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KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

SUCCESS STORY

Youth Drama Clubs Shed Light on North-South Tensions

Through theater, youth are raising awareness of community conflict issues



Gulnara leads the audience in a warm-up exercise to prepare them to interact and engage in a Forum Theater performance based on a conflict issue. A post-performance discussion will follow. Photo: IREX

“Earlier, if someone would say there is a problem in society we thought it was not our job, but now our worldview has changed. Everything is in our hands.”

- Rahat, a Youth Theater for Peace camp participant from Batken region

When 14-year-old Gulnara moved from Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan to Tokmok, a small city near the capital of Bishkek, regional divisions made it difficult for her to integrate. Gulnara’s family was one of many to come north in search of work, but they were greeted with suspicion by their new neighbors. While Gulnara excelled in school, some of her new classmates quickly seized upon regional differences, mocking her dialect. After she was involved in a physical fight with a classmate, she begged her parents to let her change schools.

But at a summer camp funded by USAID’s Youth Theater for Peace project, Gulnara entered a safe space where she could share her story and learn conflict resolution skills. Using an interactive technique called Forum Theater, Gulnara and other campers created a play about her experiences and invited the audience to come on stage, intervene, and discuss the problem.

“Sharing my story was difficult, because when I first came to the camp I wasn’t very active,” Gulnara said. “I never took part in school contests. But Forum Theater helped us to be active, and now I’m not afraid. I’m happy I got a lot of friends at camp.”

With support from Youth Theater for Peace implementing partners IREX and the Foundation for Tolerance International, Gulnara and her classmates and teachers created a Drama Club at their school and performed the play for city administration and local education and law enforcement officials, raising awareness of regional conflict issues.

In communities with few extracurricular outlets, the USAID-supported Drama Clubs give at-risk youth a chance to participate in meaningful activities, build self-confidence, and dialogue about key community issues. 22 school Drama Clubs have been formed in Batken and Chui regions following a series of summer workshops that trained over 40 adults and 100 youth in arts-based approaches to conflict resolution.

The Youth Theater for Peace project is creating a group of empowered youth and supportive adults who are equipped to lead community-based conflict resolution activities—sharing DCT techniques and a newfound understanding of those of other ethnicities, religions, and/or nationalities within their larger communities.

“Before we came to this camp we weren’t interested in the problems of the society, but after we came we got into it,” reflected Rahat, a youth camp participant from Batken. “Earlier, if someone would say there is a problem in society we thought it was not our job, but now our worldview changed. Everything is in our hands.”