



HELVETAS
KYRGYZSTAN

BRIEFING
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**Intergenerational co-
operation through youth-led
social projects**

This briefing note forms part of a series that shares achievements and lessons learned of the Youth United for the Future (YOU) project which operated from 2017 to 2025. The project was implemented by Helvetas Kyrgyzstan, Youth of Osh and Progress Aravan. Its aim was to improve the integration of young people into the social and economic life of southern Kyrgyzstan.



Supporting youth-led initiatives for positive change in communities can be a powerful way of contributing to social cohesion.

Training is not enough

The YOU project supported training for young people and adults in new ways of thinking and communicating. This training was an important element for improving the relationship between them. However, alone, it would not have been enough. New mindsets and new skills need to be applied. If they are not, they may be forgotten. Worse, introducing new ideas can raise expectations, which, if unfulfilled, may increase frustrations. Participation in the Tune In training programmes often raised young people's expectations about who they could be and what they could do (see Briefing Note 2). It was therefore very important for the project to offer opportunities to young people to realize these ambitions.

Changing mindsets and relationships through practical collaboration



Figure 1: The approach of the YOU Project

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I used to think I couldn't do anything. But after we created the reading room and the smart school bell, I started to believe that I can change the world around me. It gave me confidence.

(Young participant in focus group discussion, Jalal-Abad, April 16, 2025)

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The YOU project strengthened social cohesion, particularly young people's sense of belonging, in a multi-step process, illustrated in Figure 1. Training of young people and adults close to them, was just the first step. This was followed by a “Generation Exchange” between young people and adults to improve mutual understanding and issues of mutual concern. Young people were then supported by the adults to develop practical social initiatives they could implement in their communities to contribute social cohesion. These initiatives were presented to local authorities, to solicit their support, opening the way to public dialogue on issues of concern to young people.

Through this process the project offered participants an opportunity to put their new knowledge and skills into practice and realize some of their ambitions.

Empowered young people

Over the lifetime of the project, **45** youth-led initiatives were implemented, and 20 public dialogues were held. Youth-led initiatives allowed young people to apply the skills gained during trainings to real community issues, producing tangible results and evidence. These experiences then naturally fed into public dialogues, where youth presented their findings, articulated challenges, and proposed solutions directly to local authorities. In turn, the dialogues amplified the impact of the initiatives by creating a formal space for youth voices, strengthening accountability, and fostering long-term cooperation between young people and decision-makers.

All the initiatives were conceived and implemented by young people. Initiatives covered a wide range of themes (see box). Participating in these initiatives gave young people a real experience of their ability and power to effect change.

Examples of topics of youth chose to work on

Prevention of gender-based violence

Promoting and providing healthy pregnancy and vaccination

Suicide prevention (drawing contest, street art) in the city of Jalalabad

Prevention of racketeering (training for adults, football tournament mixed teams) in Jalalabad high school

Prevention of early marriages in Aravan (documentary watching and discussions in high schools)

Income generation for women single-parent families

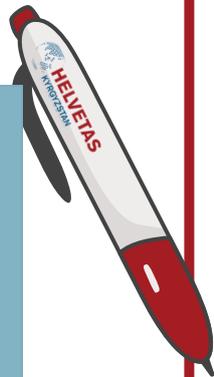
Integration of secular youth from arts boarding school and madrasa students in Jalalabad

Professional orientation

Bringing together and integrating religious and secular youth in Jalalabad city

Medical outreach to conservative Muslim communities in Aravan

Waste management



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We thought that we could not solve anything, that only those in power could do it. We learned to identify the problem and identify the causes. We learned to work in a team, although it was difficult, and we learned to find a solution to the problem. When our idea was implemented, it was such a cool feeling - that we can also do something. We found support from other people, both older and younger - we also found criticism - but we changed for the better

(Student participant in focus group discussion, September 17, 2024)

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Strengthened inter-generational bonds

Mentoring of the young people by adults proved an important component of the process. Collaboration between generations showed incredible positive results. Adults contributed with their experience, networks and access to resources, while young people brought in enthusiasm, ideas and energy. Working together helped each generation to improve their view of the other and their relationship.



Supportive local government

In several districts, local authorities were involved in the selection of which initiatives should receive support. This opened opportunities for young people to enter into dialogue with the authorities. In several cases, local authorities actively participated and provided direct support.

In 2023, **10** initiatives were developed and all received partial or full supported from LSGs. In 2024, **4** out of 5 initiatives, participants successfully secured technical support from local authorities and school administrations for the implementation of their initiatives.



Case studies of successful initiatives

Following an awareness campaign, the 'Ak-Jol' team, together with a mentor, sent a letter to the Ministry of Transport and Communications requesting the installation of a bus stop. As a result, the ministry delegated an employee from a relevant department to further investigate the issue within their authority. The representative confirmed that the request was acknowledged and noted that the installation would take place in the future after the removal of illegal structures that extend beyond the designated area, taking into account the local road network configuration.

In Barpy village, students launched a competition in cooperation with the local government (Aiyl Okmotu) aimed at developing a love of reading among schoolchildren. Students from local schools received prizes and cash awards, which was an incentive for them to read more. After the competition, parents of some of the participating schoolchildren noted that the children's interest in reading had increased: they began to read books on their own, discuss what they had read and exchange books with each other. This shows how even short-term initiatives with the support of LSGs can trigger sustainable positive changes in the behaviour and interests of adolescents. The local government continues to annually issue books, paid for from their budget, to those wishing to participate in the competition.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Three important lessons emerged from the experience of supporting youth-led initiatives.

Training on project design

The Tune In personal development training provided young people with the confidence to imagine they could bring about changes in their community. However, initial experiences with encouraging young people to develop initiatives and engage in public dialogue showed that more support was needed. Young people were proposing ideas and presenting demands at meetings with authorities that were not always feasible to implement. They needed to develop skills and knowledge that could help them successfully design and implement initiatives. The project therefore introduced the Upshift approach, which Youth of Osh had learned of through working with UNICEF on another project (see box). This was a good example of how existing resources can be repurposed and reused, rather than reinventing the wheel.

Schools as entry points

To reach many people and ensure the sustainability of the approach, the project worked through schools to reach young people, teachers and parents (see Briefing Note 3). This approach had the advantage of offering a non-controversial entry point for introducing the idea of young people's engagement in social and community issues. Efforts to mobilize young people for social initiatives and public dialogue outside of the school setting, as was initially planned, could have been viewed critically by the authorities. In the school setting, students are expected to engage in project activities. Indeed, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic periodically requests reports from schools on activities carried out as part of project work of school students.

To facilitate the integration of youth-led initiatives into school activities, the project adapted the UPSHIFT guide into a 72-hour manual for educational institutions. It has been handed over to the Republican and regional teacher training institutes for further dissemination among interested teachers. However, for integration to be fully successful, teachers will need support (training, dedicated class time, materials). Educational authorities, including the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, local authorities, and school management are urged to ensure this support is provided.

Involvement of local authorities

Experience demonstrated that the success of the youth-led initiatives depended only in part on the training and mentoring that young people received. Another important component was the degree of involvement of local authorities, which varied substantially across districts. In the most successful cases, young people prepared their initiatives and presented them at "pitching events", at which the local authorities participated. The best ideas then received financial or technical support from the local authorities for their implementation.

The limited availability of representatives of local authorities made it sometimes difficult to secure their participation at such pitching events. The possibilities for financing and other kinds of support from them also depended on their budget planning. It is therefore paramount to involve local authorities in joint planning from an early stage. This cannot be left up to individual teachers but should be a co-ordinated effort between school management and local education authorities.

Personal story

Before participating in the “**Sen/You/YOU**” project, **Samagan** was a motivated student but often unsure of himself, lacking a platform to apply his ideas. His school faced logistical challenges: the school bell did not work, students were gathered manually, and there was no comfortable space for self-study or preparation. Ideas from students were rarely implemented, creating a sense of limited agency.



Invited by his teacher, Samagan joined the project and experienced a respectful, supportive environment where his suggestions were heard and acted upon. Together with other participants, he analysed peer and school needs, proposed solutions, and implemented initiatives. They introduced a smart bell system, combining traditional komuz melodies and radio announcements, which disciplined lessons, reduced teacher stress, and motivated students. Samagan also helped create a mini-library and co-working space, selecting furniture, planning design, and mobilizing community resources.

Through the project, Samagan developed self-confidence, negotiation skills (successfully securing additional funding from the local government), leadership as head of the school event commission, and learned to present ideas and work with adults. He realized he could be an author of solutions, not just an observer. Career guidance activities helped him confirm his aspiration to become an architect. Samagan describes the project as transformative: he gained a voice, agency, and belief in his potential.