count on anyone else – be it their parents, teachers or the authorities – who they feel do not give them enough of a say. A young man from Batken summarised this sentiment: “If we are not interested in solving our problems, then why should we expect the older generation to do that for us?”<sup>25</sup> This was echoed by a young man activist from Osh: “I think that young men and women must take an active part in problem solving; [there's] no need to expect help from the government.”<sup>26</sup>

Young Kyrgyzstanis are already working on ways to address conflicts, mitigate the impact of violence, and promote harmony and well-being in their communities. Peacebuilding work with and by young people includes a range of different approaches, such as educational initiatives, debates,<sup>27</sup> dialogues,<sup>28</sup> and sport and cultural events.<sup>29</sup> These approaches seek to address exclusion, enhance communication and build trust across different segments of society by providing support to disadvantaged youth, and by bringing young people from different communities together with authorities and community members.<sup>30</sup> In a region where border demarcations have led to tensions and conflict, some cross-border initiatives have also promoted cohesion by bringing together young people from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>31</sup>

Most efforts aim to raise awareness of particular issues and strengthen young people's skills to support themselves and their families to become active members of their community and take part in decision-making processes.<sup>32</sup> These initiatives help young people find innovative ways to claim (or reclaim) physical and political spaces where they can share ideas and solutions, connecting with others through sport, art,<sup>33</sup> technology and other mediums.<sup>34</sup>

In parallel to initiatives supported by international and national non-governmental organisations, donors and government agencies, young people in Kyrgyzstan also initiate and fund their own activities. We were told of small, youth-led initiatives in support of women and people with disabilities in their communities, and of efforts by a group of young people from Batken to pool their earnings to support projects in their community, such as the building of new kindergartens. Elsewhere, young people from different municipalities have been jointly organising sport and cultural events to unite youth from different ethnic groups – with the groups taking turns hosting the events in their communities.

Some young people are also involved in local politics. They join youth committees, take part in sessions of the local council (such as budget hearings), engage with local parliamentarians, and even get elected as local councillors. Following the election of two members of the youth committee to their local council, a youth activist told us: “Now we have more capacities to influence the work of village government. Now we have more chances to get youth problems noticed and more funds allocated from the local budget.”<sup>35</sup>

While young Kyrgyzstanis have shown adaptability, pragmatism and innovation in their responses to the challenging and changing contexts in which they live and work, they face barriers that prevent their voices from being heard or their problems understood.

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Young man from Batken

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# Challenges of being heard: navigating an obstacle course

Whether reporting problems to authorities or trying to get their voices heard and playing active transformative roles in their communities and country, young women and men face a range of obstacles.

## Barriers to problems being reported and addressed

As in many other countries, young people in Kyrgyzstan face barriers when reporting problems, reducing the chances of getting them resolved. To better understand these barriers, youth forum participants were asked to outline likely scenarios that would occur when seeking to address chosen security issues. It was clear that many young people saw officials at national and local levels as failing to support them, while at times actively ignoring, dismissing or repressing them. This has often led them to report problems through other channels, such as their parents or traditional or informal authorities. This affects how issues are addressed and resolved.

One group of young women from Batken discussed the difficulties of reporting cases of sexual violence or other GBV due to taboos around sexual behaviour. This meant that admitting sexual interactions of any kind, consensual or not, before marriage would be “awful”. In the case of rape, the group said that telling their parents was risky – they could reach out to the perpetrator and try to convince him to marry their daughter, for fear of stigma in a context where victims often get blamed. For the same reason, families may prefer not to report cases to the police who may try to get the charges dropped, or who they may have to bribe to investigate the case (an especially counter-productive method if the perpetrator is also bribing the police to get the case dismissed).

Two groups of young men from Batken and from Jalal-Abad chose to discuss the issues of bullying and racketeering. During the discussion, they identified multiple avenues for reporting their concerns – from the police juvenile inspector to teachers, family members and informal authorities like imams and community leaders (which include members of elder courts, women’s councils or respected business people). However, they had little confidence that reporting racketeering incidents would lead to a satisfactory outcome. As a result, both groups admitted that they would be unlikely to report such cases to any of the groups they had named. Educators and police inspectors were described as indifferent, potentially corrupt and unreliable. Even if teachers or the police did investigate an incident, the groups believed that there would be no punishment if the perpetrator’s family confronted or bribed them. Participants also said that victims could be accused of being a ‘snitch’ if they reported bullying, which could lead to further confrontation and violence for the individual. As a result, the two groups suggested that they might seek the support of their families who could reconcile with or retaliate against the alleged perpetrator. Otherwise, imams were deemed effective at resolving cases among Muslims, but were seen to offer little privacy for those involved as they could turn cases into wider family or community issues.

During the discussions, participants also reported that authorities tend to dismiss the concerns of certain groups more than others, or that some groups preferred not to report problems out of fear. In particular, some stressed that individuals from ethnic or religious minority groups might be less confident about engaging with authorities due to mutual distrust and fear of discrimination. Others mentioned that poorer families tend to be ignored by decision makers and that high economic status can open doors to influence. “In our society there is an issue of social division between rich and poor,” said one participant. “Decision makers listen more to opinions of rich, and not opinions of poor. Many problems [of the poor] do not get solved”.<sup>36</sup>

## Barriers to youth inclusion and participation

Young women and men also face a range of barriers when trying to play active, transformative roles in their communities.

Young people expressed disappointment at the level of support they get from society in pushing for change. One activist explained: “If young people express their opinions openly, society will consider them to be ‘ill-mannered’, saying ‘do not teach fish how to swim.’”<sup>37</sup> Parents and teachers were blamed for discouraging or suppressing youth activism by failing to take their views seriously or offer encouragement, or by restricting young people’s choices in terms of behaviour, career options and movement. When engaging government institutions directly, young people said they expected to face criticism, humiliation and even incarceration or violence if they worked for political or social change.

The young people we spoke with feared the reactions older generations would have to their activism, in part because of how younger generations are expected to treat their elders and people in positions of authority, but also because of the way in which young men tend to be treated as violent and young women as victims of violence. This leads them to feel like they are left with few means of gaining support from others – whether moral, practical or material.

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Workshop participants draw a map as part of a problem-mapping exercise.

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### Young women

It was clear from the youth forum discussions and interviews with young people that young women must jump over higher hurdles than young men in order to be actively involved in and have influence over community life. These obstacles can vary from restrictions on movement and gaining education, to limited opportunities to attain positions of authority in their communities or careers. One youth activist told us: “The voices of young women frequently remain unheard in families and societies. I think that it is mostly related to stereotypes, traditions and mentality in relation to women’s roles.”<sup>38</sup>

Young women spoke of the additional labour responsibilities given to women in the home, which can reduce their access to education. One woman described her parents’ reaction to her aspiration to go to university: “If we express our opinion – for instance about school – they respond negatively immediately: ‘you will not study’, ‘after university there is no job’, ‘why study if you get married’, ‘we will give you out to marry’, etc.”<sup>39</sup> Our work has highlighted that in some rural communities in southern Kyrgyzstan, young women’s access to education ends as early as 15 due to a variety of deep-rooted traditional, cultural and socio-economic factors, including families’ preferences to invest in their sons’ education and employment and to marry their daughters early.<sup>40</sup>

Across Kyrgyzstan, society tells young women that marriage is what they should aspire to – and a big component of their identity depends on their marital status. Because of this pressure, many find husbands and start families at a young age, prioritising this – willingly or not – over getting an education, having a career or actively engaging in their communities. A young woman told us: “In many families, parents do not allow their daughters to be active and consider that women should play limited roles in public life. In my family, it is the same; my parents do not support me to be an activist.”<sup>41</sup> It was also clear during the forum that many young men believe that while women should play a role in

society, they should do so within the traditional roles that they occupy – such as homemakers and educators. Meanwhile, due to patriarchal cultural norms, young men were felt to have more control over making decisions and solving problems.

Such norms also prescribe submissive behaviour for young women, meaning they are more often ignored or criticised by communities and decision makers when they speak out and push for change, when compared with men. In particular, young women who are seen as transgressing established gender roles can be classified as westernised and can be criticised for rejecting cultural and religious norms – placing them at risk of physical harm.<sup>42</sup> Restrictive social norms increase young women’s vulnerability to poverty and violence, in large part due to their reduced access to education and employment. This pushes them away from meaningful participation and leadership roles, both in the private and public spheres, and hinders their potential to contribute to positive changes in Kyrgyzstani society.

### Rural youth

Some respondents mentioned that other groups face additional barriers. Young people in rural or suburban communities were said to have less influence in comparison with those in urban areas. “It is more difficult for the village youth to be active than the town youth [because] everybody knows everyone in the village and it is rather uncomfortable to criticise the village government because they may be your close relatives”, said one activist. “Also, youth awareness at the rural level is lower than at the urban level”.

The quality of education in rural areas is not as high, and schools are less resourced than in cities and towns<sup>43</sup> where young people have more access to opportunities. Although children are required by law to attend school until they complete 9th grade (generally around age 16), in rural and generally poorer communities, children and young people might be pulled out of school early to work and support their families.<sup>44</sup>

### Religion, ethnicity and identity

Participants also noted that national divisions can affect young people, preventing them from collaborating across ethnic or religious lines. This limits their ability to support and learn from each other and to build diverse coalitions in support of constructive change.

Contrasting visions for Kyrgyzstan have pulled the country in different directions since the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>45</sup> In particular, certain efforts to create a civic and national identity that take on forms of ethno-nationalism have caused ethnic minorities to feel excluded from the nation-building process. One youth activist told us: "I think that representatives of ethnic minorities are not as active in decision-making processes. I guess the primary cause is distrust in governmental bodies and law enforcement agencies." We were also told of a recent dialogue event that brought together youth representatives from different ethnic groups and local authorities. At the meeting, one official refused to engage in constructive dialogue and instead blamed certain participants for not speaking and learning Kyrgyz.

Some young women and men are also increasingly turning to religion, perceiving religious groups as more legitimate and better able than state authorities to offer protection, justice, public services, livelihoods, and a sense of identity, belonging and purpose. In a country where faith is strongly linked to identity,<sup>46</sup> differing visions about the nature of the state and role of religion in society are being put forward. Through our work with young people, we have encountered increasingly divisive narratives around religion, and noted a palpable disconnect between groups who form their identities along ethnic, religious and secular lines. Some young people are becoming more nationalistic, and others more religious,<sup>47</sup> while also feeling discriminated against because of how they practice their religion.<sup>48</sup>

This is also having an impact on young people and children's education. Some people are sending their children to madrassas because they see state schools as corrupt, too secular, of poor quality or of no use given limited employment opportunities. In particular, although non-discrimination is enshrined in the law, certain schools have adopted restrictive regulations that forbid young girls from wearing hijabs on their premises.<sup>49</sup>

### Capacity, confidence and opportunity

Despite their creative approaches, many young people in Kyrgyzstan do not have the confidence, time, knowledge or ability to push for change in their society. "Most young people are unaware of opportunities and their rights to participate in decision-making processes", said a youth activist in Osh. "They do not know where and to whom to appeal, nor what to do."<sup>50</sup> Others said that young people in Kyrgyzstan were passive, with some activists criticising young people for believing that the government would solve all their problems automatically, without making the case for them to do so. A young woman told us: "First, young women and men must be educated so that policymakers can rely on their opinions. But currently, young people are not that interested in finding solutions to their problems."<sup>51</sup>

Many reasons were given for this including that young people lack the resources, skills, beliefs, leadership, unity and experience to collaborate for change. One respondent told us: "There are certain barriers that impede us from being more active. For example, we cannot unite, we are inexperienced, and we lack financial support. After all, we do not rely on our own forces and we easily lose hope".<sup>52</sup>

In part, this was explained by the poor level of education and young people's lack of critical thinking. "Many young people lack critical thinking skills and the ability to question social norms. There is a pervasive and widely accepted view that youth should obey and conform to the roles expected of them by elders and society."<sup>53</sup> On top of norms for respecting the elderly, facilitators of the forum said this was also a relic of Soviet times when people were expected to look to the government to resolve their problems, without questioning authority.



Young people taking part in a tolerance and democracy workshop visit a mosque.

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During the forum, participants said that difficulties attaining funding have left some youth groups vulnerable to co-option by political groups . . .

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A girl takes a photo during a youth meeting.

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Moreover, the governance vacuum and economic crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union has had a devastating impact on the education system, which led to ‘limited financial, educational and human resources in schools and universities and poor access to education for low income families’.<sup>54</sup> With limited professional prospects, this has reduced young people’s motivation to learn, explore their options or create opportunities for themselves.<sup>55</sup>

### Instrumentalisation of young people

Young people who want to participate in decision-making processes can also be co-opted by other groups for their own purposes. One activist told us: “If we talk about what role the youth plays nowadays, many authorities mainly gather them for mass meetings of their events”.<sup>56</sup> An example of such a case is a recent march against ‘extremism’ that was organised by the Mayor of Osh as part of a civil society initiative and in which, we were told, young people were made to take part.<sup>57</sup> This, and the fact that issues related to ‘extremism’ did not come up during the forum, shows the disconnect between authorities and young people.

During the forum, participants said that difficulties attaining funding have left some youth groups vulnerable to co-option by political groups eager to encourage youth activism, but only in line with their own political objectives. Notably, during the recent skirmishes at the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border, different videos targeting youth from both countries sought to stoke anger by showing how the other side was treating their own people in order to mobilise them and provoke violence.<sup>58</sup>

Activists we spoke with also condemned government and donor strategies on youth for failing to genuinely involve young people in the design and implementation of interventions. This, they said, was also the case for international organisations. Notably, Saferworld’s work has highlighted how the focus on the C/PVE agenda is leading civil society organisations, including youth initiatives and organisations, to adapt their initiatives to the priorities of national authorities and donors.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, authorities are concerned that young people’s search for identity, belonging and purpose may drive them towards violent or criminal groups that appeal to nationalist or religious ideologies and feed on discontent – fuelled by marginalisation, injustice, corruption and exposure to violence. This has led to many studies and projects on youth in relation to C/PVE. As Saferworld’s report on the C/PVE agenda in Kyrgyzstan points out, “There is a logic behind this: young people – predominantly male – are the most likely to join violent groups, and youth and women’s groups are often seen as channels through which donors can gain access to at-risk communities for counter-messaging and anti-radicalisation campaigns”.<sup>60</sup> Most importantly, even if they have things to say on the issues at hand,<sup>61</sup> our work with young people and on C/PVE shows that the agenda is mainly driven by external actors’ interests and Kyrgyzstani authorities’ priorities.

While some C/PVE projects have sought to promote tolerance and youth collaboration – putting young women and men in the driving seat – they tend to ignore the risks that C/PVE can pose in alienating communities and stoking divisions between state institutions and sections of the public.<sup>62</sup> As ‘The missing peace’ study points out, the C/PVE agenda has produced ‘un-nuanced, counterproductive policy responses’ and ‘detrimentally skews YPS [youth, peace and security] programmatic responses and priorities’.<sup>63</sup> In particular, it can fail to empower young people and undermine participation in political processes, social movements, peacebuilding and peaceful protest, as well as expressions of dissent.<sup>64</sup>

# Recommendations

Respondents identified a range of measures, which are very much in line with the recommendations of 'The missing peace' study,<sup>65</sup> to help young people engage and collaborate in influencing positive changes in their communities and country, including:

- promoting dialogue and cooperation between young people and their parents and formal and informal authorities (including local self-government, local youth committees, school administrations and juvenile inspectors of police), as well as among themselves
- creating mechanisms to motivate young people and facilitate their civic engagement, including by encouraging and supporting them to stand for local elections
- sharing information about the activities of governmental bodies and organising regular dialogues between youth and authorities
- opening avenues for young people to get the support they need, by providing flexible funding and removing bureaucratic obstacles that may dissuade them from actively engaging in their communities
- facilitating safe spaces for young people to meet, share ideas and debate, and creating partnerships and capacity-strengthening opportunities
- boosting young people's skills (such as leadership, problem-solving, writing, public speaking and advocacy) to enhance their awareness and confidence
- educating young people about human rights and gender – including how they impact access to rights and opportunities, as well as discrimination, conflict and violence and how they affect tolerance and diversity
- bringing together young people from different communities to dispel harmful stereotypes, to build trust and understanding, and to enhance communication and collaboration

Respondents also recommended several ways young women and men can raise their concerns and ideas more effectively. They indicated the need for young people to demonstrate their interest in promoting change and to make clear suggestions, gain new skills and learn about their rights and engage with others to gain their trust and cooperation. The potential of social media and networks was also frequently mentioned as a cheap and effective way of disseminating messages and gaining attention of policymakers.

Young people want to be heard; they want to participate in decision-making. The feedback we received from the forum was positive – participants we interviewed told us it had an impact on how they treated others at school, encouraged them to understand other opinions, and motivated them to learn and make new friends. Some participants also used parts of the training in their schools and at home, and organised events in their communities – showing that with the right support, young people can play positive and potentially transformative roles.

However, many young people do not have time or the ability to take a lead. This is why efforts should be made to ensure that the needs and concerns of all young people are taken into consideration and are effectively addressed. In particular, where young people face hardship and difficulties at home, services – including security, justice, health and education – should continue to be improved and developed, and awareness raised on how children and young people can access them.

As such, it is important that authorities and national and international organisations supporting young women and men:

- do not predetermine issues that narrow the experiences and insights of young people and ultimately the responses to their needs and concerns
- conduct participatory analysis on youth issues, concerns and needs
- consult and involve young women and men when developing and implementing actions that respond to their needs and interests and contribute to their well-being
- explore structural or artificial limitations on young people's participation in society and work towards their removal
- support and fund youth organisations and initiatives, in particular young women's groups, with flexible funding that allows young people to set agendas and design appropriate responses to evolving needs, while developing change champions, leaders and role models
- support youth platforms to come together to share experiences and engage in joint advocacy
- train staff members and authorities on adopting conflict- and gender-sensitive approaches in youth, peace and security work

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## About Saferworld

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.

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## About the Foundation for Tolerance International

The Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI) is one of the largest non-governmental organisations in Kyrgyzstan. Since 1998, FTI has been working on the prevention and non-violent resolution of conflict in Central Asia, developing social partnerships between society, government and law enforcement agencies, both in cities and in remote and border areas. FTI is the founder of the Valley of Peace Network, which unites non-governmental organisations from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and is the Central Asia regional coordinator of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict Network.

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Cover photo – Students engage in discussions on promoting cooperation and tolerance.

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