



EVALUATING PEACEBUILDING INTERVENTIONS IN SOUTHERN KYRGYZSTAN

SIPRI–OSF Policy Brief

June 2014

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SUMMARY

Western-supported peacebuilding, mediation and reconciliation projects initiated in response to inter-communal violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 have proven to be attractive to donors because they are short term, easy to implement through the use of existing local partners, make substantial promises on a relatively low budget, and offer quantitative claims of success through the number of people ‘trained’.

However, it is difficult to assess the impact of projects designed either to reduce complex phenomena such as ‘ethnic mistrust’ or to prevent future violence from occurring. Nonetheless, there are good reasons to question the value of peacebuilding and reconciliation projects, notably due to their shortcomings in terms of addressing the root causes of conflict.

Five factors are common to the violence that occurred in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and a similar incident in 1990: tensions created by the Soviet-era ethno-territorial settlement; poverty, unemployment and lack of economic opportunity; Kyrgyz fears about Uzbeks challenging the integrity of the state; political instability and crisis; and institutional weakness.

Despite their attractiveness to donors, the peacebuilding activities that have been undertaken in response to the violence in Kyrgyzstan have not had a significant impact on the majority of these factors.

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This policy brief is based on a longer working paper available at <http://www.sipri.org/research/security/centralasia/>.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2010 inter-communal violence in the cities of Osh and Djalal-Abad in southern Kyrgyzstan left 400–500 people dead, hundreds of thousands displaced internally and externally, and extensive damage to property. These cities are home to substantial Uzbek minority communities living in their historic cores, and growing numbers of Kyrgyz residents who have migrated from rural areas. Social and political tensions created by the ethno-territorial structure of post-Soviet Central Asia, and a lack of economic opportunity, provided a backdrop to the political instability following the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010.

THE CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT¹

The June 2010 violence was the worst crisis in independent Kyrgyzstan's history, both politically and in terms of human suffering. The official Kyrgyz Government report blamed an alliance of Uzbek 'separatist' politicians and supporters of the former Bakiyev regime, as well as Kyrgyz political and security chiefs in the south of the country who failed to spot warning signs and then failed to prevent initial violence from escalating.² The mayor of Osh downplayed accusations against the Bakiyevs, blaming a specific Uzbek separatist plot that was backed and armed by Uzbekistan.³

The independent international Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (KIC) found that the provisional government that replaced Bakiyev had failed to address the deterioration in ethnic relations in the south and, once the conflict began, its security forces failed to intervene adequately and may have been complicit in violence against Uzbeks. It concluded that the violence against Uzbeks does not qualify as either 'war crimes or genocide', but aspects of it might constitute 'crimes against humanity'.⁴

PEACEBUILDING AND RECONCILIATION PROGRAMMES IN KYRGYZSTAN

A number of peacebuilding and reconciliation programmes were established on a significant scale by well-funded donors in the aftermath of the June 2010 violence. Responding to conflict by targeting 'civil society' as peacebuilding actors is not new, having gained importance internationally in the mid-1990s. Today, these bottom-up peacebuilding approaches have gained popularity as an alternative to top-down peacebuilding initiatives that focus on elites and institutional reforms.⁵

¹ For background see e.g. Melvin, N. and Umaraliev, T., 'New social media and conflict in Kyrgyzstan', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2011/1, Aug. 2011, <http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=429>.

² Kyrgyz Government, *The Conclusion of the National Commission for Investigation of the June Events in the South of Kyrgyzstan* (Kyrgyz Government: Bishkek, 2011).

³ Myrzakmatov, M., *Men Izdegen Chyndyk* [The Truth Which I Sought] (Turar: Bishkek, 2011).

⁴ Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (KIC), *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Events in Southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010* (KIC: Bishkek, 2011).

⁵ Lefranc, S., 'A critique of "bottom-up" peacebuilding: do peaceful individuals make peaceful societies?', eds B. Charbonneau and G. Parent, *Peacebuilding, Memory and Reconciliation* (Routledge: London, 2012), pp. 34–53.

In post-conflict Osh, bottom-up peacebuilding approaches merged with pre-existing participatory development approaches, which also mobilized local communities to reduce the potential for conflict in the Ferghana Valley (which is shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). International actors mobilized *aksakals* (male community elders), women and young people to rebuild social relationships by what was described as ‘doing things together’. For instance, the United Nations peacebuilding projects assume that ‘a return to conflict could be prevented if key sectors of society (women, youth, agricultural communities) were positively engaged in reducing inter-ethnic tension through social cohesion and economic/vocational activities’.⁶

Donors saw these reconciliation and mediation projects as a cost-effective and democratic means of conflict resolution. One development professional involved in running these schemes notes that donors normally prefer to fund training programmes, in part because they are more quantifiable: ‘Trainings and seminars is what donors like to give money for. It’s direct. It’s easy to monitor. The outcomes read like: 50 people trained in human rights standards, 10 people trained in something else’.⁷

In Osh and Djalal-Abad provinces, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) trained 750 community leaders as mediators. In addition, the OSCE set up 11 Youth Councils around Osh to encourage inter-ethnic tolerance and reconciliation among young people. The Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia (EFCA) ran a similar project, called Youth Banks.⁸ Women were also targeted as efficient peace actors.⁹ The UN set up the Women’s Peace Network, represented by 20 Women Peace Committees in 3 southern provinces.¹⁰

QUESTIONING RECONCILIATION INTERVENTIONS

As reconciliation and mediation projects proliferated, they began to overlap, became intertwined with local state and civil society interventions, and had fleeting if deceptive parallels to nationalist state-consolidation programmes. Interviews with participants recruited in projects, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local state officials reveal four major shortcomings of these projects: problematic understanding of the causes of conflict, patronizing and inappropriate teaching methods, their limited reach in recruitment, and their bias against the state.

Problematic understanding of the causes of conflict

Many Osh residents and local NGOs argued that reconciliation and mediation projects were not adequate for rebuilding inter-ethnic relations and preventing future conflict. Local actors stressed that inter-ethnic

⁶ Zapach, M. and Ibraeva, G., *Immediate Response Facility: Final Evaluation, Kyrgyzstan* (United Nations Peacebuilding Fund: New York, June 2012).

⁷ International development professional, Interview with authors, Mar. 2012.

⁸ Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia staff, Interview with authors, Osh, May 2011.

⁹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), ‘OSCE supports women in conflict prevention and reconciliation efforts in southern Kyrgyzstan’, 3 Aug. 2011, <<http://www.osce.org/bishkek/81487>>.

¹⁰ Zapach and Ibraeva (note 6).

tensions could not be overcome by talking about peace, but rather by addressing structural problems such as the lack of economic opportunity, and the failures of the legal system to secure justice for ethnic minorities.

This is not to say that there was universal cynicism. One Uzbek head teacher, who had sent his sons to Russia to protect them from racist attacks, insisted that such peacebuilding projects were effective ‘because they get Uzbek and Kyrgyz children together using a certain methodology that is interactive . . . This is more important and more valuable than money’.¹¹

Patronising or inappropriate delivery of workshops

The sense that donors who promote reconciliation and peacebuilding activities are imposing alien and erroneous assumptions is reinforced through the experiences of some Osh residents. For some people, the format of small group training seminars produced feelings of fatigue, irritation and frustration: ‘What are they going to tell them? It’s been a year, forget everything and make up, you see people have come just for that? These families need practical help!’¹²

These concerns echo the findings of a brief but illuminating report about how these training seminars work. The authors of that report sat in on a training session delivered by a Western employee of the international NGO Saferworld, which had been invited to Osh by EFCA.¹³ They describe participants who were largely uninspired by the training.¹⁴

Problems with recruitment of mediators

A third criticism of the reconciliation and peacebuilding projects is that projects often recruited groups who were already proactive in maintaining peace and who possessed limited political and social capital in their own communities. Strangely, donors engaged social groups who did not directly participate in the violence and failed to involve groups who did.

Furthermore, violence in the 2010 clashes was perpetrated largely by young, economically marginalized men, often outside Osh in mono-ethnic rural areas. Yet it is disproportionately women and the elderly from ethnically mixed areas that have been recruited as ‘mediators’ for training. This is partly due to a commendable but contextually inappropriate political correctness—according to one international donor, ‘we try to ensure gender, age, ethnicity representations, and also involvement of religion’.¹⁵

Bias against the Kyrgyz state

The fourth weakness of projects in Osh is their long-standing bias against the state. Although international actors often insist that they work with state institutions, they generally prefer to invest in ‘civil society’. A UN

¹¹ Uzbek head teacher, Interview with authors, Osh region, July 2011.

¹² Uzbek non-governmental organization employee, Interview with authors, Osh, July 2011.

¹³ Ismailbekova, A. and Sultanaliyev, R., *The Role of NGOs in Conflict Management and Resolution in Post-conflict Osh, Kyrgyzstan* (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs: Oslo, 2012).

¹⁴ Ismailbekova and Sultanaliyev (note 13).

¹⁵ Head of foreign donor organization, Interview with authors, Osh, Oct. 2014.

Development Programme (UNDP) development specialist suggested that the short-term nature of conflict-mitigation projects prevents international actors from meaningfully engaging with the local state.¹⁶

In this sense, peacebuilding promotion differs little from foreign aid programmes that seek to bypass the state both for ideological and practical reasons. For example, international donors may not listen to or consult with *akims* (i.e. head of a local administration) and mayors out of a belief that local state structures are complicit in the violence or in anti-Uzbek reactions to the violence.

EVALUATING RECONCILIATION INTERVENTIONS: THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHNO-POLITICS AND HISTORY

International actors present their efforts to promote peacebuilding, mediation and reconciliation as success stories. Project success is inevitably reported in numerical terms, which are showcased as an achievement with concrete results.¹⁷ However, it is difficult to evaluate the success of these schemes. Furthermore, there is no compelling evidence that the mediation, reconciliation and peacemaking activities led by international donors in southern Kyrgyzstan since 2010 are useful in conflict management, and there are many reasons to suspect that they may be either ineffective or even counterproductive.

The events in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 repeated in significant ways the central dynamics of a previous conflict in 1990, when violence broke out in Osh and spread to neighbouring districts, with an inter-ethnic dimension.¹⁸ These two conflicts point to a set of deep-seated factors at the heart of the emergence of violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in recent decades.

With independence in 1991, the Soviet-era institutionalization of ethnicity in the form of national territorial republics that structurally favoured the titular majorities was maintained and intensified. This ‘titular ethnicization’ has serious implications for newly stranded minorities, who suffer a double vulnerability.¹⁹

The political instability and crisis following the April 2010 overthrow of Bakiyev saw a toxic combination of same five main factors that led to the violence in Osh in 1990 resulting from the unravelling of the Soviet Union.

1. Resentments on both sides created by ethno-territorial settlement, which raises expectations of privilege among Kyrgyz people and experiences of discrimination amongst Uzbek people;
2. Poverty, unemployment and lack of economic opportunity, which disproportionately affected rural Kyrgyz people;

¹⁶ United Nations Development Programme development specialist, Interview with authors, Brussels, Mar. 2012.

¹⁷ See e.g. HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, ‘About TASK Project’, Mar. 2013, <http://assets.helvetas.org/downloads/short_information_about_hsi_task_project_english.pdf>.

¹⁸ Asankanov, A., ‘Ethnic conflict in the Osh region in summer 1990: reasons and lessons’, eds K. Rupesinghe and V. Tishkov, *Ethnicity and Power in the Contemporary World* (United Nations University: Paris, 1996), pp. 116–24.

¹⁹ Haughen, A., *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2003).

3. Kyrgyz fears about Uzbeks challenging the integrity of the state, which circulate as conspiracy theories and rumours;
4. Political instability and crisis; and
5. Institutional weakness, or the inability of administrators and security forces to anticipate, respond to and de-escalate violence.

All of these factors, apart from political instability, have been more or less constants for some time and have not produced large-scale conflicts regularly. Political instability is the single issue that seems key to explaining why violence occurred both in 1990 and 2010.

The late 1990s and early 2000s in particular saw attempts by Western donors to implement conflict-prevention programmes in southern Kyrgyzstan.²⁰ Much foreign intervention has sought to ameliorate the effects of titular ethnicization. However, it is doubtful whether foreign actors have a clear grasp of the structures of titular ethnicization that produce the tensions that they seek to address. Therefore, it is relatively easy for external interventions to prove counterproductive.²¹

It is not the case that foreign donors have only been engaged in mediation training and reconciliation. Significant international donor spending in response to the violence has gone on reconstruction.²² Nonetheless, it is questionable whether the mediation and peacebuilding programmes have been as valuable as donors have claimed, and whether they could be more effective in the light of a better understanding of conflict dynamics.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations fall under two headings. The first set is specific to the peacebuilding, mediation and reconciliation projects considered here. The second set arises from this analysis more generally.

Recommendations for peacebuilding, mediation and reconciliation projects

First, peacebuilding, mediation and reconciliation projects should prioritize working with demographic groups directly involved in perpetrating violence—that is, young, less educated, unemployed males from mono-ethnic areas. Furthermore, reconciliation programmes aimed at young men should go hand in hand with a substantive element of creating economic opportunities for young people.

Second, Western actors must recognize that their brand is tarnished, and that they lack credibility as peacemakers in the eyes of many Kyrgyzstanis. To help address these concerns, donors should aim to support and

²⁰ Saferworld, *Looking Back to Look Forward: Learning the Lessons of Conflict Prevention in the Ferghana Valley* (Saferworld: London, 2011).

²¹ Melvin, N., *Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence*, Central Eurasia Project Occasional Paper Series no. 3 (Open Society Foundations: Washington, DC, 2011); and Megoran, N., *Averting Violence in Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Eurasia Programme Paper 2012/03* (Chatham House: London, 2012).

²² See e.g. Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, *The Kyrgyz Republic: Joint Economic Assessment—Reconciliation, Recovery and Reconstruction* (IMF: Washington, DC, July 2010).

strengthen appropriate and effective Kyrgyzstani conflict-management programmes where they exist.

Third, Western actors should develop more rigorous appraisals of the effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions. As assessments may conclude that these projects should be discontinued rather than revised, and evaluations should be performed by independent organizations.

General recommendations

An examination of the two recent major incidents of violence in southern Kyrgyzstan—in June 1990 and June 2010—indicates significant similar dynamics, which allow the identification of five conflict factors common to both instances: resentments on both sides created structurally by the operation of the ethno-territorial settlement; poverty, unemployment and lack of economic opportunity; Kyrgyz fears about Uzbeks challenging the integrity of the state; political instability; and institutional weakness.

Foreign interventions that attempt to overcome these local tensions through mediation and reconciliation cannot address the structures that produce them. While local resentments, poverty and fears have been more or less constants for three decades, they do not in themselves produce major outbreaks of violence—indeed, such violence has occurred only twice in Kyrgyzstan's recent history, despite the constant presence of these factors. Rather, political instability created a context for the violence to explode.

Therefore, efforts to promote reconciliation between different ethnic groups will not be effective without a lasting political settlement that permits all communities to take part in political life and thrive economically and culturally. Governments in Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries should work together to improve the anti-money laundering regime which make corruption possible and helps to fuel political crisis and thus ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan.²³ Western states should do much more to facilitate the recovery of stolen assets and to tackle tax evasion through their corporate and financial systems.²⁴ More broadly, external actors should consider the wider impact of their activities, including their impact on conflict dynamics in southern Kyrgyzstan. Donors should welcome proposals to fund local civil society monitoring of international programmes for their impact on governance and conflict potential.

Finally, in placing the main emphasis on pursuing reconciliation and mediation projects, donors working on conflict mediation, peacebuilding and reconciliation in Kyrgyzstan may find their efforts are ultimately largely frustrated. These organizations should consider whether there are also ways in which they can begin to address some of the international structures and policies that are continuing to fuel the poor governance and economic failures that contributed to the conflict in the first place.

²³ Global Witness, *Grave Secrecy* (Global Witness: London, July 2012).

²⁴ Tran, M., 'Rich countries failing to address money laundering and tax evasion, says OECD', *The Guardian*, 18 Dec. 2013.

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