



SAFERWORLD

PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT. BUILDING SAFER LIVES

SAFERWORLD

Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

Despite improvements in recent years, Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet Republic of six million people, faces many threats to long-term peace and security. Among them are weak governance and institutions, corruption and political instability, poor access to justice, violence against women and girls, active and latent inter-ethnic tensions, a perceived increase in political and religious intolerance, and disputes over borders, water and land.

Through the joint efforts of the Kyrgyzstan government and the international community, the security situation in Kyrgyzstan has significantly improved since 2010, when political and inter-ethnic violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks flared up in the south of the country. But despite this progress, there still remains a huge challenge to provide a stable environment for growth and development.

Against a background of economic hardship, many people in Kyrgyzstan – especially young people – lack socio-economic and political opportunities to participate meaningfully in decision-making in their communities. In addition, the space for civil society, the media and communities to challenge and change the behaviour of those in authority is limited. In recent years, this exclusion is increasingly leading people to look for alternative ways to address community issues: some people are turning to violent groups of an ethno-nationalist or religious nature, having been attracted by their divisive rhetoric and the belief that they offer an alternative source of economic or political agency. Current state policies seeking to thwart the rise of these groups have been unable to stop further alienation of parts of the population from state institutions.

This alienation is increasing the likelihood of individuals adopting more extreme views that reject the status quo and support the use of violence to achieve their goals. Long-term efforts to prevent the spread of violence and conflict in this region require significant investment to address the root causes of conflict and bring about positive change.





What we have done in Kyrgyzstan

- We pioneered a community security programme and raised awareness of the community security/policing approach as a way to address safety concerns.
- We championed peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive approaches to tackle the underlying causes of violence, including addressing the reasons why people support and join violent groups.
- We worked with the Kyrgyzstan police, local authorities and communities to promote the community security/policing approach, and to encourage further transparency and accountability of the police.
- We supported more than 30 civil society organisations across the country to promote an approach of addressing community security and safety concerns that is sensitive to gender and conflict dynamics, inclusive and accountable.
- We contributed to building links and cooperation between people and authorities in over 45 communities.



About us

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with partners, communities, civil society and authorities in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Saferworld has been working in Kyrgyzstan since 2010 to improve cooperation and understanding between ethnic groups, communities, the police and authorities. Together with our partners, we develop networks to address issues which affect people's security. We also advocate to government officials and civil society for improved policies and services for conflict-affected communities and for effective conflict prevention.

“
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transforming conflict and building
peace

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To do this, we:

- **foster and support the role of community members**, in particular women and young people, in transforming conflict and building peace
- **help develop civil society organisations** so that they can carry out conflict prevention activities with groups from different ethnic, religious, social and other backgrounds
- support civil society organisations to have discussions about policies with authorities and to better advocate for improved policy and practice on **accountable and responsive delivery of security services** that meet the needs of communities
- **assist and mentor police officers** working with conflict-affected communities so that they can better respond to people's security needs
- **promote a community security approach** and inform national processes on police reform by working closely with the Kyrgyzstan government and other international stakeholders such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
- **promote peacebuilding responses** that tackle the underlying drivers of people's support for (and participation in) violent groups
- listen to **young people's concerns**, take note of the issues that young people identify as security problems, and support them to come up with plans to resolve these
- train and **support young people** to develop the skills they need to take on a range of challenges in their communities

Police officers meet with members of a local crime prevention centre.

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Saferworld in Kyrgyzstan at a glance

- **We work in about 45 communities across the country,** with the most active presence in three southern provinces: Batken, Jalal-Abad and Osh.
- **Over the last two years, we reached over 50,000 community members** through our programmes.
- Across the country, **we have reached over 22,000 young people** through our work with young peacebuilders and activists.
- **Since 2013, we have published 15 research and analysis publications** on youth, security and justice, community security, policing and conflict sensitivity.
- **In 2015, we hosted national and regional-level conferences on the drivers of violent behaviour and the reasons why people support violent groups.**
- **Since 2010, we have helped revive 32 defunct crime prevention centres,** ensuring communities have a place to report crimes.
- **Since 2016, we have trained around 1,000 'youth ambassadors' from rural areas on democracy, tolerance, respect for diversity and activism.**
- **In 2019, we began an innovative new project using WhatsApp to train 80 young people** in hard-to-reach locations **on peacebuilding.**
- In 2019, together with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, **we co-organised and hosted four coordination meetings with security officials from the police and authorities to improve police reform.**





**SINCE 2015,
WE HAVE HELD:**

15 **3**

**COMMUNITY SECURITY
TRAINING COURSES**

**YOUNG PEOPLE'S
CAMPS ON
TOLERANCE AND
DEMOCRACY**

4

**SENSITISATION
SESSIONS**

5

**'TALKING DAYS' ON
DIFFERENT TOPICS**

6

**COMMUNICATION
SKILLS TRAINING
COURSES FOR POLICE
OFFICERS**

7

**WORKSHOPS ON THE
CAUSES OF VIOLENT
BEHAVIOUR AND
THE REASONS WHY
PEOPLE SUPPORT
VIOLENT GROUPS**

AT LEAST

15

**MOTIVATION
MEETINGS FOR
COMMUNITIES**

3

**STUDY TOURS FOR
POLICE OFFICERS TO
NORTHERN IRELAND,
BELGIUM AND
GEORGIA**

4

**'OPEN DOOR' DAYS IN
POLICE STATIONS AND
MAYORS' OFFICES**

3

**EXCHANGE
VISITS BETWEEN
KYRGYZSTAN
AND TAJIKISTAN
COMMUNITY POLICING
PARTNERSHIP TEAMS**

AT LEAST

20

**POLICE REPORTING
EVENTS**



Our approach

For more than 15 years, Saferworld has been using community security approaches in multiple countries and diverse contexts affected by conflict and insecurity. The participatory approach aims to respond to perceptions of insecurity and conflict among communities by promoting greater cooperation and accountability between people, authorities and law enforcement agencies. It also aims to change relationships and behaviours that have the potential to lead to violence.

Together with partner organisations, we have built relationships and promoted cooperation between communities, law enforcement agencies and local authorities, as well as between ethnic groups and young people in conflict-affected communities in Osh, Batken and Jalal-Abad regions and across contested areas of the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border. These improved relationships have led to positive changes that are helping people to feel safer in their communities, and are creating a more conducive environment for peaceful development.



Members of a local crime prevention centre in Mirmakhmudov discuss the centre's aims.

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Building safer communities

People living in Kyrgyzstan face a range of insecurities – from street crime, corruption, poor governance and tensions between groups of different ethnic, religious and social backgrounds, to the more hidden threats of domestic violence and gender-based discrimination.

Together with partners, Saferworld supports 50 communities in several provinces of Kyrgyzstan to identify threats to safety and security and to jointly work with law enforcement officials to find solutions. By identifying safety concerns, mutual trust, accountability and long-term relationships are built between communities, the police and other

law enforcement officials as they work together on joint solutions. Women, young people and members of minority ethnic, religious and other groups are included to ensure that they have a say in how to make their communities safer. Over time, this helps to restore people's faith in the police and security sector, and leads to more security issues being reported and addressed.

Saferworld also supports civil society organisations in Kyrgyzstan to advocate for reforms in law enforcement, so that police services are more inclusive, accountable and sensitive to the needs of all communities.



An artist spray-paints a mural showing how police can work with communities on their security needs, as part of a police reform project.
© Aynura Mamazhunusova/Saferworld.

CASE STUDY

Street art in Osh

In Osh, a street art campaign – which aims to raise awareness of efforts to build trust between police and the communities they serve – has caught the attention of many residents. With support from Saferworld, the Osh-based organisation Young Lawyers of the South commissioned a street artist to feature police officers at work. They produced a short film about the role of the police in keeping communities safe, and they also organised a photo exhibition and an art competition for schoolchildren, where children drew sketches showing how they perceived the police as well as raising some of their security concerns.

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the police are making an effort to work with us, and not just for themselves.

A resident of Osh.

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The initiative helped to address the widespread lack of trust between police and communities. By highlighting some of the good work being done by the police, the project rebuilt and improved relations – so that people would be more likely to turn to the police in future.

“Street art could help convey a message of law enforcement agencies as those who serve the people,” said Mirlan Adilbekov from Young Lawyers of the South, who coordinated the initiative. “People will be more willing to take advantage of their services when they’re in trouble, which is an important first step.”

Many residents appeared to appreciate the efforts to build bridges between people and the police, through whatever means. As one resident of Osh put it, “This shows us that the police are making an effort to work with us, and not just for themselves. And I am starting to believe it.”

Gender, peace and security

Women and girls play a central role in Saferworld's work to improve security and safety for communities in Kyrgyzstan. Violent conflict is often exacerbated by the roles that women and men are expected to play in society. This can take the form of marginalisation of women or expectations of men to be 'masculine'. Traditional values also prevent women and girls from taking a stand and addressing threats to their own safety. To ensure that the needs of the entire community are met, it is essential to include women and girls in all discussions around community security.

With our partner, Foundation for Tolerance International, Saferworld works in 45 communities in a range of provinces in Kyrgyzstan to ensure that efforts to build safer communities take into account the needs of women and men, and that they provide equal opportunity for everyone to live peaceful and secure lives. We make sure that women's voices are heard at meetings with authorities. Our work with young people and women – who often form committees or groups to collectively address women's issues locally – seeks to address problems such as street harassment, early marriage, barriers to girls' education, bride kidnapping and domestic violence. We take these issues to the national government, advocating for changes in policy and extra protection for women and girls.



CASE STUDY

Youth training in Kyrgyzstan: fostering future leaders?

Girls in the Jalal-Abad province of Kyrgyzstan regularly drop out of school due to conservative religious traditions and traditional gender expectations. In response, 15-year-old Zareena is raising awareness of the opportunities for girls in her community.

Zareena goes to school in the village of Suzak, a rural community in the south west of Kyrgyzstan, where Russian language is her favourite subject. Despite living in a conservative community where there are many cases of early marriage and where girls' education is a low priority, she wants to go to university and study languages to become a translator.

Zareena took part in a Saferworld-supported youth camp, which focused on fostering tolerance and democracy among young people. When she heard about the camp through her school, she jumped at the opportunity, with support from her mother. "I'm passionate about women's rights because I have friends who are my age and are already married," she said. "They're not aware that you must be 18 to get married."

The three-day camps bring together young people from different ethnic, religious and social backgrounds and from three different provinces in Kyrgyzstan: Jalal-Abad, Batken and Osh. They seek to strengthen young people's understanding of democracy in their country, how decisions are made and what safety and security mean for people, and to increase their understanding of different cultures, religions and ethnic groups.

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It's so important to develop the skills of young people so that they can spread information.

Sherzatbek Umarbekov, chairperson of a crime prevention centre in Suzak, south-west Kyrgyzstan.

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Campers can also take part in training, games and debates, attend inspiring talks, and visit churches and mosques to increase inter-religious understanding. "In my opinion when we know about others, we see that there are more similarities than differences," said a camp participant after visiting a church.

Taking inspiration from the camps and from her mother, who works in a school in Jalal-Abad, Zareena is keen to translate her new knowledge into action. She wants to use her skills to raise awareness of some of the issues facing girls like her: "Education is so important to make young girls aware of early marriages." She has since joined Suzak's crime prevention centre, which Saferworld supports, as a member of the youth committee. Being part of a centre that is dominated by the voices of older men, and which lacks young representatives, there is no doubt that Zareena has faced challenges. But she has played an important role by organising learning activities and games for young people, assisting in organising events, and helping to educate girls on their rights and opportunities.

Her passion is recognised by the other members of the centre, who understand the significance of young women and men being active in their communities. "It's so important to develop the skills of young people so that they can spread information," said Sherzatbek Umarbekov, the centre's chairperson.

Zareena is an example of someone who has found a way around the path that so many girls are forced to follow in Kyrgyzstan. She does not let these expectations limit her ambitions: "I dream of making Kyrgyzstan a great country. I want to become a translator for an international organisation, travel the world and meet lots of different people."

Working with young peacebuilders

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.

Saferworld trains young people to identify concerns and then work together – often across ethnic, religious or territorial lines – to draft action plans that seek to resolve the problems. They focus on all issues that lead to violent conflict and increased insecurity, ranging from early marriage and domestic violence to child neglect and the perceived pull of violent groups.

More recently, Saferworld supported diverse young people from across southern Kyrgyzstan to come together and discuss issues around religion and democracy, and to lead young people's workshops and advocacy campaigns to shape public opinion and government responses. We support young people to promote peace, participation, inclusion, tolerance and respect for diversity, with the aim of creating greater understanding and increased interaction between young people from different backgrounds.

In 2019, we began an innovative new peacebuilding course through the WhatsApp mobile messaging platform to work with 80 young people from remote and often divided communities, and to promote trust between people who usually have few opportunities for interaction. The aim of the WhatsApp peacebuilding course is to help young activists to stay connected, develop analytical skills and new networks, build confidence and find creative ways of addressing the root causes of conflict and insecurity.





Youth leaders take part in group work at a youth camp.
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Muhambetalli, a participant in Saferworld's youth ambassador project.
© Saferworld.

CASE STUDY

From bias to friendship

Muhambetalli is a young man from Chon-Karakol in southern Kyrgyzstan. Growing up in a small village made up of ethnic Kyrgyz, he had little exposure to people from other ethnic backgrounds. Muhambetalli and his friends thought of themselves as true Kyrgyz patriots and tried to promote Kyrgyz values over those of other ethnic groups. Sometimes, he confessed, this would involve violence.

Ethnic bias and conflict are not uncommon in Kyrgyzstan. Unexpectedly, Muhambetalli decided to participate in Saferworld's 'youth ambassador' project and began to question some of his long-held beliefs and prejudices. Through the training organised by Saferworld and partners, he gained the confidence to challenge the traditional values and views of his peers, as well as his own. He learnt about the underlying causes of ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan, namely the opacity, distance and lack of diversity in decision-making. And he made friends with Uzbek project participants.

Now, Muhambetalli tries to influence his friends and younger brothers. "My younger brothers and friends are exactly like the 'me' of last year," he said. "They do not want to accept others' values and they do not welcome the way I have changed." However, Muhambetalli keeps trying to change their minds. "At least they stopped fighting with non-Kyrgyz people. They try to talk to each other."

"If you compared the 'me' of last year to the person sitting here in front of you – these are two very different people. The first one was confident that he knew more than others and didn't accept any new ideas. The second one tries to learn more, tries to influence others' lives in a positive way."



Aksakals (elders) at the opening ceremony of a local crime prevention centre in Batken province.

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For further information about us and our work, please visit: www.saferworld.org.uk/central-asia

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Front cover photo: Local police officers in Jalal-Abad province meet with schoolchildren as part of a community policing project.
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Contact us

BISHKEK OFFICE

19 Razzakov Street
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Email: Kyrgyzstan@saferworld.org.uk

OSH OFFICE

(at the Classic business centre venue)

145 Aliev Street
Osh city, Kyrgyzstan

Phone: +996 (03222) 4-85-77

UK OFFICE

The Grayston Centre, 28 Charles Square
London N1 6HT, UK

Phone: +44 (0) 20 7324 4646

Email: general@saferworld.org.uk

Web: www.saferworld.org.uk

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