Unlocking the social innovation and entrepreneurism of Uzbek youth

UNDP and UNV harness the social innovation of young people to tackle development challenges in Uzbekistan.

The joint United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme Social Innovation and Volunteerism in Uzbekistan Project is harnessing the social innovation of young people to tackle development challenges.

By providing training, advocacy, and grants to young innovators UNV is helping to unlock the talent and entrepreneurial skills of Uzbek youth, many of whom previously lacked opportunities to contribute to development.

The project has mobilized thousands of young people across Uzbekistan, and has launched a range of creative youth-led initiatives related to income generation and the environment—from handicrafts and knitting workshops for disabled Uzbek girls to Uzbekistan’s first cloth ‘eco’ shopping bag scheme.
People under 30 constitute more than sixty percent of Uzbekistan’s total population and face many of the same challenges as their counterparts in other developing countries: high unemployment and limited ability to participate in development processes. Uzbekistan has a long tradition of mutual help, but this has been largely localized to the community level.

In order to create an enabling environment for youth volunteerism, to systematize it and broaden its scope beyond the community level, and to empower young innovators to tackle development challenges in their communities, UNV and UNDP jointly developed the Social Innovation and Volunteerism in Uzbekistan Project (SIV) in 2012.

Social innovation and volunteerism in Uzbekistan was made possible by contributions from the governments of Korea, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, UNDP, and UNV.

UNV is playing a crucial role in managing the project. Out of 13 project staff, 10 are UN Volunteers, specialized in IT and volunteer mobilization. The project is run from a central headquarters in the capital, Tashkent, but has a regional presence in order to ensure that the project reaches young people in rural areas, who likely have fewer opportunities than their urban counterparts.

The regional representatives, who are national UN Volunteers, help deliver initiatives such as the small grants scheme, and train volunteer leaders, NGOs, and local government authorities on various aspects of community action and development. One representative, Maksuda Muhsinbaeva, supports local youth volunteers by conducting HIV/AIDS training, distributing information booklets, and preparing training and advocacy materials.

According to Ms. Muhsinbaeva “strengthening the culture of volunteerism is a crucial step, as much of the population is still unaware of the important work that volunteers do.”

Youth volunteerism and innovation do not necessarily happen on their own – they need an enabling environment to thrive. For young volunteers to bring innovative perspectives to development challenges, and moreover, to be empowered to put them into practice, they need to be equipped with the necessary tools and knowledge and given an open, safe environment to work in.

The project therefore aims to provide young people with a safe space for participation in volunteerism, and where innovative youth-led ideas can be nurtured. The project therefore undertook to develop a nationwide code of conduct for volunteers, launch a volunteer toolkit, establish a nationwide network of regional UNV representatives, and create an online portal, which has helped more than 150 young volunteers to find volunteering opportunities.
SIV is working to nurture a culture of innovation in Uzbekistan by providing IT equipment and skills training to young people, organizing public events called ‘Café Scientifique’, where young people and others can discuss scientific topics with broader social relevance, and, in partnership with a private Uzbek tech company called brand.uz, inviting young innovators to create mobile applications with a social impact.

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In addition, SIV is supporting young innovators by awarding small grants to youth groups across the country that develop creative solutions to the environmental, social and health challenges that their communities face.

In 2013, the project awarded grants of goods and services each equivalent to $1,500 to 18 groups. One, called “Club Fantasy”, was launched by youth volunteer Lola Yuldasheva in order to teach knitting and handcraft skills to young women with disabilities, increasing their professional skills and their opportunities to gain economic independence in the future. For young participants like Khakinjanova Mavluda, “Club Fantasy” was a powerful experience that not only taught them handiwork skills, but also gave them the desire and confidence to start social enterprises of their own.

Volunteer Husan Umarov, supported by the grants programme, developed a social and learning club at a nursing home in Tashkent region that brings other young volunteers to the home to socialize with residents and teach them how to use computers. This inter-generational support has a powerful effect: not only are elderly residents empowered to read the newspaper online and communicate with their family members, but the young volunteers also learn valuable life lessons and better understand the experiences of older people.

Another initiative, undertaken in partnership with a large Uzbek supermarket chain, Korzinka.uz, aims to raise public awareness about the environmental costs of using plastic shopping bags and promotes the use of ‘eco-friendly’ cloth bags instead. The project, run entirely by young volunteers, uses bags manufactured in social enterprises which were organized with support of UNDP to promote employment among vulnerable groups, and expects to give up to 60,000 consumers a day the option of purchasing the eco-bags.

Based on the success of the project, two other shopping chains have also expressed an interest in selling the eco-bags. The eco-bags initiative is the result of an activity of the programme designed to stimulate youth innovation for development: the ‘Social Innovation Lab’. The labs were developed with the help of a partner university in Tashkent, and aim to
provide access to the necessary equipment and expertise to help youth social innovation ideas grow into mature development projects.

Labs are held throughout the year in different locations around the country. One lab that ran from 9-11 July 2014 explored the idea of recycling items that otherwise would have been thrown away, such as plastic bottles and wooden pallets, and turning them into sofas and other pieces of furniture that could be donated to orphanages and other social institutions that didn’t have enough money to buy their own goods.

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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production