



## SUCCESS STORY

# Learning About Differences, and Celebrating Them

**Innovative program emphasizes religious understanding, fun**



Photo: USAID

***Through fun games children in Momchilgrad learn about each other's cultural identity in their free time.***

Children from the small Bulgarian town of Momchilgrad who participate in the “Beyond Difference” project funded by the USAID Interethnic Interaction Program are shy but proud when they say they know more about other religions than their fellow students or even their parents.

Conceived by project leader Miglena Petrova from the local NGO Faith and Love Association, “Beyond Difference” has the goal of gathering an ethnically diverse group of students from Momchilgrad’s Bulgarian, Turkish and Roma populations, and helping students to value the diversity of their community and broader society. The students learn about the history and traditions of the area’s dominant Christian and Muslim religions, as well as other religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.

The program includes opportunities for site visits to historic places in the Rhodope Mountain region. Some students say their favorite part of the project is learning about how children of different religions celebrate their religious festivals and having the opportunity to try new foods and sing new songs. Their parents are also involved in the project and benefit from the specialized instruction their children are receiving.

Girls from a Muslim high school in a neighboring village work as volunteers with the project. For the girls, this provides a unique opportunity to interact with non-Muslim children. For some of the children in the project, the Muslim girls’ participation provided their first exposure to young women practicing a more conservative form of Islam and wearing traditional headscarves.

The project is one of many micro-projects in social services improvement, educational advancement and local economic development implemented by Partners Bulgaria Foundation in mixed ethnic communities. Grants are generally less than \$5,000.