

PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION IN LOCAL  
COMMUNITIES IN KYRGYZSTAN  
**good practices & lessons learned**

Dr. Shairbek Dzhuraev  
August 2024

Target Research LLC  
E: [office@target-research.org](mailto:office@target-research.org)  
W: <https://target-research.org/>

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
PURPOSE OF STUDY.....	3
METHODOLOGY.....	4
STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT.....	4
<b>THE PROJECT CONTEXT AND DESIGN</b>	<b>5</b>
BACKGROUND: <i>WHY</i> SOCIAL COHESION IN KYRGYZSTAN?.....	5
DESIGN: <i>HOW</i> TO PROMOTE SOCIAL COHESION?.....	6
<b>LEARNING BY DOING: KEY FINDINGS</b>	<b>10</b>
MANAGING SENSITIVITIES: MOBILIZATION AND ENGAGEMENT.....	10
Finding the right actors: formal leaders vs actual activists.....	10
Ensuring balance: in search of the youth.....	11
Navigating the context: distrust in non-profits and dislike for “projects”..	12
Managing engagement: the group dynamics.....	13
EMPOWERING AND TRUST-BUILDING: SMALL GRANTS.....	14
Small grants: the purpose and process.....	15
Three benefits of small grants.....	16
What were the challenges?.....	17
Seed funding cut short.....	18
PROJECT COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIP.....	19
Maximizing local ownership: two-layered project team.....	19
Managing the differences.....	20
<b>LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>22</b>
LESSONS LEARNED.....	22
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	24
<b>ANNEX 1. DATA SOURCES</b>	<b>27</b>

## INTRODUCTION

Between June 2023 and August 2024, the Kyrgyzstan Country Office of Search for Common Ground (hereafter referred to as Search) implemented the project “Promoting Social Cohesion between Diaspora Groups and Local Communities in Kyrgyzstan” (further referred to as Kyrgyz Jarany project). The initiative focused on enhancing the organizational and technical capacities of ethnic and migrant community groups and fostering closer relations between them.

The project activities, implemented in collaboration with two local non-governmental organizations, included tailored skill-building workshops and supporting formal and informal community organizations by providing small grants and seed funding. The initiative aligned with the national government's policy of promoting civic identity through the notion of "Kyrgyz Jarany" ("Kyrgyz citizen" in Kyrgyz).

## PURPOSE OF STUDY

This report presents the results of a study to identify and document the practices, achievements, and lessons learned from the Kyrgyz Jarany project. Its primary purpose is to contribute to organizational learning and improve future project design and implementation at Search and its local partners. With this broader goal in mind, the analysis proceeds with three key objectives:

- A. Capture the essential components of the intervention, from identification of the problem and design of the project methodology and activities;
- B. Assess what worked well and what did not, and why through gathering insights and observations from all relevant project stakeholders;
- C. Propose a set of lessons learned and recommendations, drawing on positive and reassuring experiences as well as challenges that the project encountered in the process.

Conducting comprehensive learning reviews is a long-standing practice at Search, but three additional factors further necessitated this research. First, the Kyrgyz Jarany project targeted communities traditionally overlooked by similar donor-funded interventions and, thus, represented uncharted territory for the project team. Second, the project engaged with diverse ethnic communities, a subject that is typically securitized and thus sensitive within the Kyrgyz context. Third, the project was conducted in the context of growing

negative discourse on externally funded non-profit initiatives, adding complexity.

## METHODOLOGY

The approach to producing this learning document is built on two methodological decisions. First, the study adopted qualitative research methods best suited to the nature of the task and practical considerations. In addition to relevant project documents, primary data was gathered through key informant interviews (KIIs) and observations at project events, including a focus group discussion, the final closing ceremony and the project-related media products online. The focus group discussion organized by Search featured eight project participants. The KIIs held for this study included eight respondents representing project staff from Search, IDEA CA and IPD, project participants and trainers. The lists of data sources are provided in Annex 1.

The second methodological decision concerned balancing depth and breadth regarding thematic focus. The analysis adopted a hybrid "focused yet flexible" approach that combined a) the focus on three pre-selected priority themes and b) an openness to relevant insights and observations beyond the core themes. In consultation with Search, the following three focus areas for the study were identified:

1. Mobilization and engagement of key beneficiary groups.
2. Utility of small grants and seed funding as instruments of intervention.
3. Project implementation partnership between Search and local CSOs as implementing partners.

## STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The report is structured into four main sections. Following the Introduction, the second section discusses the relevance of promoting social cohesion in Kyrgyzstan and outlines the project design to achieve this objective. The report's core, the "Learning by Doing" section, presents critical insights from the project's implementation. This section covers the core themes, including mobilization and engagement, leveraging small grants and partnership management. The fourth section concludes the report with a list of the lessons learned and actionable recommendations for future initiatives. This part builds on the preceding discussion and may recirculate certain statements from previous sections. Still, the purpose here is to offer a brief wrap-up of key "take-away" messages for similar projects in the future.

## THE PROJECT CONTEXT AND DESIGN

### BACKGROUND: WHY SOCIAL COHESION IN KYRGYZSTAN?

The primary problem that the Kyrgyz Jarany project identified concerned the challenges that ethnic minority and internal migrant communities faced in terms of their integration into broader society “due to cultural and institutional barriers”, as put in the project proposal. Home to over 80 ethnicities, Kyrgyzstan is a diverse society. However, in the first thirty years of independence, the country twice, in 1990 and 2010, faced large-scale interethnic violence, leaving hundreds dead and thousands injured and displaced.

Following the June 2010 violence, the subject of interethnic relations grew increasingly securitized. As a result, public discussion of the subject was often limited to politically convenient and safe aspects. Most ethnic minority communities remained closed and self-contained communities. Promoting a genuine bottom-up integration of diverse ethnic groups emerged as one of the most important conflict-prevention needs of the country, making a perfect match to the concept of social cohesion.

Recognizing the above challenges, the Kyrgyz government adopted a high-level policy document, “Concept of Development of Civic Identity—Kyrgyz Jarany,” in November 2020. The notion of Kyrgyz Jarany as an expression of civic identity was not novel, but for the first time, the document placed civic identity promotion as a critical priority. While the document contained ambiguous propositions, for most international development partners of Kyrgyzstan, the Concept became a much-needed government-endorsed foundation to work on promoting social cohesion projects.

As a legacy of the 2010 violence, most interventions in the field of social cohesion and development focused on Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities. Consequently, sizable ethnic communities without a comparable history of large-scale violence have remained overlooked by these programs despite facing clear challenges in integrating into the civic identity. These included the project's target groups, Dungans and Uyghurs, both concentrated primarily in Chuy province and the capital Bishkek.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The report applies an alphabetic order when listing parallel entities, such as Dungans and Uyghurs, or IDEA CA and IPD, unless the context requires a different order.

**Table 1. Top six ethnicities in Kyrgyzstan**

Ethnicities	Population
Kyrgyz	4,995,877
Uzbeks	999,300
Russians	335,237
Dungans	76,573
Uyghurs	61,033
Tajiks	60,148
Others	219155
Total population	6,747,323

Source: National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2022

## **DESIGN: *HOW TO PROMOTE SOCIAL COHESION?***

As there is no single definition of social cohesion. The concept is “differently appropriated and utilized in many countries across the globe, depending on the context”.<sup>2</sup> Correspondingly, approaches to promote social cohesion are also different, reflecting nuances of specific settings.

The Kyrgyz Jarany project is a relatively small project designed for 14 months. While its broader goal was to “*foster social cohesion between diverse communities in Kyrgyzstan*,” the intervention focused on two specific ethnic minority communities residing in northern provinces of Kyrgyzstan: Dungans and Uyghurs, and representatives of internal migrants, i.e., Kyrgyz communities in new settlements around the capital city of Bishkek.

The project’s activities were organized into two sets, each serving towards a core objective of the project (Table 2).

---

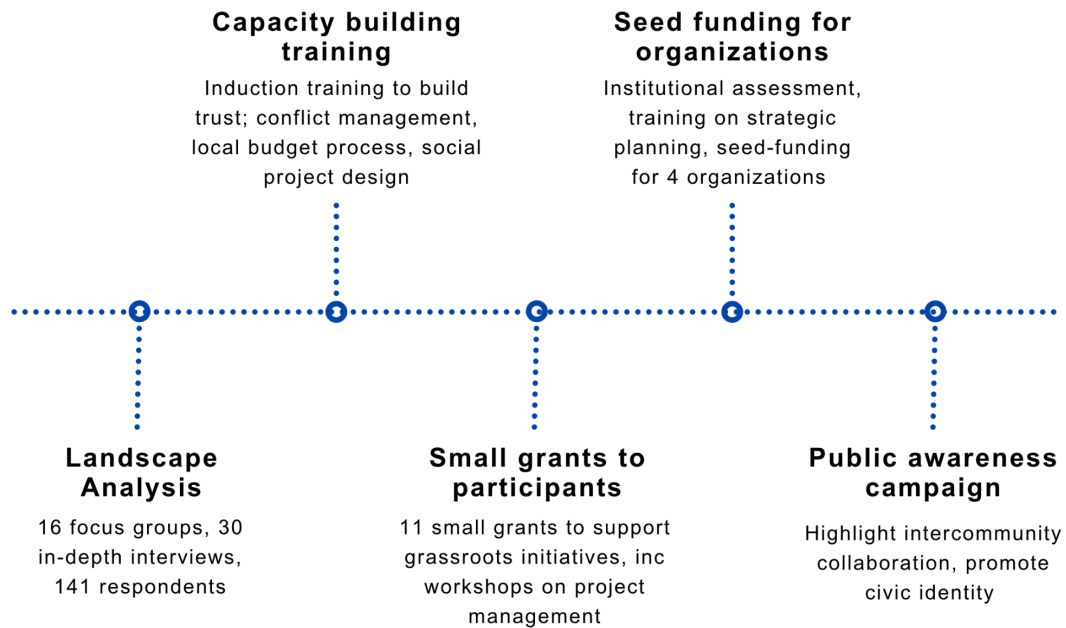
<sup>2</sup> Mopp, Robert, and Daryl Swanepoel. ‘Promoting Social Cohesion: Getting Symbolism, Action and Rhetoric Right’. Occasional Paper 3/2023. Inclusive Society Institute, March 2023, p. 3.

**Table 2. Project objectives and activities**

<b>Objective 1</b> <b>Strengthen the organizational and technical capacities of formal and informal groups representing ethnic and migrant communities</b>	<b>Objective 2</b> <b>Increase relationship-building and understanding between different communities across dividing lines</b>
Landscape study to identify entry points and inform the project activities	Small grants for collaborative activities between communities
Capacity-building training for formal and informal community groups	Public awareness campaign for social cohesion
Targeted seed funding for formal and informal community groups	Development of learning products on best practices

The project timeline included preparatory stages, such as coordination between Search and IPs and completing the Landscape Analysis, with field activities starting in the sixth month, in December 2023. While the core activities rolled out in sequence (see Chart 1), some parts were designed to build on previous activities. Thus, the capacity-building training was a stage where project participants were already tasked to brainstorm local problems that would later feed into small grant activities. Similarly, public awareness activities have already occurred during the implementation of community projects.

**Chart 1. Sequence of project activities**



The capacity-building stage included four different workshops:

- Workshop 1: Induction Training (December 11-13, 2023). Conducted by Search in collaboration with IDEA CA and IPD, this workshop introduced 23 community leaders to the project, worked on trust-building and launched brainstorming on community-level needs and challenges.
- Workshop 2: Managing Diversity and Local Public Budgeting Process (January 31-February 04, 2024). Conducted by IPD, the workshop focused on equipping participants with skills to handle diversity within communities and understand the local public budgeting process.
- Workshop 3: Social Project Design Hackathon (Maketon) and FRIC Session (February 22-25, 2024). Organized by IDEA CA, this was a hands-on workshop using debate technology (Framing, Reasoning, Impact, Comparing) to teach social project design.
- Workshop 4: Training on Project Management. IDEA CA and IPD held separate workshops for their respective groups to help the proposal preparation process for small grants, April 11-14, 2024 and April 15-18, 2024).

The narrative proposal and the preparatory stages reveal four distinct characteristics of the project design.

**Priority of local leadership.** The project team was a consortium, with Search recruiting two local NGOs to lead most project activities. Such design implied the project not only benefited the direct beneficiaries but also strengthened



local CSOs. The partners, IPD and IDEA CA, brought different expertise and experiences to the table, and the joint "co-design" workshops were arranged to allow joint curriculum development.

**Priority of practical engagement over knowledge transfer.** Both project documents and interviews confirm that the project team firmly believed in the priority of practical engagement over theory-heavy, lecture-style capacity building. Correspondingly, the capacity-building activities were limited in scale and focused primarily on confidence-building, project management, organizational development and discussing community projects.

**Priority of trust-building.** Trust is a central ingredient to social cohesion but is also mandatory for successful project implementation. The Kyrgyz Jarany project activities demonstrate the team made trust-building within the group the highest priority. Commissioning of a comprehensive landscape study, organization of a dedicated induction workshop and "extra miles" of work done to address potential trust-related concerns illustrate the point.

**Sensitivity to political context.** Working with local community activists is not a high-level political subject. However, the project team demonstrated sensitivity to the context in Kyrgyzstan, where ethnic relations remain highly securitized. Thus, the project reached out to the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports and Youth Policy (which oversees interethnic relations) and secured its understanding and support of the project's goals.

## LEARNING BY DOING: KEY FINDINGS

### MANAGING SENSITIVITIES: MOBILIZATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Effective mobilization and engagement are critical to a project whose central goal is to empower local community activists and help them grow into active and engaged part of citizenry. Mobilization, for the purposes of this study, implies *the identification and recruitment of project participants from target constituencies*, while engagement stands for *sustained interest and proactive involvement of project participants in the activities*.

For the Kyrgyz Jarany project, mobilization and engagement were part of the expected challenges for at least three reasons. First, recruitment of participants was deliberately chosen to be done through direct reaching out instead of relying on the help of LSGs, as many similar projects do. Second, the key target constituencies, Dungan and Uyghur ethnic communities and internal migrant settlements, are actors that are traditionally outside donor-funded interventions. An invitation to a project would be a novelty for many of them, and thus, it would take extra effort to inform and convince potential project participants. Third, the broader political context posed new challenges. Notably, the discussion of changes to the law on NGOs (so-called "foreign agent law") resulted in a negative perception of donor-funded projects.

Interviews with project staff, trainers, and participants indicate that the expectations outlined above were accurate. Both the mobilization of participants and ensuring their continued engagement proved to be challenging and required extra attention and efforts.

#### Finding the right actors: formal leaders vs actual activists

##### **What was the challenge?**

Recruitment of the right local actors was the first manifestation of the mobilization challenges. Recognizing the relatively under-studied state of organized and informal civic activism in target communities, Search commissioned a Landscape Analysis. The mission of the study was broad, including identification of grassroots initiatives, self-mobilization efforts, capacity-building needs, and identifying avenues for joint initiatives. The team also expected that the Landscape Analysis would produce a list of potential project participants, thus supporting the recruitment process.

The landscape analysis proved to be of partial use in the recruitment of project participants. While it produced a comprehensive knowledge base on target communities and their challenges, the list of key actors it provided was only partially relevant to the project. "As we requested, the analysis produced a list of leaders and opinion-makers, but we realized formal leaders are not always the ones engaged or willing to engage in civic activism", a project staff says. A colleague concurs, adding, "There were more than 80 people on the list, but many did not agree, forcing additional rounds of participant identification".

### **How was the challenge addressed?**

The project team resorted to a combination of referrals, network scanning and direct contacts to reach out to new potential project participants. Thus, they used networks of colleagues who had connections or prior involvement with relevant target communities. "We also used Google and Instagram accounts to identify active individuals and organizations," a project member recounts. One of the consortium members, IPD, runs a network of "peace clubs" across the country, and this network proved to be a beneficial resource for reaching out to relevant individuals. At a later stage, the project team utilized the help of already recruited participants to identify and invite more participants from relevant communities.

## **Ensuring balance: in search of the youth**

### **What was the challenge?**

The initial cohort of project participants included a very few young individuals. One of the IPs, IDEA Central Asia, is renowned for its active work with the youth, and its involvement in the project partly presupposed working with the youth. However, the very first workshop revealed disbalance. The interviews suggest at least three explanations for this. First, the Landscape Analysis was tasked with identifying active organizations and their leaders, but it was not tasked with ensuring age balance. Since most self-organized groups, formal or informal, turned out to predominantly include the elderly, the initial list of potential participants indeed lacked youth. Second, both Dungans and Uyghurs are culturally conservative groups, with age-based hierarchy being one of the organizing principles of the community. Third, as one respondent mentioned, the younger generation in targeted communities have a "bags packed" mood, ready to move away from their communities, either to the capital city or abroad. Therefore, it was difficult to find young people who would see their future in their towns or villages.

### **How was the challenge addressed?**

Recruiting further to make the group more diverse in terms of age was the only way to address the disbalance. The project team decided to remain open to adding new participants in the process instead of “fixing” the list of participants from the onset.

Given the importance of the cultural context, i.e., the age-based hierarchical relations, the project team found it was most effective to search for additional young participants via the existing cohort of older participants. “What we did was ask active participants to find young and active members of their communities and invite them to the project”, according to a project team member.

### **Navigating the context: distrust in non-profits and dislike for “projects”**

#### **What was the challenge?**

Central to challenges with the mobilization of project participants was a broader context in the country. The project launch coincided with an intense phase of public debate surrounding the so-called “foreign agent law.”<sup>3</sup> During this period, the country's parliament approved amendments to the NGO law, introducing the term “foreign representative,” which would be mandatory for CSOs engaged in “political” activities while receiving foreign funding. High-level political rhetoric accusing NGOs of serving foreign interests exacerbated public sentiment against non-profits, labelling them as “grant-eaters” and potential “agents” of foreign influence.

In addition to the NGO law, the political context also included a peculiar attitude towards non-state actors and their projects among Dungans and Uyghurs. These are “historically isolated and culturally very closed communities” and are not keen to get engaged with projects of this sort, a project staffer says. Several leaders of the Uyghur community happened to be arrested in cases involving organized crime and high-level politics. Given the fact that the Uyghur community has a reasonably centralized leadership, the arrests made many community members feel the pressure of being “watched” by the state, a factor not conducive to proactive civic engagement.

Dungans are less centralized and are organized into several distinct communities, both geographically and culturally. But common to all is their desire to remain “invisible” and prevent any form of misalignment with the

---

<sup>3</sup> The President of the country signed the bill into law in March 2024, after the project launch.

government. Thus, the Dungan community leaders showed a strong desire to ensure the project was pre-approved by relevant government agencies. A good illustration of the above was an innocent question from a project participant asking, "I hope you are not Americans". Others asked a series of questions, such as "who is funding the project?", "how come you do this for free for us?" and so on.

### **How was the challenge addressed?**

A careful communication strategy was developed to address the concerns of project members. First, the project team emphasized their identity as entirely local non-profit organizations and local citizens. Both IDEA CA and IPD, which directly engaged with project participants, are indeed local non-profits with a proven track record of delivering projects that empower local communities. Second, while the grant funding originated from abroad, participants were reminded at each stage that they would have a direct role in shaping the project's content, from selecting workshop topics to designing community projects for small grants.

Furthermore, participants were reassured that the Kyrgyz government was not only aware of the project but had also endorsed it. Search held a special meeting with the Deputy Minister of Culture, who is the government's high-level focal point on interethnic relations. This meeting resulted in a full understanding and backing for the project. Thus, the project team proactively communicated the government's support, the participants' leading role in shaping the program, and the fact that the implementing organizations were local to Kyrgyzstan.

### **Managing engagement: the group dynamics**

#### **What was the challenge?**

Once the project participants were successfully recruited, the priority was ensuring their sustained interest and participation. The findings of this study suggest that the project has not faced major difficulties with engagement. Overall, the group was highly motivated and eager to participate. That said, three observations were made pointing to challenges that had to be overcome.

First, the group dynamics, particularly in the first stages of the project, featured the domination of elderly members. Younger participants were not only fewer in number but also felt less free to speak up in front of the older leaders of their communities. Beyond the matter of participation, the age and

language skills diversity in the group also required a differentiated approach to learning pace and instruments.

Second, the initial group activities revealed fault lines between different groups of the same community. Thus, the Dungan community leaders from different geographic locations turned out to have limited interaction and demonstrated a degree of occasionally unhealthy competitiveness in the process.

### **How was the challenge addressed?**

Three implementing partners held a series of "co-design" sessions to jointly discuss approaches to delivering training most effectively and also made efforts to communicate this priority to invited trainers. As a result, several methodological decisions were adopted to ensure the group dynamics did not derail the purpose of the sessions.

First, the project team decided the workshops must adopt "human language" and avoid the project vocabulary. As one of the project leaders said, discussing and promoting social cohesion without mentioning it was crucial. Similarly, the project activities were designed to avoid lecture-style sessions aimed at informing participants of abstract notions. Thus, spending too much on international human rights protection standards would be irrelevant to the daily needs of project participants and risk creating a sense of disillusionment about the gap between "how things should be" and "how things are". Instead, the team decided to focus on practical and context-relevant subjects.

Second, several workshops employed innovative instruments for group work to encourage participants to move beyond their comfort zone and appreciate the complex nature of relations, stereotypes and conflicts. Thus, the Karpman Drama Triangle was employed in the induction workshop to help participants understand the psychological foundations of conflict patterns. Application of simulation at the IDEA CA workshop was also designed deliberately to drag participants out of their roles and, through the need to play the character, appreciate the viewpoints of "other" roles, whether based on gender, age, social status or other.

## **EMPOWERING AND TRUST-BUILDING: SMALL GRANTS**

Supporting selected community organizations and activists with small grants was a cornerstone of the project. The grants provided funding for carrying out specific community-level initiatives that project participants developed in the

course of capacity-building workshops. The project also supported community organizations with seed funding, i.e., small grants aimed at supporting the institutional development of community organizations. This section appraises how Search and its implementing partners executed the small grants for community projects.

### Small grants: the purpose and process

The project narrative envisaged ten small grants and ten seed fund grants. These were estimates before the project started, and the actual number of grants disbursed was 11 and seed funding grants - 4.

**Table 3. List of small grant projects**

Kyrgyz language courses for Dungans in Aleksandrovka and Milanfan	A forum on preventing early marriages in Ken Bulun
Improving tax literacy among individual entrepreneurs	Promoting non-violent communication between parents and children
Social cohesion among ethnic minorities via cultural events	Forum "Unity in Diversity - Progress in Development" to discuss the Kyrgyz Jarany concept
Three-day summer camp for 50 young activists to develop leadership, teamwork and public speaking	A football tournament among school children dedicated to a campaign against pharmacy drug addiction
Promoting open dialogue and empathy in the family context	Online dance tournament and dance team development

According to the project proposal, small grants would follow after the capacity-building workshops and seed-funding provision. The core idea behind the small grants was to strengthen social cohesion *between* communities to “foster a greater sense of community across social dividing lines, including at organizational, community, and person-to-person levels (as per the Proposal). Furthermore, as project team members said, the small

grants were also designed to give the community activists a "taste of civic activism" and put the knowledge and skills on the topic into practice.

The project's work on small grants included three phases: idea generation, project management skill-building, and grant disbursement and mentoring.

- **Idea generation** started from the initial Induction training, where project participants were asked to brainstorm on community needs. The process continued in subsequent workshops culminating in preparation and submission of formal project proposals to one of IPs. Project staff members remained actively engaged in giving feedback to refine ideas but ensured that ownership for proposals were fully with project participants.
- **Project management skills:** along with discussing ideas for community-level initiatives, the project participants were also provided with a set of workshops on social project management. In particular, the joint workshop 3 called "Social Project Design Makeathon" aimed, among others, at capacitating participants on project designing and implementation. Furthermore, workshop 4, delivered by IDEA CA and IPD separately, also focused on project management.
- **Project implementation.** Following the review of small grants proposals, a total of 11 proposals were approved and grants disbursed. The IPs and trainers remained available to provide support or advice to respective small grant-recipients in the course of project implementation.

### Three benefits of small grants

Small grants proved to be a highly relevant and successful component of the project, a message echoed by both project participants and project team members. The positive feedback received during this study could be grouped into three statements.

First, small grants are critical to trust building. As one of the core project team members said, small grants were a critical element that reversed the scepticism of many participants about the project. A high level of distrust about foreign-funded projects was evident among the project participants both during recruitment and early phase workshops. The image of NGOs as "grant eaters" who make money while not doing something worthwhile has long become part of political discourse in the country. In this context, small grants played a crucial role in reversing the tide. During the designing and implementation of the community initiatives, the project participants received



hands-on experience of how a "project" works. The resulting trust, while not necessarily the central goal of small grants, will likely contribute to greater proactiveness of community leaders.

Second, small grants allowed effective dissemination of the project's values. In implementing their community initiatives, the project participants emerged a transmission belt, furthering the project's message and values to their local contexts. As one project member said, "The project improved us, and we worked to improve others" with the help of the grants. A good example is a project that tackled early marriage problems in a Dungan community in Ken Bulun. In a conservative environment, the topic is susceptible, with early marriages seen as a norm by significant and influential categories, starting with religious leaders to the elderly in general and even among the youth. A project participant who initiated the project received feedback: "You are throwing a challenge to the whole community". Yet, she received very reassuring feedback upon completion of the project, with young people saying they changed their views on the subject.

Third, small grants strengthened community organizations. The experience of receiving a grant and implementing a community-level action had a significant impact on the local standing of Kyrgyz Jarany project participants. Several project participants said the experience strengthened the respect they had in their communities. In several locations, the small grant activities brought together heads of LSGs, local law enforcement officers, informal leaders and even national parliament members. Also, the project management training that participants received before small grants also proved to be an investment in the organizational skills of project participants. Thus, even though the project had other components for organizational development (capacity building workshops, seed funding), the small grant projects have also contributed to this.

### **What were the challenges?**

While overall, it was a very positive and reassuring experience, the small grants component revealed a few challenges for the project team.

#### **Intra-group competitiveness**

The project team members noted a sense of competition between participants, particularly in the earlier phases of the project. While aimed as an opportunity to benefit a community, small grants also had a potential to cause conflicts, a project member said. To prevent any doubts, suspicions and

ambiguity, the project team adopted a basic principle of openness and fairness. The small grant amounts were all equal in all cases, and the selection of proposals was a collegial decision.

### **Lack of experience**

For most project participants, the small grant was the first time they designed and carried out a project. The relative inexperience meant that some project proposals, especially at initial stage, were overly ambitious, aiming at influencing national policies. In another extreme, the community organizations had an overwhelming anxiety about the responsibility and possible mistakes they could make. The project staff addressed these challenges through regular advice, feedback and being available to address emerging questions.

### **Rural economy challenges**

In several cases, project participants faced problems with collecting necessary papers for accounting (invoices, receipts). Small-scale businesses in rural areas rarely provide such papers. Moreover, the project overlapped with the period of new accounting requirements, further complicating the task. In a few cases, project participants were allowed waivers, but in others, the project participants succeeded in forcing local businesses to produce necessary documents. "Thanks to our project, now all shops in our village have the necessary papers to conduct business," a project participant said half-jokingly.

### **Timing matters**

The implementation period of small grants overlapped with the last weeks of the academic year. This caused challenges for the project participants with ensuring attendance of relevant groups, especially school children and teachers.

### **Seed funding cut short**

As part of Objective 1 (Strengthen the organizational and technical capacities of formal and informal groups representing ethnic and migrant communities), the project initiated the provision of seed funding for organizational development. In the course of the project, the team realized that community activists were primarily individuals, not organizations. A few formally registered organizations were run in a fairly informal way, with poor record of bookkeeping, little concern about institutional policies and other documents. The organizational assessment found only four organizations could benefit from receiving seed funding.

Following the selection of four organizations, the IPs provided additional workshops on organizational development and strategic planning. The project participants felt the workshops were very important for their organizations. The extent to which these activities can alter organizational practices remains a question. As one of the trainers said, community-level organizations with a poor record of institutional development would most benefit from tailored consultancy rather than general workshops.

## **PROJECT COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIP**

The third task of this study was to identify good practices and challenges in project implementation. The core question in this section was, "How has the partnership performed during project implementation?"

The interview respondents concur that Search project staff are professional, open, and flexible. Both the IPs and trainers who dealt with Search stress that the project coordination team members were always thoughtful, sensitive to the context, and professional. Project participants extended similar commentaries to the project teams of IDEA CA and IPD, emphasizing very warm human relations and a top-level professional attitude.

Organizationally, the major novelty of the project was a consortium-like partnership between Search and two local NGOs in designing and implementation of the project activities.

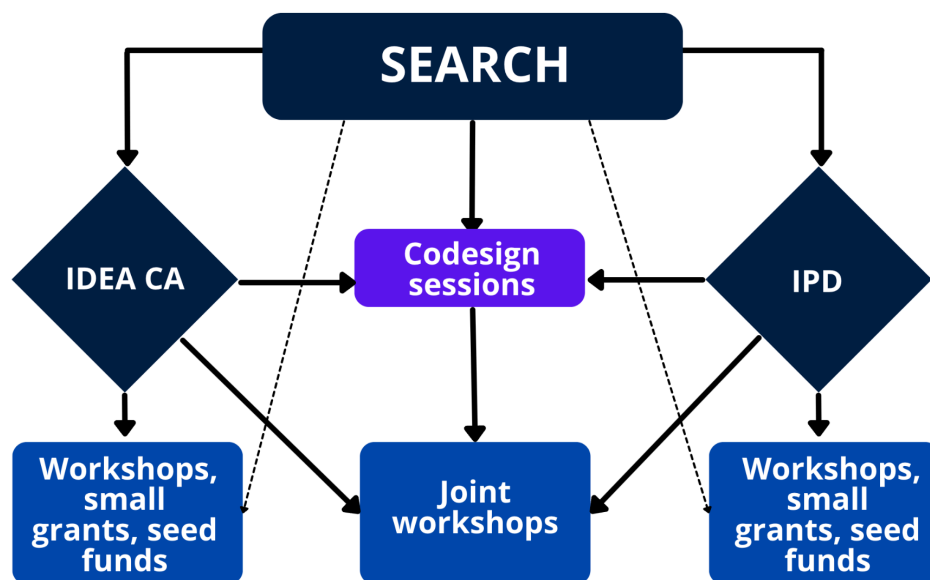
### **Maximizing local ownership: two-layered project team**

The project coordination comprised two layers. Search was the primary grant recipient and the main implementing entity. To support the implementation, Search engaged two local non-profit organizations, IDEA Central Asia (IDEA CA) and the Institute for Peace and Development (IPD), as local implementing partners (Chart 2). These partners worked directly with project participants and managed 61% of the overall grant budget.

IDEA CA is a youth-led nonprofit that promotes equal partnership and youth participation through awareness raising, capacity building, civic education, and public dialogue. IPD is a nonprofit organization that advances peace and social cohesion by supporting peace initiatives, civic education, and dialogue.

The division of labour within the project was well-defined at a schematic level. The capacity-building component included three workshops led by one of the three partners: Search, IPD and IDEA CA. Following this, project participants were divided into two groups, with IDEA CA and IPD each taking responsibility for one group. This phase also included additional workshops on project management to prepare for the small grants. Before launching the active phase, Search and the two implementing partners conducted a series of co-design sessions to collaboratively discuss and develop the training curriculum.

**Chart 2. Project team diagram**



### **Managing the differences**

While the project coordination design performed well, two issues surfaced during the implementation. The first concerned the challenges of having two IPs assume the leading roles. The Search's reports reveal that during the co-design sessions, it faced IPs limiting the proposed training workshops to topics of their organizational expertise. Thus, IDEA CA proposed a focus on youth and activism, while IPD suggested utilizing its existing network of local peace clubs and collaboration with LSGs.

Two IPs were encouraged to shape the project content actively. However, the overall project design was already in place when they joined the project. Search used co-design sessions to push for a curriculum tailored to the needs and priorities of this particular project and encouraged partners to look beyond the familiar best practices. The organization of dedicated co-design sessions and the fact that all three organizations were open-minded and flexible helped move the process.

The second challenge that emerged revolved around the relationship between two IPs. The project proposal did not clearly state why Search would recruit two local NGOs, nor did it specify the division of roles between these equally competent but very different organizations. To ensure horizontal and symmetric distribution of roles, each of the IPs organized one of the joint workshops before assuming leadership over half of the group to work on small grants. The division of project participants into two groups was not based on geography or age. The vagueness of the role distribution and insufficient communication resulted in the IPs having occasional misunderstandings over relatively minor “working-level” issues.

The above challenge became particularly evident when the project faced the need to interact with a government agency on particular project activity. One of the community organizations that went through rapid institutional development assessment had allegedly complained to a government agency about the kind of questions it was asked. The assessment included a series of checklist-type questions quizzing the organization's existing practices, and these were apparently misinterpreted by the party that reported to the government. The recently adopted changes to the law on NGOs might have further contributed to that decision.

While the contents of the case remain beyond the scope of this study, the case illustrated very well the limits of communication and mutual understanding between two IPs. IDEA CA and IPD appeared to have different views on how to act and react in such circumstances. More importantly, they seemed to have differing accounts of what had actually happened and why. The case does not need to be overblown: the incident was resolved, and two organizations successfully completed the project. All parties involved understand they have differences, including on preferred communication approaches and strategies. Yet, this experience is one where each organization will draw a lesson for the future.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### LESSONS LEARNED

The following is a list of ten lessons learned from the Kyrgyz Jarany project. These statements draw equally from positive and challenging aspects of this project, in line with the statement that “lessons learned are the documented information that reflects both the positive and negative experiences of a project”.<sup>4</sup>

**Understanding the cultural context is critical to the successful mobilization of the local community.**

The Kyrgyz Jarany project has demonstrated how awareness of and adjustment to the specific cultural context were vital to ensuring buy-in by the target communities. The key ethnic groups targeted in this project had actively religious communities, limited exposure to donor-funded interventions and historical wariness of politically sensitive topics. The project team had to account for these and related contextual factors, which manifested in challenges with participant recruitment, relations between different age groups within the community activists, and so on.

**Risk aversion and conflict avoidance of ethnic minority groups are their survival strategies but do not necessarily imply harmony and cohesion.**

In the course of the project, ethnic minority representatives demonstrated a high level of political awareness and ability to avoid potentially escalatory language. This behavior, reminiscent of Soviet-time practice of celebratory demonstration of “friendship of people”, feeds the government’s rhetoric of interethnic harmony and cohesion. Such an approach warrants more critical appraisal.

**Small and insecure ethnic communities are highly susceptible to the political rhetoric of the government of the day.**

The challenges with project mobilization were not exclusively cultural. Many people openly questioned the “Western” roots of the project funding, expressing concerns about the “real intentions” behind such projects. Such reactions are in line with the fairly aggressive political narratives in the country

---

<sup>4</sup> Rowe, S.F., and S. Sikes. ‘Lessons Learned: Taking It to the next Level’. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2006. Project Management Institute, 2006.  
<https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/lessons-learned-next-level-communicating-7991>.

that are a) anti-civil society and b) anti-Western. The project benefited from having secured the endorsement of the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports and Youth Policy on this project.

**Participant recruitment cannot be taken for granted, even after a comprehensive study.**

The challenges with participant recruitment were not unexpected. However, the expectations of the utility of the Landscape Analysis for recruitment purposes turned out to be misplaced. The said analysis helpfully set the context and produced a solid knowledge of relevant communities' needs. However, identifying specific persons for the project participation and securing their commitment requires a process separate from social research.

**The “project language” and lecture-style workshops are best avoided when working with grassroots activists.**

The Kyrgyz Jarany project benefited from the team's principled decision to "promote social cohesion without mentioning 'social cohesion'". The vocabulary used in project proposals is far from familiar to community activists and can only help reinforce pre-existing suspicions about the uncertain motives of the project. Moreover, most concepts indeed originate in Western cultural contexts and do not seamlessly translate into local languages, including notions of "identity", "social cohesion", or "empowerment", so central to the project. Similarly, given the educational and professional background of community-level activists in rural areas, traditional lecture-style workshops are best avoided in favour of activities that are practical and easily applicable to the local environment.

**Role-playing and focusing on local context are key to building engagement and trust.** Closely related to the above is the methodological "take-away": gamified activities (e.g. simulation games) that assign specific roles work very well to break the ice and help the group move beyond the imposing stereotypes. Also, the project's insistence on identifying specific needs in specific communities was crucial to get the discussion to turn live and emotional, thus building the in-group trust and confidence.

**Small grants are critically effective for community empowerment projects.** The built-in component of small grants for community projects was the single most effective component of the Kyrgyz Jarany project. Among several benefits it yielded was its role in ensuring the participants' trust in the project. Project participants received funding to carry out a project of their choice and design. This experience contributed to the local standing of project

activists and expanded the circle of beneficiaries of the Kyrgyz Jarany project. Thus, small grants had catalytic effects at the local level.

**Grassroots activism in rural areas is inherently informal.**

The Kyrgyz Jarany started with a good understanding of how big the "informal" nature of the self-organization of activists in target communities is. The project development confirmed this in full. Often, the organizations and leaders known publicly to represent ethnic communities did not match the notion of "community leaders and activists". Instead, such entities played rather formal roles, often limited to representative roles in various government-endorsed platforms. In turn, many community-level activists had no organization as such. The project's success with small grants compared to seed funding illustrates this lesson well.

**A flexible approach is mandatory in community empowerment projects.**

The Kyrgyz Jarany project has demonstrated more than once how important it was to keep the project flexible and, thus, adjustable to the context. One illustration is the distribution of small grants and seed funding - the project team was able to respond to the context and modify the number and the size of grants to better serve the needs and interests of project participants. Given how this project was the first-ever "project experience" for many, it was the project's flexibility that allowed a smooth process and effective adjustment to emerging situations.

**Having multiple implementing parties requires rigorous and comprehensive pre-project agreement.**

The Kyrgyz Jarany project revealed the benefits and challenges stemming from having several NGOs in charge of the project. One important lesson learned was the need for detailed clarification of roles, risk mitigation strategies, and coordination of approaches in project content and communication with external stakeholders. Search and its IPs applied a genuinely participatory approach, but the co-design sessions were limited to specific activities and practicalities. In addition to the "pre-project" coordination, in multi-partner projects, it is also critical to institutionalize continuous feedback to ensure IPs are well-prepared and to agree and adjust approaches as and when necessary.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This section builds on the study's key findings to provide a set of recommendations for future initiatives. Each project is unique, and lessons



learned from one may not always apply to another. However, these recommendations are intended to guide projects that share specific characteristics with this one. They are not universally applicable but offer insights for projects facing similar contexts, challenges, or objectives.

- **Encourage local ownership and leadership.** This statement has long become a mantra, but its genuine implementation remains rare. The Kyrgyz Jarany demonstrated both why this is important and how to do it. Project participants, especially those from rural communities who are not "usual suspects" for various initiatives, develop trust and enthusiasm when they "own" the project idea. Involving local NGOs as leading implementers is another layer of empowering local actors worth replicating.
- **Invest in understanding the local context.** Before designing specific project activities, it is essential that the project team has a deep and shared understanding of the needs and sensitivities of the target communities. Understanding local context is hypothetically an endless process. However, the project team should at least cover the most important political, historical, and cultural specifics, including those related to age hierarchies, gender roles, and even the main types of occupation in the given locations. The Landscape Analysis provided such leverage and is worth replicating in the future.
- **Utilize small grants to empower local leaders.** Grassroots-level activists are legitimate actors who know the needs of the community, but they may not be most experienced or even available to lead systematic civic activism. Small grants are a sweet spot instrument. Successful projects may have catalytic effects, turning the activists into more confident change-makers or serving as templates for larger projects. The very process of identifying projects for small grants can present valuable data on the needs and wants of local communities.
- **Develop a risk mitigation strategy.** Identifying potential risks and assessing their likelihood or impact are not sufficient. Some risk factors allow for relatively straightforward risk prevention measures. Some risks may be too complex to prevent and require a well-thought-out mitigation plan, i.e., actions that minimize the damage. In countries like Kyrgyzstan, risks arising from the political context are particularly significant, especially on issues that the government has treated as sensitive or securitized. At a bare minimum, risk mitigation should include a) continuous context scanning and analysis and b) an agreed plan for coherent and consistent communication with relevant stakeholders.

- **Keep project framework flexible.** Projects that target communities with limited exposure to similar projects in the past are inevitably in uncharted territory. Preliminary analyses will not account for all important matters. Therefore, designing the project with a significant space for flexibility is crucial. It will allow the project team to adjust to the emerging local context, allow tailoring specific interventions to the needs of particular actors, and thus, result in more effective and impactful projects. The Kyrgyz Jarany project faced the need to adapt its small grants and seed funding parameters to better respond to the demands on the ground and benefited from grant flexibility to do that.
- **Invest in building strong local consortia.** The "local turn" is the reality of the day in development and peacebuilding. In addition to creating local ownership, there is a related but distinct need to develop a robust network of local implementing partners. The Kyrgyz Jarany project involved two local NGOs as leading IPs. Future projects should view such partnerships as strategic rather than ad hoc and commit the necessary time and resources to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks associated with collaboration. This approach requires careful planning, including clear definitions of roles, code of conduct agreements, and effective communication channels for regular updates and emergencies. Local organizations will inevitably differ from one another and international counterparts. Therefore, collaborative projects should steer clear of a one-size-fits-all model and instead play to the strengths of each partner and encourage mutual learning.

## ANNEX 1. DATA SOURCES

### **Documents**

- Narrative Project Proposal
- Landscape Analysis
- Quarterly Reports
- Workshop programs and learning documents from each session
- Workshop trainers' reports
- Small grant proposals
- Organizational assessment reports

### **Interviews**

1. Aida Kurbanova, trainer
2. Aidana Aitbaeva, Search for Common Ground
3. Aizada Ruslanova, IDEA Central Asia
4. Azat Muradyl, trainer
5. Begaim Kulova, IDEA Central Asia
6. Ilkham Umarakhunov, Search for Common Ground
7. Samat Abilov, project participant
8. Ulugbek Nurumbetov, IPD

### **Additional events observed**

- Focus group discussion held by Search for Common Ground with the participation of eight project participants
- A closing ceremony of the project hosted by IDEA Central Asia featuring project participants' presentations