



FIRST PERSON

Bringing Messages of Peace to the Border

A teacher from the conflict-affected south uses theater to engage youth in community dialogue



Photo: IREX

Suhrob Ergashev, above center, experienced the benefits of participatory theater and now shares his knowledge with his students.

“I was nervous to go to the Kyrgyz-language school at first, because I was afraid of how my students would be received. But our performance created dialogue and many of the youth are still friends.”

—Suhrob Ergashev, teacher from Andarak, a Tajik-speaking community in Batken region

“I am a citizen of Kyrgyzstan,” Suhrob Ergashev, an ethnic Tajik, says proudly when asked about his nationality. He is a history teacher in Andarak, a small community near the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, where teenagers more frequently leave home for low-wage migrant work than for university. Yet Ergashev’s students now dialogue with their community through Drama Clubs he founded with help from USAID’s Youth Theater for Peace (YTP) program, which promotes community-level conflict prevention using a participatory theater methodology called Drama for Conflict Transformation.

Ergashev brings a quiet but noticeable energy to any room; his students clearly adore him. It’s hard to believe he wasn’t always this engaged in his community. “Forum Theater has changed me as a human being,” Ergashev reflects, referring to the Drama for Conflict Transformation methodology he was trained to facilitate. “Before the training, I didn’t know how to connect with youth. I would go to my history lesson and then go home. I was reserved. Now I have 100% attendance in my class and I communicate with my students’ parents.”

The Andarak Drama Club presents monthly Forum Theater plays, including a recent performance at the top Kyrgyz-language school in the area. “I was nervous to go there at first because I was afraid of how my students would be received – they are Tajik speakers,” Ergashev recalls. “But the performance created dialogue and many of the youth are still friends.”

The Andarak theater group is one of 22 drama clubs established under the YTP program in Kyrgyzstan that have reached over 9,000 people with plays on local conflict issues.

Ergashev has big plans to continue engaging his community’s youth through theater. He’s starting an NGO that will serve as a legally registered fundraising base for Drama for Conflict Transformation projects, and applying for a grant through YTP to train more teachers and students and help them start their own drama clubs. “Forum Theater has changed me to become more involved, and more open,” Ergashev says. There is no doubt his experience and community work will inspire others. When a group of YTP youth participants is asked to describe the qualities of a leader they admire, hands shoot up: “We want to tell you about our teacher, Suhrob.”