

saha

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY-TURKEY

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE EARTHQUAKE: STATE, MARKET, SOCIETY

“We need to discover the politics of everyday life itself”: Risks, trust and emotional capital - **Ferhat Kentel**

“It is not just housing that is required” - **H. Tarık Şengül**

The earthquake and policies of dispossession - **Bahadır Özgür**

Disaster capitalism opens up new spaces for capital - **Özgür Orhangazi**

Kızılay: The symbol of humanity, impartiality, and peace? - **Cafer Solgun**

The disaster from a gender equality and women's solidarity perspective - **Tülin Kesiktaş Teoman and Beritan Onuk**

“We will stand against the plans which have been made in spite of the public after the earthquake” - **Hakan Güneş**

Pictured on the ruined wall: Hurry up, Ali! - **Nesimi Aday**

Hometown associations as a mechanism of assistance: Opportunities they offer after a disaster - **Harun Arslan**

The role of participatory citizenship in disaster resilience - **Citizens' Assembly**

One can help one another even in the smallest matters: What is the situation of being a neighborhood resident of Istanbul? - **Nida Kara**



Contents

- 2** EDITORIAL » Fırat Genç
- 3** INTERVIEW » Ferhat Kentel
Interview by Beyhan Sunal
“We need to discover the politics of everyday life itself”: Risks, trust and emotional capital
- 13** INTERVIEW » H. Tarık Şengül
Interview by Haluk Kalafat
“It is not just housing that is required”
- 20** ARTICLE» Bahadır Özgür
THE EARTHQUAKE AND POLICIES OF DISPOSSESSION
- 30** INTERVIEW » Özgür Orhangazi
Interview by Haluk Kalafat
Disaster capitalism opens up new spaces for capital
- 36** ARTICLE » Cafer Solgun
KIZILAY: THE SYMBOL OF HUMANITY, IMPARTIALITY, AND PEACE?
- 45** INTERVIEW » Tülin Kesiktaş Teoman and Beritan Onuk
Interview by Beyhan Sunal
The disaster from a gender equality and women’s solidarity perspective
- 56** INTERVIEW » Hakan Güneş
Interview by Haluk Kalafat
“We will stand against the plans which have been made in spite of the public after the earthquake”
- 64** INTERVIEW » Nesimi Aday
Interview by Cafer Solgun
Pictured on the ruined wall: Hurry up, Ali!
- 71** ARTICLE » Harun Arslan
HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS AS A MECHANISM OF ASSISTANCE: OPPORTUNITIES THEY OFFER AFTER A DISASTER
- 80** FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR » Citizens’ Assembly
- 81** FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR » Nida Kara



This magazine is published by Citizens’ Assembly-Turkey (formerly Helsinki Citizens Assembly-Turkey).

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saha is published two times a year in Turkish and English, and available free of charge. The information and views set out in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of Citizens’ Assembly-Turkey. For subscription enquiries, please contact Citizens’ Assembly-Turkey.



This publication is funded by *Civil Rights Defenders*. The content of this publication does not reflect the official opinion of *Civil Rights Defenders*.

IN THIS ISSUE

In our previous issue, we gave the following explanation for why we had chosen to focus on the subject of political participation: “At a time when the meaning of politics has been narrowed to refer only to the election process, it is necessary to broaden our conception of politics not only to the limited terms of elections and institutional political structures, but also beyond. Despite all the difficulties, we need such a reframing more than ever to make sense of the complexities and dilemmas we are currently facing.” When these lines were written, in the days of December 2022, the debates about the upcoming election had drawn out discussions about the different kinds of dilemmas encompassed within Turkish society, yet it had also somewhat overshadowed them. With the February 6 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes we witnessed, in the most painful way, how these dilemmas have become tangled in a knot.

After the earthquake, many commentators rightfully emphasized that disasters are not only natural but also social phenomena. They drew attention to the fact that the underlying causes of any event which reaches the level of disaster are essentially social conditions, relationships, and dynamics. In this sense, it can be expected that disasters will reveal moments of truth. It can be assumed that the need for questioning born out of the devastation, pain, and disappointment brought by the disaster will generate a widespread critical attitude.

It is widely recognized that the underlying reasons behind the significant loss of life experienced on 6 February are directly linked to Turkey’s pattern of urbanization: that responsibility lies with the various actors involved in the urbanization process, from the selection of settlement areas to the implementation of zoning plans, the construction process of individual buildings, and the pardoning of illegally constructed structures. The primary responsibility for these issues lies with past or current public administrators.

Similarly, the reasons behind the lack of coordination, initiative, inadequacy, and even occasional negligence that occurred in the hours and days immediately after the earthquake are evident, to a degree. Following the 1999 earthquake, the field of disaster management was centralized in order to facilitate swift and effective interventions. However, the stark reality facing us today indicates that the practical outcome of this centralization has had the opposite effect. Indeed, we’ve witnessed how the meaning attributed to disaster management has been reduced to that of alleviating the “possible destructive political consequences” of the disaster.

The truth regarding the events before, during, and after the disaster, and the roles and responsibilities of the state, the market, and powerful social groups in shaping this truth, is quite visible. But it is obvious that the disaster has not provided a moment of the expected encounter with this truth. It is necessary to acknowledge that this is an issue which extends beyond the outcome of the May elections, but is rather a broader societal and political situation. In other words, the earthquakes of February 6 mark a bleak milestone which extends beyond the immediate political context and reveals the dark state of structural transformation dynamics that have shaped Turkish society for the past two decades – and perhaps even since the aftermath of the September 12 coup.

It is now our duty to understand what these structural dynamics are. Undoubtedly, this should be a long-term inquiry that requires further continuation, new lines of questioning, and perhaps a re-examination that discards existing assumptions and fills the gaps with fresh readings. In this issue of **saha**, we set out with the aim of modestly contributing in this direction. In a world shaped by multiple crises, at a time when vulnerabilities and uncertainties are deepening, we delve into the various aspects of state-market-society relations in the context of the earthquake to reconsider the meaning of citizenship. We work towards this in the hope that the reconstruction after the earthquake will lead to the reconstruction of a better life.

“We need to discover the politics of everyday life itself”: Risks, trust and emotional capital

At a time when life is becoming increasingly uncertain, risks are growing, and our collective sense of security is diminishing, how do people perceive life, society, and the state? The 6 February earthquakes inevitably put such questions on the agenda. Ferhat Kentel, the general coordinator of BAYETAV (Foundation for Education and Social Research for Coexistence), emphasizes the significance of emotions and intuitive behaviors as well as reason and rational choices, in answering them. He questions where we should look for the possibilities of politics and coexistence, against all the odds.

Unlike the earthquake of August 17, 1999, the earthquakes on February 6 affected a much wider area. We have some knowledge about what was not done in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, in the hours and days that followed. I would like to start by asking you what *should* have been done, and particularly what the state should have done. Such a question also requires a discussion about the centralist structure of the state and the dilemmas brought about by its cumbersome nature.

Ferhat Kentel: I also believe that the answer to this question lies in the subject of centralization. There is both an urge towards centralization and a claim of superiority which lies deeply embedded in the genes and memory of the state. This has the effect of elevating the state to that of a superior creature, an almost divine entity. This state can never be subordinate, it can never compromise its prestige, it must always play big, be boastful, and so on. This attitude has reached a peak in the last decade of AKP rule. This is a sociologically understandable notion; we are talking about a state that emerged as a result of a social movement and became identified with a particular ruling party. The centralist vein that has always been dominant in the Republic of Turkey has become even more prominent with the AKP. Therefore, when this state speaks through the AKP, its biggest fear is that

of losing the idea of centralization, losing its central role. That’s why the Kurdish issue is also a significant problem because if the Kurdish issue is discussed at local levels, and its problems, such as language and culture, can be solved at this level, it would greatly erode the centralizing role of the state.

That’s why trustees have been appointed to municipalities, right?

F.K.: Yes. This sentiment cannot tolerate any alternatives. We can see this in various other aspects as well; there are institutions such as the Turkish Historical Society, the General Directorate of Land Registry and Cadastre, which are like the temples of this state. Those institutions must be strict because the moment any alternative ownership, alternative forms of governance, or alternative languages emerge, the entire centralizing structure would be undermined. We saw some of these manifestations after the earthquake.

A state that doesn’t try to win its reputation, but rather repeatedly emphasizes it, was shaken when cities were destroyed by the earthquake. Ultimately, we are living with a state language which is spoken by a single man: I’m not talking specifically about Erdoğan, but rather the state language spoken by Erdoğan. In Adıyaman, Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, the governors, the mayors, the

These issues can easily be resolved at the local level. However, when you introduce something like an amnesty for illegal constructions at the central level, and spread the negative consequences, instead of the positive ones, across the country, the positive role that centralism might play in issues such as building oversight are replaced by results that exacerbate the negativity.

army units, the soldiers could have made decisions on the spot and solved the problems locally. The losses and damages increased a lot more when the divine intervention, which was expected from Ankara, did not arrive. If there had been local governance and local initiatives, this might not have happened. If there was a decentralized governance mechanism, and a non-centralized structure, the wounds would have had a chance to heal much more easily. Nationwide corruption and irregularities in construction projects might not have been so common. If the state had fulfilled its role as a control mechanism and taken measures against



Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin

fraud and bribery, and prevented the unsteady buildings from being recorded as legitimate, these things wouldn't have occurred.

In the Kocaeli earthquake, nothing happened to the buildings in Tavşanlı because the local government had taken a lot of initiative there, and the buildings were well-inspected. In Hatay, there were also certain districts that remained intact. These issues can easily be resolved at the local level. However, when you introduce something like an amnesty for illegal constructions at the central level, and spread the negative consequences, instead of the positive ones, across the country, the positive role that centralism might play in issues such as building oversight are replaced by results that exacerbate the negativity.

We can go so far as to say that, in the existing system, oversight and prevention are not only neglected but further intensified because they are based on rent-seeking. This causes the issues to be even more widespread.

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Nationalism is the perfect “remedy” –umbrella, mold, or cover– to govern a diverse society of eighty million people with a multitude of differences and problems. What does this cover provide? It constructs a discourse that roughly aims to “keep together” this complex society.

problems. What does this cover provide? It constructs a discourse that roughly aims to “keep together” this complex society. There are references to the homeland, the nation, armed drones, the domestic automobile production, being a global leader, and being the biggest country of the world. Meanwhile, underneath this discourse, there is a vast amount of dust, dirt, and mud being swept under the rug. Such a discourse covers up the personal enrichments, corruption, injustices, and unjust gains.

We can talk about a global trend of conservatism and authoritarianism, but are there material reasons for such

politics to take hold in our country? When America claims, “We are a great nation,” it may be a convincing claim, but we are not in a situation to wholeheartedly believe it, particularly in this period. Why do people continue to believe in this discourse?

F.K.: I don't think this is very abnormal because, after all, that's what belief is – you believe in something that you cannot rationally prove. Otherwise, it wouldn't be belief; it would be knowledge. You also believe in supporting a football team, for example. You may experience defeats, but you still believe that your team is superior. You may believe that injustices are being committed against your team, such as unfair refereeing or internal traitors. You curse them, blaming them for causing harm to your team. Belief is very normal. There is no difference between America and Turkey in this regard. Remember Trump's slogan, “Make America Great Again”. Who believed in it the most? It was the rural Americans. The Tea Party was the party made up of the most insecure segments of American society. Trump, Orban, Erdoğan, Putin, Modi, Bolsonaro... When you look at their social bases, you see that they consist of segments with a significant level of insecurity. These

people are afraid of refugees, gender issues, foreigners, communists, liberals, and so on. That's their common ground. You can see its traces in theories like Ulrich Beck's risk society, which I think is still very powerful. It's also referred to by various names, like post-truth, post-fact, and so on. In a world where the neoliberal capitalist mindset, an unjust system and an increasingly unjust power that is concentrated in the hands of the smaller minorities are prevalent, people feel profoundly insecure. The world is in great turmoil; the Ukraine-Russia war continues, Syrians are seeking refuge, Kurds are discontented, and there is immense dissatisfaction in Africa. The world is being turned upside down, yet in the realm of certain powerful entities, there is no change - they continue to steer their own ships. In the context of such an unjust world, one of the easiest things to provide, or one thing that can provide the most comfort to people who feel insecure, is a feeling of security. And how can you make them feel secure? Through belief. It is similar to having faith in God; it makes people believe that they are superior to others. In fact, this pattern is probably common to all religions: religious fervor and rituals are not just about God, but about the enthusiasm of being part of a community. I'm leaning towards a somewhat Durkheimian sociology here, but when we engage in a collective ritual - whether it's of a secular or religious nature, whether it's at the Kaaba or Karbala, at the mausoleum of Atatürk, at Red Square during the October Revolution, or at an AKP rally in Yenikapı – people don't just feel how wonderful their

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leaders are or how perfect their beliefs are; they experience an almost divine power that comes from being together. Religion, in sociological terms, is not just about believing in God, and nationalism is not just about believing in Turkish nationality: it is about self-belief. I believe that religion and therefore nationalism –and I think they are closely intertwined, not separate entities but interchangeable responses given at different periods– all these intertwined religion-nationalism syntheses and hybridizations provide a kind of belief mixed with enthusiasm. This is an almost euphoric state, which is repeated through rituals that connect people. You come together, chant slogans together; you gather and perform religious rituals; you come together and listen to rock music or metal concerts. All these things create an enthusiastic state, and this makes you believe, convinces you, that you are great. You see millions of people gathered, and you feel how powerful you are, you can fight anyone who stands against you. I think that the average person who stormed the Senate in America and Turkish people are very similar in that sense. I think this is a deeply religious process that people who are convinced of, those who feel insecure and fearful, go through: from “he is our hero, we won't let you sacrifice him” to “we will sacrifice one of you if necessary.”

We used to think that social media and its ability to inform people was a good thing, but perhaps, as you mentioned, being informed about everything happening in the world has further increased the perception of living in a risk society. But, on the other hand, despite the massive devastation caused by the earthquake, is it also possible to attribute the significant support for Erdoğan and the AKP in the elections to Erdoğan's “leadership” personality?

F.K.: Qualities like leadership, personality, charisma, etc. are created and shaped by power. People aren't born with charisma; we know that even charismatic leaders can find themselves in quite dismal situations. It's all about power dynamics. If power inflates you, you become charismatic, and people around you may start worshipping you.

They don't realize that their leader is the one preventing them from buying better shoes or causing them to wear torn shoes.

F.K.: This is a very rational thought process. Life operates not solely based on logical reasoning but rather through emotional processes. The emotional capital we accumulate is far more significant than all our rational thoughts. What is emotional capital? One example may shed light on it. Let's assume I am a woman who wears a headscarf, and during the period of 28 February I was excluded and humiliated by a secular government that denied the entrance to universities for headscarf-wearing women. A leader or a party emerges and says, for instance, “I will liberate your headscarf.” When this actually happens, people support the party that made it possible, or which facilitated it. But the AKP did not achieve headscarf freedom on its own: it was demanded by the democratic forces of society. In fact, the AKP delayed it until the last minute, and took cautious steps to avoid any negative consequences, while many liberal democrats showed more progressive attitudes towards the headscarf issue.

At Bilgi University, we used to hold classes with students who wore headscarves in the coffee shops. Back then, certain prestigious academics, who are now the elites of the AKP era, looked the other way. They were the ones who showed excessive loyalty by preventing students wearing headscarves from entering Anatolian universities. Emotional capital is never rational: it is solely fueled by the emotions, impressions, and traumas accumulated by an individual's experiences. I display the necessary reactions using my emotional capital in order to avoid ending up in a worse situation. As the name implies, it is similar to economic capital: if I have a lot of money, I won't be content eating plain bread. My aspirations expand. The list of meals I eat, the places I travel to, the furniture I buy for my home, the schools of my children, etc., everything expands in proportion to the power of money. If my economic capital is very low, I would eat only olives, cheese, and pasta, and my idea of a vacation would be limited to visiting parents or travelling to my home town. It's similar with cultural capital: For example, if I am Kurdish, and I've been nurtured by the words of the *dengbejs* (Kurdish traditional storytellers), Kurdish stories, legends, and Kurdish language, I would see life from the perspective of that cultural capital. My cultural

capital would be different from that of someone from Trabzon, Tekirdağ, or Bosnia. Let's leave ethnicities aside: if I am a villager, if I was born in a village in Erzurum, my cultural capital, which has been formed by my perspective of fields, mountains, plants, and animals, would be different from the cultural capital of a young person from Istanbul's Bağdat Avenue. That's why we perceive life from different perspectives. This is where emotional capital comes into play. Those things which we experience, the emotions which deeply resonate with us during childhood and youth, hold great significance: emotions such as humiliation, dignity, justice, freedom, accusations, exclusions, love, harassment, etc. – these are the stories that shape who we are. They are the most energizing factors: processes like emotional energy, emotional resonance, or emotional alignment become incredibly influential, just like religion. As a political party or an ideology, you may provide the most rational explanations, but this doesn't mean that everyone will understand you, just because you're rational.

There are two things that need to be mentioned about the earthquake and the elections here. Firstly, AKP is a party of the state. It has become a party-state. Consider all the campaigns they have carried out. They have various mechanisms at their disposal, such as the Ministry of Communication, state-owned radio and television channels, all those pro-government mainstream media outlets, channels and newspapers that appear to be independent but function like AKP's media, and the entire army of internet trolls. These are similar to the mechanisms used by the Turkish Armed Forces during the February 28 period. There used to be a network of February 28 actors within the General Staff, and now that structure has been taken over by the AKP organization. A significant media operation, using a campaign of persuasion and manipulation, is being carried out. The state is in charge of manipulation, and setting the agenda. And an AKP-led state sets an AKP-led agenda. I leave aside questions over what happened at the ballot boxes, where and how people were pressured, what kind of "mistakes" were made, whose votes were given to whom and how they were written down, etc. But still, we are talking about a leader who received only 49.5

But who will rebuild those buildings? Who will re-plan the city? People are so fragile, so weak; some families have been completely wiped out, leaving behind a single child. What will these people do? The way to recover from the disaster created by the regime, the system, capitalism, and the construction system, is still very much a political and people-oriented mechanism.

percent of the votes in the first round. If we consider the parliamentary elections, AKP's vote stands at around 35 percent. I mentioned that people are emotional, irrational, and driven by beliefs, but this is not entirely true: these results mean that there is still rational thought at some point, and people respond by saying, "I don't support this injustice, so I will not vote." There is a rupture even among those who are emotionally very attached to the AKP. We should not overlook this.

Let me say one more thing about the earthquake: AKP received a lot of votes from earthquake-affected regions, but it was a declining trend. It means that some people thought, "We experienced a lot of suffering in this earthquake, and the government couldn't help us." They didn't vote. Why did some people vote for the AKP? People were afraid and feeling insecure, and they sought a trustworthy authority and institution. They voted for the AKP along these terms of "stability". Even if they were dissatisfied with the AKP, they probably voted for it anyway. Who will save you after the earthquake? Civil society organizations will bring you soup, blankets, and hygiene supplies. But who will rebuild those buildings? Who will re-plan the city? People are so fragile, so weak; some families have been completely wiped out, leaving behind a single child. What will these people do? The way to recover from the disaster created by the regime, the system, capitalism, and the construction system, is still very much a political and people-oriented mechanism. Good decisions will be made, and buildings will be built which will enable people to find shelter. As a result, you are compelled to vote for



the state. You don't have the luxury to tell the state, "I don't love you anymore" because you know that this state is very vindictive. It constantly calls you to account, applies pressure, and punishes you. Here I am, heavily damaged by the earthquake, with nothing left, and now I'm supposed to defy the state. How am I going to do that? The way for me to escape this helplessness is not by engaging in futile acts of heroism that will only further weaken me; my only option is to acquiesce to the existing system. Despite all this, we are still talking about a regime that received only 49.5 percent of the vote. Let's not forget that.

We also need to look at the other side of the scale. The Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*) wasn't able to do anything to nurture this emotional capital, it couldn't build that power. The problem wasn't solved by Kılıçdaroğlu declaring that he is Alevi, or through promises of reconciliation.

F.K.: If we consider the average Sunni population and their prejudices against Alevism, we can say that Alevism is more democratic. There were some political provocations which led to Kılıçdaroğlu declaring his identity, along the lines of, "Oh, how nice, we're becoming transparent, I openly declare that I

am Sunni, why don't you also have the courage to say you're Alevi?" And Kılıçdaroğlu responded by declaring it. However, emphasizing identities didn't work well for those people who are afraid and feel insecure precisely because of the emphasis on identities. That's why Kılıçdaroğlu and his team tilted completely in the other direction between the two rounds. They shifted towards a much tougher, masculine, and highly nationalist discourse with slogans such as "Refugees out!" or "This will come to an end!"

They even said that they would force refugees to go back to their countries.

F.K.: Gelecek Party, Deva Party, CHP, and İyi Party initially attempted to construct a relatively more liberal discourse to counter the authoritarian and oppressive discourse of the AKP regime. However, what may have been lacking in their building of this discourse was a failure to consider society's need for reassurance. They fell short in providing that reassurance, and did not confront it themselves. In my opinion, the most important thing that Kılıçdaroğlu should have done was not only to declare his Alevi identity but also to engage in a reckoning with the deeds of the secular state of the Republic of Turkey. If there

were clear positions, theoretical and ideological reactions to the events of 28 February, perhaps some people who had doubts about Kılıçdaroğlu and his backing by the Nation Alliance would have had reassurance. The alliance might have provided more reassurance by publicly confronting themselves, their political career, and their past. But they probably didn't want to lose the secular, white Turkish wing by engaging in such a reckoning, so they decided to play the nationalist card instead. This wasn't particularly difficult for Deva, Gelecek, and especially İyi Party. Even Ümit Özdağ joined this coalition. Currently, the entire political spectrum is shaped around nationalism. These elections were trapped in the frame of trying to take advantage of the sense of insecurity and lack of reassurance within a society that doesn't trust itself and others. As if we don't have any other issues left, our only concern is now the quest to find a single enemy – today this enemy is the 'refugee', the 'other'. Anything which is not part of our nation is our common enemy. This is a very common situation; we have also seen it in Nazi Germany and many other places. Perhaps it's not happening here to the same extent, but simplifying the situation by creating

a single enemy and presenting it as the solution for insecure individuals is a common strategy. I think this is the strategy that is being implemented now. We are currently trapped in a situation where someone will either carry out this agenda through a totalitarian discourse or someone will take relatively more liberal steps within the same framework.

Let us also discuss the solidarity that civil society organizations promoted in the face of this insecurity. People who travel to western countries used to say that when someone falls over on the street, no one turns around to help them, trusting in the knowledge that the system and state organizations work well and that someone will help them eventually. In Turkey, people don't have the luxury of such assumptions. In contrast, they assumed that no one would support people in the earthquake-stricken areas and rushed to help them. How do you evaluate this form of citizenship?

F.K.: Last year, BAYETAV conducted a piece of research entitled "Living Together" to explore the potential for coexistence in Turkey, despite the language of polarization. We used both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Many significant findings emerged that we believe are important, but one particularly noteworthy result is the following: Yes, everyone speaks the language of polarization, and everyone has an "other" in their minds. It could be Alevi, Sunni, Turkish, Kurdish, LGBTI, feminist, Armenian, Sunni, religious etc. – everyone can have their own enemy. But they use a common language, a language which already exists. This is a spoken language; these are worded, discursive, stereotyped, clichéd, ready-made, template languages. We often encounter them in interviews. You're talking to someone you don't know, asking them questions on subjects related to the homeland, nation, citizenship, rights, etc. A person who they don't know is asking them questions – why would they give potentially risky answers to that person? Of course, at first, they speak with a certain template. They say things like, "We believe in Allah" and "Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is a great leader", "our flag" etc. These are all things that need to be said, but the real stories lie beneath those words, and they gradually emerge as you gain their trust. Those stories are indeed very complex; they involve tales of mothers, fathers, compassion, children, fear, the end of the month,



Photo: Özcan Yaman



Photo: Özcan Yaman

earning bread, and many more things. These stories are attempts to articulate the practices of everyday life. However, everyday life is like magma; it can only ever be understood by being truly experienced. The language of politics, the public discourse, tends to resort to stereotypes, clichés, and categorizations to describe everyday life. We may identify as supporters of AKP or CHP, but in everyday life, we don't necessarily have to conform to such labels. Some of us may have less faith, while others have more. Some may perform the five daily prayers, while others may not. Performing the five daily prayers does not automatically make someone morally upright, just as someone who doesn't perform them is not necessarily immoral. These are different things. All these underlying contradictions do not surface, only clear categorizations emerge at the surface. The result of our research was this: yes, there are polarizations at the surface, an upper discourse of sorts, but at the bottom, in everyday life, people have a high potential for coexistence

A lot of people rushed to help. The government, in contrast, only cared about its reputation – who it would help, who was criticizing the government, making sure the AFAD label was visible on the aid being distributed, and so on. In this moment, people are not interested in their reputation, but the government is; it discriminates, determines who will receive the aid.

because when they encounter each other they realize that they actually have commonalities. I am a complex whole, within which there are various elements that I share with you and others. Let's imagine there is a woman leading a very secular life and another woman leading a religious life, and both experience domestic violence. What happens is that the shared experience of these two individuals as women enables them to have a conversation with each other. They can discuss topics related to womanhood, masculinity, and patriarchal ideology. As a result, they come together, and their potential for coexistence increases. Or nature, for example: you build a gold mine, and

everything gets poisoned with cyanide, or you build a geothermal power plant, and those toxic gases destroy all the trees. In that research, we asked the following question: if an earthquake were to happen in this country, would everyone help each other? The results showed that nearly ninety percent answered 'yes' because during an earthquake, people put themselves in the place of people who are trapped under the rubble, regardless of who they are. This could happen to them too, after all. And, as we saw on 6 February, the capacity for empathy indeed reached its height after the earthquake. A lot of people rushed to help. The government, in contrast, only cared about its reputation – who it would

help, who was criticizing the government, making sure the AFAD label was visible on the aid being distributed, and so on. In this moment, people are not interested in their reputation, but the government is; it discriminates, determines who will receive the aid. It cares about the publicity. I won't even get into the scandal of the Red Crescent, selling tents and profiteering. Hundreds of thousands of people rushed to help. This also shows that, despite the polarizing discourse, we are talking about a society with a strong capacity and desire to coexist. This certainly gives cause for hope. Despite the language of crisis, and the polarizing discourse, we can still talk about an enduring desire for coexistence.

Let's also talk about the issue of reconstruction. The question of the restoration of historically significant

areas, such as Antakya and Maraş, as well as the reconstruction of other places, is currently under discussion. How should this process ideally unfold, theoretically speaking?

F.K.: Like many others, I also believed that something would change in these elections. There was no legitimate reason for this belief; it was simply the result of hoping that what is desired would come true. Everyone was fed up... But life is not like that, of course. Due to the concepts we discussed earlier, such as emotional capital, belief, and irrational thinking, we should not try to evaluate life from our own perspective. As average citizens of modern societies, we have developed the habit of engaging in politics only once every five years through our vote. But politics is not limited to this. When we expect to change things that make us unhappy only with a vote we cast

every five years, the disappointment we experience becomes immense. This suggests that we need to expand politics into every aspect of life. We need to explore the politics of everyday life, as I mentioned earlier. Life cannot be lived solely by waiting for elections: political effort, the effort for change, should be present in every aspect of life, at all times. Sometimes, the path to this involves reaching out to people who are different from us. Why aren't some people voting for the same party as me? Engaging in conversation with them is also a form of politics, for instance. When you only make assumptions about why other people vote the way they do, without actually knowing, you are not engaging in effective politics. By assuming that the world consists only of people who think like you, you overlook the fact that others have different perspectives.

As a result, when you believe that your vote will change lives without understanding others, it doesn't work because people vote for different parties for different reasons.

We should also be thinking in this way in the aftermath of the earthquake. Instead of focusing on how many buildings should be reconstructed, we should instead consider how people will participate in the process. Will the people of Hatay, Maraş, Adiyaman rebuild their cities on their own, or together with the government? Will the government take charge and the people decide, let's say five years later, whether their work has been carried out well or badly? Hatay has an incredible cultural diversity, cultural heritage, and historical accumulation. It is one of the most multilingual regions in Turkey. Armenian and Syriac languages are spoken; there are Catholic, Syriac, Orthodox, and Gregorian communities; there are Armenian villages and Alevi and Nusayri Arabs. Despite this complexity, it is an exemplary place in terms of living together. Now that the city has been destroyed, what will happen to this culture? Rebuilding it is not easy. You can restore the churches, synagogues, and mosques, but it is no longer the same city. One of the most important aspects of rebuilding this city is therefore the participation of its people. If the people contribute to its rebuilding, if they can make their voices heard, if there is a dialogue with the people who want to contribute to the rebuilding process, if this process involves genuine participation... That's what I mean by politics being present in all aspects of life. Those cities can be rebuilt with such participation, and at least some of the wounds can be bandaged. Creating public awareness and civil society is necessary for urban transformation. This process is not solely the responsibility of a few companies seeking profit and financial gain. It requires raising the voice of a civil society that can say "This must be done by the people of Hatay, Maraş, Adiyaman, Malatya, Adana, and Urfa." It will be necessary to make efforts to claim ownership over all aspects of life, in everyday life, without waiting for five years.

In Turkey there is an understanding that organizing in order to solve problems and engage in politics should be limited

to places that align with one's own political program or views. But it appears that there is a need for micro level and inclusive forms of organization, involving different individuals. Civil society organizations in Turkey also seem to be homogeneous groups. Perhaps problem-solving oriented forms of organization will be needed in the upcoming period.

F.K.: True. It should be something like this, I suppose; a civil society organization should be an organization that works with others to solve problems, rather than being centered around a specific identity. This is already the logic of new social movements in the classical sense. We come together with people who are not like us in order to solve a problem; we solve a different problem with other people. This should be the assumption - I will receive support from others for this task because I must do it this way; and, I cannot solve this problem on my own, without help from others. Otherwise, at most, I would shout and yell, the police would push me around, I would start a petition, but the problem would be forgotten, etc. Maybe I find a strong, good cause, gather tons of people around me, and exert pressure, and so on. In a country like Turkey, which is complex and filled with tensions, where a multitude of deep-rooted issues intertwine, including class, cultural, and ethnic dimensions, and where there are various political polarizations between the central region, provinces, cities, villages, etc., achieving something through civil society is only possible by coming together with others. Others may bring a dynamic to your movement that you were not previously aware of, or do not understand. In this way, at the very least your potential would increase. It would be beneficial to think that others have a voice that I am not familiar with, and my movement would be enriched with that voice.

Do people welcome participation? In a place like Turkey where people experience various insecurities, is there a prevailing expectation that problems will be/should be solved by the government or leaders?

F.K.: One of the results that emerged from our research was this: along with the desire for participation, practicing it is also a matter of courage. Perhaps people fear what could happen to them. Let's say I want freedom, and I see that someone else free. If I were to take action to find

freedom, would something bad happen to me? There is a paradoxical situation here; I am insecure, I don't trust myself or others, so I want to trust the state, but the state is also the reason for my lack of trust. I have almost no choice other than to trust an institution that is the cause of my insecurity. If you notice, these emotions are based on very religious words: belief, fear, fear of God, etc. They are things that perpetuate each other. The idea of God probably originates from the father figure; the belief in Turkish politics likewise oscillates between the father and God-like figures; from Atatürk to Erdoğan. This is similar to the fear of the father figure. Therefore, it would be more accurate to say that people in Turkey or the average person living in Turkey is forced to live under certain conditions, rather than claiming that they are inherently like this. I'll repeat the same thing - only by creating practices with someone who is unlike me can I learn not to fear others and make this trust contagious.

Finally, let's talk about BAYETAV's work. What are your plans for the earthquake region and the upcoming period?

F.K.: BAYETAV's principle or philosophy focuses on three fields. One is the effort to diversify the language of coexistence based on academic research in the field of human and social sciences. This is done through panels, writing books, conducting research, and making them public. In addition to this, we're also working on another field that can be called 'life sciences', which is more focused on ecology and nature. The issue is not only about coexistence or the relationships between individuals and various cultural and political identities. Another issue is the relationship between humans and nature. We can argue that one of the things that complicate coexistence among humans is the tendency of humans to claim superiority over nature. By considering ourselves superior to nature, we have learned to assert superiority over other people as well. Nature is an entity in itself, I claim superiority over it, and I also claim superiority over 'underdeveloped', 'unrefined' people. These two are not separate things. This is our second field. The third area is related to art and design. Life doesn't always present itself with textbook sentences - certain pieces of information and emotions lie between the lines, and may



Photo: Tayfun Kesik



Photo: Mert Can

be better understood through art. Our philosophy involves strengthening our artistic language, exploring art within life; or, if we are going to produce something we want to design it, and often design it in a pluralistic way. All of these involve education. We therefore also want to engage in educational activities and re-think different forms of education. We're trying to approach life from these perspectives.

After the earthquake BAYETAV collaborated with various civil society organizations in Adiyaman and primarily in Hatay to organize collective relief efforts. We tried to establish solidarity networks with the earthquake survivors in Izmir. We have conducted various activities to find financial support and organized cultural activities. These include facilitating efforts for people, particularly women, to come together and produce. Additionally, we have offered psychological support, and assisted teachers to provide education to children affected by the earthquake. We have established an organization that operates between the earthquake-affected regions and Izmir, facilitating

support and coordination. Our rationale was as follows: We are dealing with people who we need to coexist with and learn from. I set aside clichés like “we could be earthquake victims tomorrow.” They have experienced it and are struggling to survive. Speaking in a very opportunistic and self-interested manner, if they cannot survive, we will

Learning to coexist with those stricken by the earthquake also means investing in our future wellbeing. If we disregard them, coexistence would not be possible, because the traumas of these individuals and the negative effects that will be passed on to future generations will be experienced by the entire society. They are not limited to those who are directly stricken by the earthquake; they will affect all of us.

also experience negative consequences in the future. Learning to coexist with those stricken by the earthquake also means investing in our future wellbeing. If we disregard them, coexistence would not be possible, because the traumas of these individuals and the negative effects that will be passed on to future generations will be experienced by the entire society. They are not limited to those who are directly stricken by the earthquake; they will affect all of us.

We are also conducting research on how to rebuild these cities. We are contemplating the question of how to reconstruct Hatay, Maraş, and Adiyaman, and how people can participate in this process. We have participated in producing a research proposal for TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey) with Dicle and Kırklareli Universities. If accepted, we will conduct a field study for the reconstruction of life, agriculture, nature, and education in the villages. We are currently working on such a process, striving to carry out holistic studies that consider the entirety of life. ☸

Interview with H. Tarık Şengül

Interview by Haluk Kalafat

“It is not just housing that is required”

Many questions about the reconstruction of residential areas after the Kahramanmaraş Earthquake remain unanswered. The devastating impact of the earthquake proved once again that political forces in Turkey have failed the test of providing earthquake-proof urbanization and housing. We conducted an interview with H. Tarık Şengül, professor at Political Science Department at the Middle East Technical University, starting with the questions of whether Turkey has learnt from the disaster and what should, and should not, be done in the rebuilding efforts of the affected cities. Şengül, who also served as the Chairman of the Chamber of City Planners between 2008 and 2010, underlined the inadequacy of dealing with cities from a geological and structural perspective alone, regarding earthquakes. He gave a clear answer to our question of why we can't learn from our earthquake reality – “they know what they are doing, but they still do it anyway!”

Great destruction has occurred in eleven cities. It seems to be easier to rebuild a city that has been largely destroyed by an earthquake than to prepare a city to deal with a predicted earthquake. Ironically, we are better equipped to rebuild them. Is this the case? Can you elaborate more about what we need to do?

Tarık Şengül: If we look at it as an engineering issue, it might be possible to construct a logic to support what you're saying. However, cities are not just made of buildings. The concrete structures which represent the geology of the city are undoubtedly important, but there are also other layers to the city. In addition to the geological layer, we can't fully understand cities without considering the biological layer, which represents life, and the socio-cultural layer representing human society. Let's assume that we have replaced the destroyed buildings in a more qualified and durable manner. What do we do about the lost lives? The number of dead was 17,000 in the Marmara Earthquake and 50,000 in the last Kahramanmaraş Earthquake. Moreover, how are we going to bring back the historical and cultural accumulation of these cities, which were thousands of years old? Hatay as a civilization heritage is almost gone –

when it is rebuilt it will be different, not Antakya as we know it. It is therefore necessary to confront the earthquake before the destruction, not after it. I'm saying this with the possible earthquake of Istanbul-Marmara in mind, which is swinging like the sword of Damocles above our heads. 16 million people live only in Istanbul. 90,000 buildings need to be rebuilt. 170,000 buildings need reinforcement. The walls, historical buildings and artefacts are also at risk. Moreover, we are talking about a place that produces nearly 40 percent of Turkey's economy and GNP. If we are dealing with such a large population, agglomeration and economy, we should be prioritizing this before the earthquake, not after it. In short, if Istanbul and the Marmara Region were to experience an earthquake in its current condition, it won't be possible for any power to easily recover it. Let's think about it just from an economic perspective. If the most productive region collapses, the power which is required for its recovery collapses with it. It's clear what needs to be done. We can start by changing the logic of the large-scale project approach, the usefulness of which has already been discussed and criticised in the past period. More specifically, the “mega project” of the upcoming period should

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I want to discuss the earthquake zone covering the eleven provinces recently hit. The provinces listed here don't possess an economic geography which is able to recover with their own dynamics, except for Gaziantep. The immediate reflex after the earthquake was, somewhat understandably, “let's rebuild houses.” However, as I mentioned, cities are not just made up of buildings. Every city and region has its own economy. Those economies also collapsed with the earthquake, and infrastructures and transport links were also severely



Photo: Hayri Tunç

damaged. What is required today is not just housing, but also the rebuilding of urban and regional economies and the re-establishment of their functional connections with wider geographies. We need to approach these regions with the perspective of a development plan. This approach also needs to be supported by social policies.

Turkey has a history of major earthquakes. There is the Erzincan example, which was rebuilt after a major earthquake. The 1999 Marmara Earthquake caused great destruction and loss of life, as you mentioned. Certain adjustments were made as a result of this. It was said at the time that the experiences of that earthquake would not be repeated again. But, again, the Kahramanmaraş Earthquake has caused great losses. Now many people, including experts, are asking why we don't learn from these experiences and prevent their repeat. How do you answer this question? Are we really incapable of learning?

T.Ş.: I don't think the costly earthquakes we're experiencing are caused by the problem of not learning our lesson. The urbanization style in Turkey produces cities that are not durable in the face of the earthquake risk. The decision-making elements of the broad alliance that created this style of urbanization know,

down to every last detail, that this form of urbanization is leaving cities helpless in the face of earthquakes. However, to borrow a popular expression, "they know what they're doing, but they're still doing it anyway."

What's the problem? We allow urbanization and construction in areas close to fault lines which are prone to earthquakes. Moreover, we allow a remarkable part of this construction to remain without any earthquake resistance. These are known facts. Geological surveys which are prepared as part of zoning plans clearly indicate the places where construction should be avoided, especially in earthquake zones. The construction process takes place under the supervision of the municipalities. But somehow this gets overlooked. A significant number of them do not have permits. But zoning amnesties are issued to buildings that don't hold construction permits.

Today we are discussing the earthquake risk of Istanbul. At the most optimistic estimate, 260,000 buildings are at various levels of risk. Among them are a serious number of buildings which don't hold permits. We know the risk these buildings carry, but just before the Kahramanmaraş Earthquake, an amnesty was issued under the name of 'zoning peace' throughout

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Turkey. Thanks to this amnesty, a very significant segment of these risky buildings in Istanbul became legal. Those who issued this law signed the amnesty with full knowledge of what this action meant. Trade Chambers objected at various levels during this process, as always, and raised their voices, but we all know that their voices were not heard.

The problem is therefore not one of not learning our lesson. This problematic form of urbanization creates huge economic and political income. Those

who control and decide about this income underrate and avoid such a serious earthquake problem. Then 50,000 people die, thousands of buildings gets destroyed. Those who paved the way to this form of urbanization disappear for several months. The zoning amnesties are condemned, it is said that this will never happen again, but then things slowly return to the previous routine. Until the next big destruction occurs... This is exactly what happened after the 1999 Earthquake. Then things continued as they did before. A new sensitivity has re-emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Kahramanmaraş Earthquake. However, as an expert, I can observe that this fresh earthquake sensitivity is being increasingly pushed to the background with every passing day.

Are there any countries in the world that are learning their lesson?

T.Ş.: Of course, there are countries that have become sensitive to this issue and which have created rational policies and durable cities capable of withstanding earthquakes. I can give Chile as an example, since its economic profile and development levels are quite similar to Turkey. Chile is also a country that has experienced devastating earthquakes and tsunamis in the past. But they have achieved significant success in the last

twenty years. There are many main reasons for this. First, they successfully revised the forms and regulations of urbanization procedures, which prohibited any forms of urbanization and construction that wouldn't be resilient in the face of an earthquake. They've had equally important success in mobilizing large segments of society around the issue of earthquakes. Today, there is a very active civil society in Chile in almost every field, from protection to rescue.

You are conducting a study entitled "Earthquake-proof Cities" under the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. What does this study entail?

T.Ş.: What I have mentioned so far shows that we need a break from the dominant urbanization regime, a separation that would hinder the construction-based operation being pursued up until now. Undoubtedly, the first addressees and responsibility for this issue is the central government and its related units, which determine the legal regulations and authorities and hold a significant stake in it. We know that no positive progress has been made in this regard in the last twenty years. Istanbul and the Marmara Region are marked as geographies which have a serious risk of earthquakes. But the investment and incentive policies determined at the

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central government level still continue to direct investments, and therefore the population, to Istanbul and the Marmara Region. Since this is the case, attention turns to the role of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM), although it has more limited authority. But while it has limited authority on one hand, the fact that Istanbul is formed by the votes of the electorate gives the municipality administration strength on another level.

The relevant units of IMM were working in their respective jurisdictions before the earthquake as well. But an Earthquake Science Supreme Board,



Photo: Erdoğan Alyamut

Cities lost their people, their animals, their landscape. Those who lost their lives in the earthquake are gone forever. Migrants will also be recorded in the missing section of this region and cities, on another level... So, no matter how we plan urbanization, some great losses are irreversible.

Photo: Erdoğan Alyamut



of which I am a member, was formed after the Kahramanmaraş Earthquake, following the call of Ekrem İmamoğlu. This Board is guiding IMM's earthquake efforts from a scientific perspective. We have determined seven main areas for this Board. The management and law, engineering, urbanism and architecture, logistics, health, economic and finally social dimensions of the earthquake are being studied – both as a whole and on their own. The members of the scientific board, working on the management aspect, are in charge of reviewing the things required to carry out the

administrative dimension, including the necessary regulations and legislative changes together with the relevant units of the municipality. Engineers, planners, economists are also working in similar studies. This is not just a desk job. The logistics desk systematically defines what Istanbul needs to do in terms of logistics before, during and after the earthquake. The implementing units of the municipality then re-evaluate their works in terms of its compliance with this systematic framework. This is an intertwined process. The logistics units are continuing these preparations in

their own fields. This process will start to operate faster in the coming days. But there is a need for cooperation between the local government and the central government for such a model to work properly. We will see together what kind of a working model will emerge in the coming period.

Can this Istanbul-based study produce a general approach that can be applied to every settlement area in Turkey?

T.Ş.: This is possible to a certain extent, and is indeed beginning to happen. Each region and city has its own unique

features. But there are common themes regarding what needs to be done. In this respect, a study which used the same model as Adana Metropolitan Municipality was carried out in the recent period under the coordination of the Istanbul Planning Agency (IPA), which is a unit of the IMM. They are also working with Mersin and İzmir Metropolitan Municipalities to a certain degree. There are also joint efforts with smaller municipalities. There will be a joint event between Bursa Gemlik Municipality and IPA next month for example. In this respect, I think that inter-municipal

cooperation is opening up an extremely important area.

The construction of earthquake-proof houses began immediately after the Kahramanmaraş Earthquake but it is not clear whether the planning was done for this. Is it possible for people living in these cities to participate in the decision-making processes and escape from the income trap?

T.Ş.: We all know that we are faced with a dramatic situation in the earthquake zone. There was serious destruction, particularly in cities such as Hatay, Maraş

and Malatya. There are deficiencies and needs which extend far beyond the daily needs, especially in terms of housing. The reflex of constructing housing quickly is understandable. However, the situation is complicated because the destruction is huge, multi-sectoral and multi-scaled. That's why a fast housing strategy could end up making things worse. I would like to remind you that after the 1939 Earthquake in Erzincan the settlement of the city changed. Now, particularly in cities like Antakya, the re-establishment of the city can take very different forms from that of before the earthquake.



Cities lost their people, their animals, their landscape. Those who lost their lives in the earthquake are gone forever. Migrants will also be recorded in the missing section of this region and cities, on another level. So, no matter how we plan urbanization, some great losses are irreversible.



Undoubtedly, the traditional centre is important, but it is a fact that a different urbanization strategy is needed than that of the past. The urban economy and sectoral priorities may also undergo a change. A housing strategy that takes all these changes into account cannot be limited to determining suitable areas to rebuild. Therefore, the hasty elections themselves may become a problem in the coming period. But I should also state that these regions can't wait for a long time. Outward migration has already occurred and it's necessary to act quickly in order to encourage people to remain in the region. It's not possible to say that the relevant institutions, especially the Ministry of Urbanization, which is the authority in this regard, are running the participatory processes, including both experts and local components, to the required level. But there is a need for serious regional development plans in order for the region to "recover." It is important to include the local civil society and economy as a founding element in the processes while doing this. As such I believe that there is a need for a cooperation and joint work program at the local-regional-national level.

You urban planners say that "the city is not just about placing buildings next to each other." In the case of Antakya, in particular, it is said that the historical centre of the city was destroyed and that the fault line passed under the centre. Is it possible for planning to be carried out which doesn't spoil the historical and cultural structure of Antakya, and of other cities?

T.Ş.: I partially answered this question in my answers to the other questions. A city consists of geological, biological, and socio-cultural layers and elements. We are mostly discussing structures that are part of many geological layers. When we talk about buildings, we're mostly thinking of housing, as this is an urgent need. Cities lost their people, their animals, their landscape. Those who lost their lives in the earthquake are gone forever. Migrants will also be recorded in the missing section of this region and cities, on another level. Migration is not an easy process to return from. But at the same time, cities like Antakya have irreversibly lost their accumulation of historical-cultural layers that added meaning to the city. It's probable that a very important historical-cultural heritage

has been destroyed. A limited part might be regained as a result of long-term efforts. People have lost their neighbours, teachers, tradesmen. So, no matter how we plan urbanization, some great losses are irreversible.

A friend of mine, who lives in Antakya and has devoted his life as a civil engineer to struggling to ensure that exactly this eventuality would not happen, told me on the phone, "There is no more Antakya." Of course, this kind of evaluation, made with great emotion in the first days of the devastation, is not entirely correct. But it is mostly correct! While it is therefore important to act after the earthquake, the real and deep intervention should be carried out before the earthquake occurs. The positive and negative experiences which we've had for years, and the knowledge we've gained from these, are sufficient to prevent natural events such as earthquakes from turning into disasters in many geographies, particularly in Istanbul. That is, if we can stop the income-seeking mentality. We need a firm stance in order to produce durable cities. ☹️

THE EARTHQUAKE AND POLICIES OF DISPOSSESSION

Journalist Bahadır Özgür explores the long-term effects of the 6 February earthquakes, based on his first-hand observations of the area. Özgür discusses the conditions under which the earthquakes turned into a social disaster, and argues that the policies being followed by the public administration will lead to dispossession, impoverishment, and injustice for the vast majority of residents.

The economic, social, and cultural effects of the 6 February earthquakes, which covered a large geographical area and had such devastating consequences, will be seen for many years to come. It is therefore necessary to dwell carefully and thoroughly on the causes which turned the earthquake from a natural to a social disaster, and how to normalize life in the regions affected. In this respect the policies regarding the earthquake, which started with the search and rescue activities on the night of the disaster, and have been carried out along lines of pure political calculation as a result of them coinciding with the election period, are not promising. The scale of the destruction is such that Turkey will pay the price for many years to come. Now it is faced with two major dangers. The first is the danger of dispossession / impoverishment as a result of the socio-economic structure of these regions. The second is the new and more significant risks created by the government's understanding of construction. Let's first recall some data to see the magnitude of the earthquake's current and future consequences.

Regional inequality will increase
Inhabiting 14.196 million people, the people of Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, Malatya, Adıyaman, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Kilis, Osmaniye, Adana, and Elazığ correspond to 16.4 percent of the total population (85,279,553). In other words, one out of every six citizens

of Turkey resides in the earthquake zone. The average population density across Turkey is 110 people per square kilometer, but this rate is 144 in the disaster area. Furthermore, according to official data, almost half of the registered Syrian population under temporary protection, (officially about 3.5 million people in total), reside in these eleven cities. The total number of Syrians under temporary protection in the region is over 1.7 million, corresponding to 11.5 percent of the population in the region.

A total of 3.841 million people are employed in these eleven provinces. This represents 13.3 percent of the total employment of the country. However, only 2.3 million of the 3.8 million laborers in the earthquake zone are employed formally, while 1.5 million are informal workers – that is to say, uninsured. The rate of informality is 39 percent. The average informal employment in Turkey is 29 percent. This means four out of every ten workers in the region are facing the earthquake's destruction while working without social security protection and insurance. In addition, the state paid the General Health Insurance premiums of only 2.55 million out of the 14 million people in the earthquake area. That's almost one-fifth of the population.

Gender inequality in participation in employment in the earthquake area is also evident. In the region's provinces, men's participation in the labor force

The earthquake struck a region with a high concentration of the poor, labourers, migrants, and asylum seekers, and where Turkey's traditional industrial and commercial basins are located. It is not a prophecy to say that as a result of the earthquake, regional inequality will increase even more, the current levels of poverty will grow, and livelihood opportunities will shrink further. The government believes it can overcome these heavy consequences through construction activities alone.

is 70.3 percent, while it stands at 32.8 percent for women. The unemployment rates are 10.7 percent for men and 14.7 percent for women. Wages are well below the average of Turkey and the other 70 provinces in all 11 provinces. The per capita income in the earthquake region is only 68 percent of Turkey's average.

Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin



In addition to this, the region is the national center of textiles and agriculture. This contributes to nationwide growth, since many exporting sectors are concentrated there. According to the Turkish Enterprise and Business Confederation's (TÜRKONFED) calculation, released in the week of the earthquake, there is expected to be an economic loss of 100 billion dollars.

In short, the earthquake struck a region with a high concentration of the poor, labourers, migrants, and asylum seekers, and where Turkey's traditional industrial and commercial basins are located. It is not a prophecy to say that as a result of the earthquake, regional inequality will increase even more, the current levels of poverty will grow, and livelihood opportunities will shrink further. The government believes it can overcome these heavy consequences through construction activities alone. The steps they have taken from day one have all been construction oriented. The nature of these steps is more likely to aggravate the social implications of the earthquake than to solve their problems and facilitate the normalization of life.

The government's construction-oriented step

The government declared a state of emergency on February 7, 2023. It then published a Presidential Decree No. 126, dated February 24, 2023, on Settlement and Construction within the Scope of the State of Emergency. This Decree, with its focus on "settlement and construction" in the provinces affected by the February earthquakes, clearly defines the perspective of political power and the view of the capitalist class from various sectors and various levels (primarily construction), which are organically related to it. It indicates that the vast

destruction experienced by the people was perceived to be an opportunity from the first moment, articulated through the term "reconstruction". The purpose of the decree was to usurp the lands, cultivated areas, agricultural lands, forests, and grasslands of the people living in the cities and villages, under the pretext of the earthquakes. The Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change was equipped with extraordinary powers in the earthquake region and appointed almost as a kind of Ministry of Emergency. The Ministry had almost unlimited powers, such as making all kinds of dispositions on the property

The Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change was equipped with extraordinary powers in the earthquake region and appointed almost as a kind of Ministry of Emergency. The Ministry had almost unlimited powers, such as making all kinds of dispositions on the property rights of the earthquake victims, opening the forests, coasts, agricultural lands, and pastures up to development by changing their status, and being made the sole authority on decisions of settlement and zoning in earthquake regions.



rights of the earthquake victims, opening the forests, coasts, agricultural lands, and pastures up to development by changing their status, and being made the sole authority on decisions of settlement and zoning in earthquake regions. The Ministry was also granted extensive urgent expropriation powers.

As a result of this decree, Zoning Law No. 3194 was ignored. A procedure was imposed in which the zoning plans were not required to be displayed, construction was undertaken without the need for a zoning plan, the objection right of the beneficiary citizens were abolished, and only the interests of the construction plantations were taken into account.

Such impositions were made on the region in the name of “reconstruction.” In addition to all other official institutions and organizations, the rights and powers of professional organizations and local governments were deactivated. As a result there is no mechanism left for the earthquake victims to understand, or even ask about, the state-capital practices regarding their last remaining properties. Within the scope of the Decree, forest areas listed in Annex 16 of the Forestry Law, and those subject to the Pasture Law, may be used for temporary and definitive settlement areas by having their status changed upon the request of the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change. All these procedures

have led to the confiscation of lands belonging to the public in the earthquake zone, sometimes for the construction of container or tent cities, sometimes in order to dump rubble, and sometimes for the construction of permanent housing or industrial zones. Many people in the region are facing this problem.

With the Presidential Decree on Industrial Workplaces published within the scope of the State of Emergency, and released in the Official Gazette dated March 12, 2023, it is clear that measures have been taken purely in the interests of the capital class, under the name of eliminating the losses of industrialists in the earthquake region. Through the decree,

the determination of places that may be turned into industrial areas has been entrusted to the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization and the Ministry of Industry and Technology “by taking the opinion of the relevant institutions”; a decision was made that the status changes of the said areas should be made within three days and that the zoning and parceling plans and changes should be prepared and approved by the Ministry of Industry and Technology.

As can be seen, the determination of which places were to be declared as industrial areas was left to the authority of the two ministries by reducing the role of all remaining institutions to that

The government clearly considers the earthquake as an opportunity to revitalize the construction economy and redesign the destroyed cities to suit their political and economic needs. This is the real danger. The construction-centered approach that the government has applied thus far is playing a significant part in the earthquake’s transformation into a social disaster, and has consequences that will affect several generations to come.

of “taking their opinion.” Moreover, the “status change” of these areas, that is, the opening up of areas which had previously qualified as forests, agricultural areas, and pastures to the construction of industrial zones, will now be made in a short period of only three days. The Ministry of Industry and Technology was authorized to confiscate all immovables belonging to public institutions and organizations or those subject to private ownership in these areas. It will be sufficient for the Ministry of Industry to claim for the registration of expropriated immovables on behalf of the Treasury. This will pave the way for the confiscation of public lands, plots, and fields in the earthquake zone, in line with the interests of industrialists.

New housings are not distributed fairly

On April 5, a 307-hectare section, which encompasses the historical center of Antakya, was transformed into a “risk area” with the signature of the President. Centers which have been home to Antakya’s particular cultural-historical identity for centuries are located in this area. Although, it was made clear from the beginning that this area will be reconstructed as a “cultural area,” recent experiences and practices in other parts of the country strengthen concerns that Antakya’s center is also being considered as a “tourism destination.”

No official explanation has been given over what, by whom, and how it will be built. Declaring it a ‘risk area’ also means completely isolating the area. The reconstruction of Antakya is therefore being hidden from the public and, most importantly, from the people of the city. Moreover, although nearly seventy percent of the city was completely destroyed, it has not been

explained why a particular region has been marked as a risk area. Emek and Aksaray neighborhoods in the center of Antakya were declared risk areas in 2013; an urban transformation project was prepared for these neighborhoods, but the court canceled the prepared project as a result of a lawsuit filed by TMMOB in 2016. A decision announced in 2019 stated that the proposed projects did not contain enough social reinforcement areas, and the number of floors was increased. Antakya Municipality prepared an application zoning plan that allowed for up to thirteen floors on ground containing alluvial soil, and which proposed building 6000 houses for an estimated 2000 owners. All of these plans indicate that the intention was not to create urban transformation as a means of reducing the risk of earthquake disaster but to create new urban rent. After the cancellation decision, the municipality prepared another plan, but postponed its implementation due to the 2019 local elections.

Another sign that the government is not taking the needs of the people into account in the reconstruction of Hatay is the new housing constructions and tenders being propagated to the public. Although Hatay region has suffered the most destruction from the earthquake, it has been allocated the least share of new houses. According to the Presidential Strategy and Budget Department’s report, 215,255 houses (which make up 42 percent of the 518,19 houses which were heavily damaged and demolished) are in Hatay. As of April, the total number of new residences, which TOKİ has signed the contract for, is 36,530. Only 3,828 of these have been allocated to Hatay. The new housing tenders being held in Hatay make up only 2 percent of the severely damaged and demolished houses.



Photo: Tayfun Kesik

This rate is 38 percent in Gaziantep, 26 percent in Kilis, and 15 percent in Şanlıurfa. The distribution of the 2,928 houses whose tenders were made in Hatay, are as follows: 364 houses in Altnözü district (whose mayor is from AKP); 292 houses in Belen district (whose mayor is from MHP); 1451 houses in Iskenderun district (whose mayor is from AKP); and 821 houses in Payas district (whose mayor is from AKP).

In other words, the government began taking steps towards fulfilling the needs of their construction-oriented politics rather than the needs of the people, from the very moment of the earthquake. TOKİ and the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization started housing tenders while the wreckage was still in place, where the bodies of citizens who had lost their lives had not yet been removed. Most of the tenders were allocated to companies which are close to the government, as we have witnessed frequently in the last twenty-one years. It is worth noting that some of the constructors of those buildings which were destroyed or damaged in the earthquake were among them.

We should once again state that these policies do not hold the ambition of

reducing the impact of the economic and social destruction of the disaster and normalizing life. The government clearly considers the earthquake as an opportunity to revitalize the construction economy and redesign the destroyed cities to suit their political and economic needs. This is the real danger. The construction-centered approach that the government has applied thus far is playing a significant part in the earthquake's transformation into a social disaster, and has consequences that will affect several generations to come.

Construction oligarchy in Anatolia

The new economic and political forms created by the AKP government's economic policy, which have been based on resource transfer through public tenders and capital accumulation based on construction in Anatolia, are striking in the cities destroyed by the earthquake. A form of "oligarchic structure" with the same network of relations, where politicians, bureaucrats, and capitalists are intertwined, is apparent in each of these cities. The cities are typically regarded as the busiest basins in Anatolia, in terms of labor, agriculture, industry, and trade. These structures, which are compatible with the organization of the political regime, and which have spread

Although construction has had a historically dominant role in Turkish capitalism, it has become a giant black hole in the hands of the AKP government, swallowing up huge public resources. The results have not been limited to the construction sector but have led to poverty, environmental and urban destruction, disrupted income distribution and ultimately political and economic corruption.

to the districts and monopolized the economic resources of the cities across Anatolia, deserve special attention. How have the cities surrendered to such an oligarchic order? Although answering this question requires much more comprehensive research and discussion,

the initial observations and information coming from the earthquake zone are enough to draw some conclusions.

In the first decade of the AKP rule, a series of laws came into force that reshaped the legal and administrative status of cities. The Metropolitan Municipality Law of 2004 and the Special Provincial Administration Law of 2005; the Municipal Law; and the Law on Local Administration Unions were enacted one after the other. As a result, the administrative structure of local governments began to be changed quite comprehensively. The laws were presented as a "democratization" step to balance out the central government's authority with the expansion of local governments, within the framework of the goal of integration into the European Union, and under the label of "local government reform." However, every regulation presented as an administrative reform had economic consequences that would further increase regional inequalities in Anatolia and centralize capital accumulation. In the aftermath of the earthquake we saw the results of the long-forgotten 2005 liquidation of the General Directorate of Rural Services, when the state wasn't able to reach the villages for days during the earthquake.

In short, while the liquidation of state-owned enterprises through privatization and the transfer of their public savings to capital continued at full speed, simultaneously, the institutional capacity of the public was liquidated in the provinces, the authorities were concentrated in municipalities and provincial special administrations, and the "service to the provinces" was privatized through tenders. Institutions such as the General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works and Highways are now almost dysfunctional, except for being a "tender distribution center." All kinds of services one can imagine –from constructing roads, bridges, and irrigation channels to distributing essential services such as natural gas, electricity, and water– are now provided through private companies through tenders.

The main reason for the inability to bring fresh water to the earthquake victims for weeks, the failure to build temporary shelter centers, or the lack of equipment such as cranes needed for search and

rescue operations in the very first days is that no public institution was left to fulfill them. In fact, municipalities remained the only institutional structure able to provide an organized service in the field during the earthquake. The most powerful ones in terms of opportunities, namely Ankara, Izmir, and Istanbul municipalities, were able to provide a continuous service. From the very first years of its rule, the AKP has made the administrative organization of the municipalities compatible with their corporate understanding.

In those years the municipalities were brought to the fore as rent-generating and distribution centers as a result of the following factors – the IMF agreement which prevented the government from using the central budget resources arbitrarily; the fact that the superior boards established with the Kemal Derviş program did not allow them to make arrangements in favor of the government in the economic bureaucracy; and the fact that the judicial system as a whole had not yet undergone the transformation desired by the AKP. Because the conditions in the first version of the Public Procurement Law required large tenders to be made, inevitably, in favor of large capital, mega projects such as highways, airports, etc., were only started after the procurement law was changed many times and made suitable for use by the AKP. Until then, capital and wealth transfer was carried out through companies established by the municipalities. Capital groups such as Kalyon, Cengiz, and Kolin, which are now seen as part of the government, also provided their first intensive savings through tenders such as the urban metro, tunnel, viaduct, etc.

However, zoning plans have long been the AKP's main mechanism of producing uninterrupted economic rent. Municipalities have essentially evolved into a machine which constantly produces "raw materials" for the construction economy and turns land into plots by gradually valuing them based on parcels – that is, through personalized plans. Investments such as double roads, hospitals, schools, mosques, universities, etc., have come to the forefront as economic policies aimed at reviving the construction economy through using the public, rather than as social needs.

TOKİ is the most influential actor in producing and distributing plots from the land. The lands of the municipalities were quickly transferred to TOKİ stock; the qualities of those lands were changed under the zoning plans approved by the municipal councils; and these lands were then transferred to private construction companies with contracts, signed again through TOKİ. TOKİ has also been skilled in generating political consent in the government's favor by ensuring the lower classes receive a certain share of urban rent. The regulations facilitating the opening of chain markets in city centers and the building of shopping malls should also be understood within this construction economy. As a result of these regulations, Anatolian cities, as well as metropolitan cities, have been filled with shopping malls in a short period of time.

The magnitude of the construction economy

Undoubtedly, global financial opportunities are the primary reason enabling the AKP to build the infrastructure of a construction-based accumulation effortlessly in the first decade of its existence. Intensive hot inflows of cash saw construction as a valuation area, and loans distributed through banks expanded the market by supporting citizen purchasing power in borrowing as well as contracting activities. The estimated cash flow into construction is more than two trillion dollars. This resource is mainly allocated to companies selected by the government through guaranteed projects. However, it would be a mistake to limit the oligarchic structure created by the construction economy to only the "gang of five." If we were to compile a balance sheet examining public tenders with a contract value of more than 100 million TRY, we would see that the first twenty-five companies have fifty percent of all contracts. The share of companies called the "gang of five" is thirty percent. The remaining fifty percent is distributed among seventy-five large companies. Considering the subcontractors, excavators, and different side elements of construction working under each big company, the dimensions of the dominance of the construction-centered structure in the economy and politics established during the AKP period become apparent.



The relationship between construction and the new regime built by the AKP is not symbolic but symbiotic. This symbiotic relationship forms the economic and political basis of the construction oligarchy. It has reached a stage where one cannot exist without the other.

When we examine the sector balance sheets published by the Central Bank, the number of construction companies increased by a record forty-four percent between 2011 and 2020. In 2011, the number was around 88,000. In 2020, it exceeded 127,000. The tremendous increase in the number and activities of construction companies, especially during the pandemic years, is remarkable. Nearly 100,000 of these companies are micro-enterprises, 24,000 are small, 3,900 are medium, and 486 are large. Although construction has had a historically dominant role in Turkish capitalism, it has become a giant black hole in the hands of the AKP government, swallowing up huge public resources. The results have not been limited to the construction sector but have led to poverty, environmental and urban destruction, disrupted income distribution and ultimately political and economic corruption.

Due to the orderly distribution of the public procurement system, the public is now well aware of the practices of a gigantic construction oligarchy intertwined with power, which has expanded downwards like a pyramid and encompassed hundreds of companies. The “provincial” leg of this political-capital organization, established through municipalities, became even more apparent in the aftermath of the earthquake. The only way to keep such an organism alive, which is the basis of rapid wealth and capital accumulation and which has spread to areas such as tourism, mining, and energy, depends on finding the resources to feed the habitat that creates it and creating political and legal tools to protect it. The relationship between construction and the new regime built by the AKP is not symbolic but symbiotic. This symbiotic relationship forms the economic and political basis of the construction oligarchy. It has reached a stage where one cannot exist without the other. This existential problem lies behind the AKP’s increasingly authoritarian and despotic policy of building a new regime in the second decade.

After the 2010s, the government started a “mega-project” era at the central level, using financial power created by intense inflows of hot cash and excessive foreign borrowing. However, after 2012, as the global conjuncture began to change and foreign financial opportunities began to shrink, a sharp crossroads emerged in domestic economic policy. It was not a coincidence that in the same year,

TÜSİAD released an annual report which criticized the interest policy and called for an adaptation to global conditions; and Erdoğan issued a harsh statement in response, which he initiated through Gezi, but which in fact targeted the interest policy of the Central Bank. Political and social processes are different aspects of the same momentum, as can be seen in the creation of a media monopoly close to power in 2014 and the change in the AKP’s partners in the power architecture. As foreign funding began to be cut off, AKP sought to create new financial opportunities as a necessary means to maintain this symbiotic relationship. As part of this, it implemented unprecedented legal arrangements such as “wealth amnesty” that could attract revenues from illegal activities ranging from black money to drug trafficking. However, the primary pillar supporting the AKP has remained land generation. Moreover, construction is the main area where money which has been accumulated through illegal trade is easily converted into wealth and capital.

During this period, the legal amendments monopolizing the regulations that would open forests, pastures, bays, and agricultural lands up for development were enacted one after the other. Let’s observe the construction economy’s role again through this series of legal changes enacted in this painful, conflicting, and complex process in which the political regime had radically changed. One of the most significant changes was the Metropolitan Law passed in 2012. With the amendment



Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin

made to Law No. 6360, the regions of Aydın, Balıkesir, Denizli, Hatay, Malatya, Manisa, Kahramanmaraş, Mardin, Ordu, Muğla, Tekirdağ, Trabzon, Şanlıurfa, and Van obtained metropolitan status. With the same law, town municipalities were closed, as of 2014, and the status of villages were altered to that of neighborhoods. In some provinces, such as Hatay, the social consequences of this “political deception,” which had changed the administrative connection of the neighborhoods and enabled local governments to change hands in elections, were devastating. The adjacent areas became “vacant lands” to be brought by the construction economy for the municipalities, and the services to be delivered became a source of tender.

Another significant legal development in 2012 was the enactment of Law No. 6306 on the Transformation of Areas at Risk of Disaster. Through this law, the ruling power entirely monopolized the opportunity to declare any desired area as “risky,” change its status, expropriate it, transform it into a reserve housing area through TOKİ, and transfer it to the preferred capital group.

It is also worth noting that the legal changes, known as urban transformation, give an effective weapon to the government, such as providing a share of urban rent to the desired segment, punishing the unwanted ones, and even confiscating their property. The motive of these laws can be summarized by the fact that the rate of urban transformation projects implemented by the government in Istanbul, and the official earthquake risk areas in the city, don’t even overlap by ten percent. This tornado of urban

transformation, which started in the metropolitan cities, was then reflected in the countryside with the opening up of agricultural lands, forests, pastures, stream beds, and plains for housing. The public was able to follow the process in the big cities to some extent; but most people only realized how terrible the “construction hell” in Anatolia had become as a result of the earthquake.

Bureaucrat-politician-contractor network

In cities, there is a structure in which the contractor, the politician, the bureaucrat, the governor, the district governor, and the leader of the ruling party are mixed and intertwined. As wealth and capital accumulation shifted to construction-centered areas, the political elites who hold the authority to direct the construction activities in the cities and the economic elites became more closely integrated, new riches emerged for politicians, and private interests replaced the public responsibilities of bureaucrats. Eventually, the cities’ economies also underwent a construction-oriented change. Construction-based growth has made cities more fragile, spatially and economically.

Construction activities feed many subsidiary branches, so the need to constantly produce buildings has arisen to maintain the economic vitality of the cities, resulting in the destruction of agricultural lands, pastures, forests, and water resources. No data is available to measure the extent of political-social corruption caused by degeneration, bribery, nepotism, and the greed for easy money generated by construction. However, it is necessary to add the

consequences. While those with land, and political and economic power became richer due to the construction economy and became the new elites of the cities, those who didn’t have access to them were pushed further into economic injustice and poverty. Agricultural landowners opened their lands up to construction because they could not earn their subsistence through cultivation. In the meantime, agricultural laborers who were left unemployed or condemned to very low wages due to the decrease in farmlands or land not being cultivated were forced to migrate to the industrial zones in the surrounding provinces or to work in unskilled jobs in the cities. Therefore, labor should be added to the list of destructions caused by the construction economy. The dynamics underlying the social disintegration caused by the lack of means of livelihood should be better understood here.

In conclusion, the extent of the devastation caused by the 6 February Earthquake was not only limited to problems of negligence, irresponsibility, and urbanization; it was also a consequence of the social destruction caused by the economic policies on which the political regime is based. Minimizing the effects of the consequences of the earthquake therefore requires taking a different path from these economic policies. A perspective which limits itself to construction will carry the effects of the earthquake to future generations, making the current inequality and injustice even more permanent, and transforming it into a legacy.



Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin

Disaster capitalism opens up new spaces for capital

Prof. Dr. Özgür Orhangazi, the head of Department of Economics at the Kadir Has University, evaluates the economic policies on the path towards restructuring after the 6 February earthquake in Kahramanmaraş. Orhangazi argues that the construction-oriented growth policy, which the AKP (Justice and Development Party) has been pursuing during the entirety of its rule, failed the test of the earthquake, and that this is the inevitable outcome of market-oriented capitalism. He warns that construction-oriented growth is likely to accelerate in the coming days, due to “disaster capitalism”.

When I think of the question of the earthquake and the economy in combination, it immediately brings to mind the construction sector. It is known that the growth of the Turkish economy has been based on construction in recent years. How did a situation come about where the buildings of a country which allocates so much of its resources towards construction faced such great destruction during the earthquake? Where did we go wrong, and how can we fix it?

Özgür Orhangazi: When we look at it from the perspective you’ve outlined, the following statistic is quite remarkable: since the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, construction and real estate activities have generated 15 percent of the gross national product. This has also been a period of great urban transformation. I think this tells us two things. The first is something we already knew – that this whole construction and urban transformation frenzy has been created based on the generation of rent. We have individual examples of this; that so-and-so neighborhood was evacuated, that multi-story buildings were built in the so-and-so neighborhood, etc.

Such as Fikirtepe...

Ö.O.: Yes. There are many such singular examples, but when we put them together and look at them in macroeconomic terms, we are talking

about billions of dollars. That’s one side of it. The second is that there was, and there still is, available resources. That tells us that they have the capacity to rebuild all the houses destroyed in the earthquake zone in an earthquake-proof way. That is – if they want to. The considerable depth of resources which have been transferred to construction and urban transformation includes the mega projects, airports, and bridges built with public-private cooperation. This also shows how and where resources will be allocated. As an economist I talk with numbers and statistics, but at the end of the day there are political decisions happening here. A particular political choice has been made, and that is – even though you feed and expand the construction business with TOKİ and the amended tender laws, you ultimately leave it to the market to work it out. When you say, “let the market decide,” the market will naturally go for the more profitable option. That’s the nature of the market. Furthermore, you let the market do the building inspections. We can find the roots of this in the 2001 economic program. We can extend our analysis all the way back to the 1980s, but it was in 2001 that we decided to market everything fully. Kemal Derviş’s “2001 Transition Program to a Strong Economy” was outlined in that year. When the AKP came to power in 2002, it continued the same program and approach.

Neoclassical economics itself states that the market has no solution for situations it cannot price. When construction-oriented growth is market-oriented, it does not solve problems like the ones we faced during the earthquake. We were sadly reminded of this fact once again on 6 February.

The market does not solve major societal problems. You don’t have to be a Marxist economist to know this – it’s in the introduction to neoclassical economics books. If there are externalities, the market cannot solve the problem. What is meant by an externality is that if there are losses that cannot be included in the calculation of profit and loss, or that you cannot calculate, the market cannot solve it. The earthquake created a situation which is impossible to calculate and price. Don’t get me wrong, I’m also not saying that it can absolutely solve what it can price. Neoclassical economics itself states that the market has no solution for situations it cannot price. When construction-oriented growth is market-oriented, it does not solve problems like the ones we faced during the earthquake.

We were sadly reminded of this fact once again on 6 February.

Is the solution therefore not to leave the market alone and instead put public authorities into action?

Ö.O.: Talking about public authority in Turkey is a problematic area. Let’s talk theoretically. As a public authority, you first need to set specific rules; secondly, you need to ensure that these rules are audited autonomously; and thirdly, you must prioritize this field in the allocation of resources. Solving the first and the second is relatively easy, but when it comes to the third, statements such as “the state should not do this, it should not interfere with resource allocation, let the market do it” come into play. In such a case, the market cannot calculate the cost of major earthquakes that occur every hundred years; it doesn’t have such a mechanism. However, you do have great power as a public authority: the ability to impose and spend taxes. This is the framework in which the generated resources can be used. This is how it should work theoretically.

A new administration will be in action after the election, regardless of whoever wins. We are confronted with the task of

rebuilding eight mostly destroyed cities. What kind of economic policy should be pursued?

Ö.O.: There is a concept called “disaster capitalism”, which Naomi Klein defined after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in the US in 2005. Massive demolitions open up new space for capital. They also allow things to happen that wouldn’t be able to happen under normal conditions. With the tender processes and construction projects that started immediately after the earthquake, we see new rent areas being created under the pretext of moving settlements away from the fault lines. In this process, the opportunity emerges to include pastures and agricultural lands in the capital appraisal. Unless you can think of an alternative within the capitalist system, every disaster makes room for these processes of capitalist accumulation and rent relations, both economically and politically. When there are a million homeless people, no one cares about objections such as not pouring concrete on pasture and agricultural land, not rushing things, and not proceeding without plans. The atmosphere of discussion and generating ideas is off the table since the problem needs an urgent solution. You will also not have

Massive demolitions open up new space for capital. They also allow things to happen that wouldn’t be able to happen under normal conditions. With the tender processes and construction projects that started immediately after the earthquake, we see new rent areas being created under the pretext of moving settlements away from the fault lines. In this process, the opportunity emerges to include pastures and agricultural lands in the capital appraisal. Unless you can think of an alternative within the capitalist system, every disaster makes room for these processes of capitalist accumulation and rent relations, both economically and politically.



Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin



the support of the earthquake victims if you suggest a careful planning of the city, involving conducting surveys, and likely to finish in three years rather than one year. How would they support such a proposal, since housing is one of people's most basic needs? This resurrection will therefore occur at a speed that will leave no room for discussing alternatives.

Let me ask you a question at this point. There was a debate over the ruling party getting more votes than expected from the earthquake zone in the May 14 elections. Do you think the earthquake survivors voted predominantly for the existing power because of what you just said? In other words, they voted for whoever

they thought could build their houses quickly? The ones in power. In fact, immediately after the earthquake, there were images of a minister scribbling something on a piece of paper, saying 'we can move the city here, we can do something like that'. On the other hand, the position of the opposition has been to say 'let's plan first, you don't plan

the city by scribbling on a piece of paper', etc.

Ö.O.: Under normal circumstances, a minister can't proceed as fast as they declare the actions they will take. But that has been enabled now. About the question of voter preference... There is a lot of discussion about the question you just raised. Of course, you cannot explain

voter behavior with a single parameter. Considering the various power relations, economic relations, and ideological affiliations created by a twenty-year rule, I can evaluate the factor you mentioned as being only one of the contributions. We can't measure if its effect is three or five points, but it is obviously one of the reasons.

In your article on the post-earthquake economy, you mentioned that the international credit rating agency, Moody's, predicted that Turkey's growth would increase with the post-earthquake construction activities. Is there a parallelism between this growth forecast and the "disaster capitalism" concept you just mentioned?

The construction-oriented economy in Turkey began to slow down towards the end of the 2010s. They built airports, bridges, and tunnels everywhere, but in the meantime, construction capital had grown as well. By its very nature, capital needs to grow constantly. That need started to become a bottle neck. When we look at the images after the earthquake, it is hard to believe that so many construction machines went to the region that were not there in the early days. The accumulated tangible capital is apparent in those images, and this capital needs to be used somewhere. Otherwise, those trucks and construction equipment lose money when they are idle.

Ö.O.: We can certainly link it there. Our approach is that there was a disaster, and this destruction has a cost, right? The variables we're considering are actually stocks. The stocks are now gone. What we measure as growth is current values. That is, produced things, some of which are accumulated yearly. When you remove the wreck, you start from scratch. This will create a tremendous demand for growth in terms of construction. An economic slowdown is expected in the first phase, as the earthquake disrupted production, but it will become a period of construction activity as soon as this moment is over.

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Was Kanal Istanbul's introduction as a "crazy project" in the 2010s, and the constant pushing for the project to go ahead, a move to find a solution to this

bottleneck of the construction sector?

Ö.O.: We call it a political choice, but the capital structure at hand determines this choice. As construction capital succeeds and grows, let's not think of it just as a form of monetary accumulation – it is always possible to transfer the financial accumulation to different sectors, and then there is the accumulated tangible capital that extends from the truck to the digger, to the construction equipment, to the trained personnel. After a while, it starts to exceed the borders of the country. For instance, you can go to Russia; you can go to Venezuela. It is easy to use monetary capital, but you must continue using the physically accumulated capital, or you will have to liquidate it at a price lower than its value. This is the case when you look at it from a classical capitalist point of view.

The dollar is currently pushing the 20TRY limit [at the time of this interview] and is expected to spike after the election. There is an expectation of a further economic crisis, which is constantly being talked about. The Central Bank has been keeping the policy rate stable in recent months, neither lowering it nor increasing it. It is unable to use interest as an instrument. Will the investments in the earthquake zone be successful under such economic circumstances? Or will there even be an economic environment left in which it is possible to make investments?

Ö.O.: Good question. I believe that Turkey's economy has entered a particularly unpredictable phase. This policy is not sustainable whether the government changes or not. In any case, the government seems to have designed this policy to last until the election. What are the options ahead? First, your money will lose value. This is

evident. There is a significant discrepancy between the foreign currency needs and the foreign currency entering the country. This is a straightforward market mechanism; there is not enough currency. The price of the currency will increase. Will a rabbit be pulled out of the hat? Receiving five billion dollars from Saudi Arabia and three billion from somewhere else, devising something called a 'currency-protected deposit', etc. It seems as if all the possible rabbits have been pulled from the hat, but you never know. Anyway, no matter what, the exchange rate will increase. This is inevitable. The question of whether there will be a change in the monetary policy is significant here. The opposition says it will change it if it comes to power. The government says it will continue with it. I don't think they can continue unless they find a great source of foreign currency. On the other hand, if interest rates rise... It is not the interest policy of the Central Bank that matters; it is the effective loan interest in the market which is decisive. In this last period, we have already seen that Central Bank's policy rate decisions have had a minimal influence on the effective interest rates in the market.

Let's take these two indicators. What do high exchange rates and high-interest rates mean in terms of construction? First, construction is a highly credit-based industry. Second, there is a high rate of imported input in construction. This is challenging for the industry in two ways. Companies that receive these businesses, constructions, tenders, etc., will find it increasingly difficult to access the credit they need without a special borrowing opportunity. Of course, this special borrowing can be done through public banks, by transferring from the budget, etc. This, again, is a political choice. However, construction activities will become seriously expensive. How much of this will you subsidize using the public budget, and how much will you reflect on the sector? This decision will affect the pace of reconstruction, but it will also determine who will be able to afford to live there at the determined prices and who will be displaced. The government says it will build houses and that earthquake victims will make gradual and long-term repayments. The increase in exchange rates and interest rates will also make it difficult to implement this plan. If there is a slowdown in economic



Photo: Hayri Tunç

activity as a third indicator, apart from the exchange rate and interest rates issue, if the economy tends to a recession or a crisis, then it seems that it will not be possible to save that side in the short term.

Isn't Turkey experiencing an economic crisis right now?

Ö.O.: Technically speaking, when we economists talk about a crisis, we list a few factors. Production slows down, for example, and this is not currently the case in Turkey at the moment. Employment decreases. Unemployment is at a certain level, at the moment, which is high and steady – that is, there has been no dramatic decline in employment. Several companies, and sometimes banks, become unable to make payments. As a result they either go bankrupt or try to prevent bankruptcy by selling their assets. These three factors are not in existence for the time being. The cost of living is high; that is correct. Poverty is on the rise; that is correct. The income and asset distributions are becoming increasingly unequal; that is correct... But we cannot say, yet, that what we are experiencing constitutes an economic crisis.

So, what have we been going through for the last few years? Are we on the verge of an economic crisis?

Ö.O.: We can say that we are on the verge of a crisis. The policies implemented so

We can say that we are on the verge of a crisis. The policies implemented so far have been aiming to postpone the crisis. For political reasons, owing to the election period, they put it off for as long as they could. They postponed hoping for a change in the world conjuncture, or that they would find natural gas or oil somewhere and eliminate the crisis. After this stage, they need to find external resources in order to delay further.

far have been aiming to postpone the crisis. For political reasons, owing to the election period, they put it off for as long as they could. They postponed hoping for a change in the world conjuncture, or that they would find natural gas or oil somewhere and eliminate the crisis. After this stage, they need to find external resources in order to delay further. But I'm talking about an extensive external resource. So far, they've managed through swaps with foreign banks and governments. They've depleted the reserves of the Central Bank. Imports are very high; thus, there is a foreign exchange deficit. There is a currency deficit from foreign debt payments. At the same time, some of the residents in the country need foreign currency when they want to take their assets abroad. Foreign currency inflows are needed to meet all of these demands. Exports remain limited; there will be a foreign exchange inflow which comes with tourism in the summer months, but that will not be enough. After all, someone

has to give you currency to close this gap. Would they do that? Yes, they would, but with a very high-interest rate. That's what I mean by postponing. You get foreign currency with high interest, but when it is time to pay it back, you will have to pay the amount plus ten percent interest in foreign currency. And by the way, you will need to be able to have generated that currency by the time of the repayment, but you can't. If the import-export imbalance does not change, you cannot save foreign currency to pay the debt you have received and interest. This, again, is a delay. You're actually increasing the cost by postponing.

Let's go back to the beginning; what can you say about the reconstruction of the earthquake zone in these economic and political conditions?

Ö.O.: Eventually, a construction process needs to be planned locally in the longer term. However, the current political and economic framework does not seem capable of allowing this to happen. ☹️

KIZILAY: THE SYMBOL OF HUMANITY, IMPARTIALITY, AND PEACE?

While all state institutions were criticized for their late and inadequate intervention after the earthquake, Kızılay was one of the institutions that received the most heated public reaction. Initially founded as an association, Kızılay has been the official aid organization of the Turkish state since 1935. However, it did not fulfill its function when needed. In this article Cafer Solgun compiles all the developments of these intense days to discuss the discrepancy between Kızılay's basic principles and functions, and its practical functioning.

On the official website of Kızılay, the institution's mission is defined as "to protect the dignity of people and society with the power of goodness, to increase their resilience and to relieve their suffering." They define their vision as "peace and safety for all." The purpose of Kızılay, which is described as sharing the fundamental principles of the International Red Crescent and Red Cross Community, is articulated as follows:

"The aim of Kızılay is to try to prevent and alleviate human suffering without any discrimination, to protect human life and health, to ensure respect for the human being, and to try to bring mutual understanding, friendship, respect, cooperation and continuous peace amongst all peoples. Kızılay is a symbol of solidarity in times of need, equality in times of suffering, humanity, neutrality, and peace in the hottest times of war."

The basic principles of the International Red Crescent-Red Cross Community, which is shared by Kızılay, are humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence,

voluntary service, unity, and universality. In other words, Kızılay is a charity institution like that of other Red Crescent and Red Cross institutions, with the same mission. As defined in their mission, vision, and purpose, they aim to relieve people in difficult situations, including natural disasters such as earthquakes, without discrimination. Red Crescent and Red Cross institutions don't just operate domestically but also help countries in need in times of disaster. Being a charity organization working without discrimination naturally requires this.

As we know, an earthquake is caused by seismic fluctuations caused by the unexpected release of energy accumulated within the earth's crust. The extent of its consequences makes it one of the most devastating natural disasters. The destructive element of an earthquake's power is directly related to human activities – the settlements built on earthquake fault lines, buildings that are not resistant to earthquakes, and irresponsible, careless approaches and practices regarding the taking of precautions during and after the

earthquake. The cliché often repeated by experts, "rotten buildings kill, not earthquakes," expresses a fact in this sense.

Kızılay should be proactive in preparing for the earthquake

When an earthquake occurs, search and rescue operations and responding to the vital needs of earthquake victims are of primary importance. Since Turkey is an earthquake-prone country, it is naturally expected that Kızılay would be prepared for an earthquake disaster at any time.

The needs of earthquake victims, such as nutrition, cleaning, shelter, medical equipment, and health, can only be urgently met by being prepared and organized. Inevitably, one looks to Kızılay to provide these things.

Search and rescue, and the timely fulfillment of the vital needs of earthquake victims, provide an opportunity to minimize the negative consequences of the disaster, particularly in terms of loss of life. In addition to other health services, providing psycho-

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Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin



social support activities for disaster survivors is also among the activities which Kızılay should take the lead in.

Another significant point to be made regarding the Red Crescent and Red Cross institutions is that they are supra-political institutions. We can state this as being the most fundamental feature of these organizations. The Red Crescent and Red Cross symbols are considered to be symbols of neutrality and immunity for all parties in cases of war.

As we know, these institutions depend on donations in kind and cash for the financial and moral basis of their operations. In Turkey, Kızılay is the primary address for blood donations. People donate money to Kızılay, to be used when necessary. They donate blood in blood centers. They donate nourishment, food, and clothing. As its name implies, these are “donations” which are given to ensure that Kızılay is ready to aid those in need whenever necessary. It is a question of human

nature and sensibility that someday you yourself might be “the one in need.” A charity must always be fully open, transparent, and accountable at all times about the materials it receives as donations. This is not only a requirement of law, statute, or regulation but also a moral responsibility emerging from its mission. This means, for example, that it cannot sell earthquake victim tents to other institutions or persons with a commercial motive. It has a responsibility to deliver them to the ones in need.

From Hilal-i Ahmer to the present

The history of the Turkish Red Crescent is based on the Hilal-i Ahmer Society, which was established in 1868 during the Ottoman period. This society was founded with the mission of helping soldiers injured in the wars of the Ottoman Empire and civilians harmed by the war. After adopting the Geneva Convention during the Republican period, its name was changed to Turkish Kızılay, and the society became the official charity of the state in 1935.

Kızılay ve Kızıllaç kurumları için önemle belirtilmesi gereken bir diğer husus da, bunların siyasetler üstü kurumlar olmasıdır. Bu, bu kuruluşların olmazsa olmaz önemdeki en temel özelliğidir denilebilir. Kızılay ve Kızıllaç sembolleri savaş hallerinde bütün taraflar açısından tarafsızlık ve dokunulmazlık sembolleri olarak kabul edilir.

To understand the current situation of Kızılay, and the criticisms and reactions being directed towards it, it may help to remember the previous tests which the institution experienced in their response to the earthquakes of 1939 in Erzincan and 1966 in Varto. A total of 32,968 citizens lost their lives in the 7.9 magnitude earthquake in Erzincan, which struck on December 27, 1939. A further 100,000 people were injured, and tens of thousands of buildings were destroyed. The situation of the survivors and search and rescue efforts was made even more difficult due to the winter conditions.

The Erzincan earthquake was the first critical test of Kızılay during the Republican period. At the time, Kızılay had warehouses in Trabzon, Samsun, Erzurum, Sivas, and Malatya which were used to prepare for possible disasters. Despite the winter and transportation difficulties, Kızılay was able to deliver tents and blankets to the earthquake area on the very first day, and “emergency trains” left Erzurum and Sivas on the evening of December 27, 1939.¹ The Erzincan earthquake revealed the importance of Kızılay, although with bitter experience. A national aid and donation campaign was organized in the following days, and many citizens donated money, food, and clothing to Kızılay branches.

Severe earthquakes occurred in Varto district of Muş – the first on March 7, 1966, and the second on August 19, 1966. The first’s magnitude was 5.6 and killed 14 people, while the second was 6.9 and killed 2,394 and injured 1,489 people. All the buildings in Varto were destroyed as a result of this earthquake. The day after the earthquake, the following news was published in Ulus newspaper, dated August 20, 1966:

“A team from the Turkish Kızılay Society was sent to the earthquake

zones urgently for damage assessment and organizing necessary aid in the earthquake regions. Kızılay has sent 1,300 blankets, 1,300 tents, 100 sacks of bulgur, 250 sacks of bulgur paste, 270 sacks of flour, and 100 cans of oil from the region’s warehouses as emergency aid, ensuring that they are delivered to the citizens in the region urgently.”²

Photographs of tents, identifiable as belonging to Kızılay, were published in the period’s newspapers. Kızılay was able to reach the earthquake zone in a day with food, drink, and tents.

August 17 Marmara Earthquake The Marmara Earthquake, which occurred on 17 August 1999, with its epicenter in İzmit-Gölcük, is one of the most traumatic earthquakes to have occurred in Turkey’s recent history. It affected the entire Marmara Region and was also felt across the broader region, as far away as Ankara and İzmir. The Parliamentary Research Commission Report published in 2010 stated that 18,373 people died, 48,901 people were injured, and thousands of buildings were destroyed as a result of the earthquake. Sixteen million people were affected by the earthquake to various degrees.

The August 17 earthquake revealed our great potential for social solidarity. A great solidarity organization played an important and exemplary role in meeting the vital needs of earthquake victims, as well as search and rescue efforts. However, the earthquake also demonstrated that Kızılay was not prepared for such a severe disaster.

Kızılay was inadequately prepared. There were serious deficiencies in its emergency planning. It was unable to conduct search and rescue operations quickly and effectively. There were



We don't know when that next earthquake can come, and we cannot prevent it from happening. But it is not "fate" that the earthquake should hurt us so much, either. It is possible to prevent this hurt – and it is in our hands.

Photo: Mert Can

significant logistical problems and deficiencies. It was unable to effectively coordinate the relief efforts of different institutions and nongovernmental organizations. As a charity, Kızılay should be extremely transparent. Their response to the earthquake revealed that it did not have an understanding of accountability and transparency in matters such as aid distribution and resource management.³

Kızılay and AFAD

The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) was established in 2009 to address the disaster preparedness, emergency response, and coordination deficiencies which were revealed by the 1999 Marmara Earthquake. The General Directorate of Civil Defense under the Ministry of Interior, the General Directorate of Disaster Affairs under the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement, and the General Directorate of Emergency Management of Turkey under the Prime Ministry were closed. AFAD was instead established to single-handedly fulfill the duties, authorities, and responsibilities of these institutions, related to earthquakes. A Presidential Decree No. 4 was issued on July 15, 2018, within the scope of regulations relating to

After the establishment of AFAD, Kızılay's job description related to disasters became limited to the scope of providing "nutrition" and "assisting" with housing problems. Some experts in the field don't agree with this "positioning" and have criticized what they describe as the transformation of Kızılay into merely a fundraising organization.

the Presidential Government System, and AFAD was reformed as an agency under the Ministry of Interior.

In addition to its obligations, such as pre-disaster preparation, response, and emergency management during disasters, and managing the planning, coordination, and cooperation in this field, AFAD also carries out activities such as raising societal awareness of potential disasters and organizing training and awareness studies.

After the establishment of AFAD, Kızılay's job description related to disasters became limited to the scope of providing "nutrition" and "assisting" with housing problems. This job description is compatible with AFAD legislation.

The AFAD legislation assigns Kızılay the responsibility for nutrition services. Some experts in the field don't agree with this "positioning" and have criticized what they describe as the transformation of Kızılay into merely a fundraising organization.⁴

Kızılay Holding!

Kızılay, whose name is associated with "charity," "goodness," "health," and "help" and whose position and mission are defined as being "above politics," has come to the fore in recent years, not as an institution concerned with the rescue of citizens in distress, but with scandals.

In the aftermath of the 6.7 magnitude earthquake which struck Elazığ on January 24, 2020, Kızılay sent SMS

messages and tweets to people struggling for their lives. These messages requested citizens to donate money to Kızılay.

This is a situation in which there has been a severe earthquake. It is feared that people have lost their life; the situation is a matter of life and death; tremors are continuing, and people are living in a state of fear, curiosity, and anxiety. Is this the right time to make a call to "Donate to Kızılay"? The only statement necessary at that moment is to explain the actions being taken and how you are fulfilling your duties and responsibilities. Following

the negative reactions, the President of Kızılay, Kerem Kınık, deleted his post calling for donations.

On the same days, the news broke that Kızılay had made an extensive donation (about eight million dollars) to the Ensar Foundation.

This news was extraordinary – one fundraiser was donating to another! And it was an eight-million-dollar donation, no less. Among the questions over whether this news was accurate, Kızılay President Kerem Kınık confirmed it. With

a "contribution" to the literature by his statement, "Tax evasion is one thing, tax avoidance is another."

The donor was Başkent Gaz, a company within Torunlar Holding. Mehmet Torun, one of the company's bosses, released a statement which was as interesting as Kerem Kınık's: "If it was wrong, Kızılay should not have accepted it." Torunlar Holding, as we know, is a capital group whose boss is Aziz Torun – one of the founders of Ensar Foundation and a former schoolmate of President and AKP Chairman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at an imam Hatip school. Torunlar Holding operates in the fields of energy, real estate, and food. Apparently, they are "deeply" bonded with the Ensar Foundation. Mehmet Torun justified their donations through Kızılay, saying, "We wanted Kızılay to get the credit for the goodwill of this donation." How will this donation, given with "goodwill", be spent? On TÜRGEV's dormitory in New York.⁵

Is it usual for a charity to "mediate" the "tax evasion" or "tax avoidance" of various capital groups? Kızılay's President ignored the criticisms and the calls for his resignation regarding this question, until the disaster of February 6 in Maraş.

Kızılay's Subsidiaries

- Kızılay Investment Holding Inc.
- Kızılay Beverage Industry and Trade Inc.
- Kızılay Real Estate and Venture Capital Portfolio Management Inc.
- Kızılay Health Inc.
- Kızılay Culture and Art Trade Inc.
- Kızılay Tent and Textile Inc.
- Kızılay System Structure Inc.
- Kızılay Maintenance Inc.
- Kızılay Logistics Inc.
- Kızılay R&D and Information Technologies Trade Inc.
- Kızılay Biomedical Products Trade Inc.



Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin



Photo: Mert Can

The institution which was supposed to be setting up tents for earthquake victims was selling tents, and the institution responsible for meeting the nutritional needs of earthquake victims was selling foodstuff. In response to the criticisms the head of the institution stated “This is not a big deal.”

Is it true that “selling tents is no big deal”?

A severe earthquake occurred on February 6, 2023, in Maraş. The earthquake’s magnitude was 7.7. Nine hours later, another one struck, with a magnitude of 7.6. Eleven cities in the region were directly affected by the earthquake, more than fifty thousand citizens lost their lives, and thousands were injured. Numerous settlements were destroyed. What aggravated the heavy losses caused by the earthquake was that AFAD and Kızılay were too late in their response. Thousands of people in the region were trying to make themselves heard under the wreckage with their cries for “help”; cold winter conditions prevailed, and those who had survived the earthquake struggled to

make their urgent food and tent needs heard with their cries “we will freeze to death.”

At that moment the following shocking news, as the media would put it, came to the agenda. Kızılay, which owns a company to produce tents in order to deliver to earthquake victims in case of need, and which has tents in its warehouses, had sold tents to AHBAP, one of the first nongovernmental organizations to reach the earthquake area. They had taken 46 TRY million for these tents. Journalist Murat Ağirel reported this news, and Kızılay made a statement confirming it.⁶ The statement released by Kızılay was – “we sold [the tents] at the production cost”. In Kızılay President Kerem Kinik’s view, this transaction was “not a big deal.”⁷

AHBAP bought 2,050 tents from Kızılay for 46 million TRY, as well as foodstuffs such as dried beans and kidney beans.⁸ The institution which was supposed to be setting up tents for earthquake victims was selling tents, and the institution responsible for meeting the nutritional needs of earthquake victims was selling foodstuff.

Kızılay President Kerem Kinik replied to the criticisms and reactions with humor, sharing mocking posts about the calls for his resignation, which had become an issue once again. When the spokespersons of the ruling party started to criticize him, and finally, President Erdoğan invited him to resign, Kinik

announced his resignation two days before the May 14 elections.⁹

One of the issues on the agenda was what Kızılay, which sold its tents instead of delivering them to the earthquake victims, had done with the tents and blankets sent from abroad. Murat Ağirel, one of the journalists who revealed how Kızılay has become an institution that collects rent from the crises, asked whether the 20,000 tents sent from China for the earthquake victims were being distributed to them and questioned the fate of the 3.5 million euros given for the purchase of blankets. He did not receive a satisfactory answer from Kızılay.¹⁰

Conclusion

Turkey is an earthquake-prone country. No matter how often we remind ourselves of this fact, it never seems to be enough. The reason and necessity for this awareness, for remembering it, and reminding each other of it on every possible occasion, is in order to be prepared for the next earthquake in advance.

We don’t know when that next earthquake can come, and we cannot prevent it from happening. But it is not “fate” that the earthquake should hurt us so much, either. It is possible to prevent this hurt – and it is in our hands. For this, we may need to find objective, realistic, and courageous answers to what should be done in order for institutions such as Kızılay and AFAD to fulfill their duties and responsibilities properly.

¹ December 28, 1939, Akşam newspaper.

² August 20, 1966, Ulus newspaper.

³ For days, the newspapers reported how Kızılay President Kemal Demir and Kızılay executives had spent its budget arbitrarily and in areas that were not needed. Kemal Demir left Kızılay in 1999, where he worked for twenty years, due to claims of corruption, and was tried for abuse of office. He died in 2010 at the age of 89.

⁴ One of the news on the subject: <https://artigercek.com/guncel/deprem-sonrasi-tartisilan-iki-kurum-afadin-ozerkligi-kizilayin-yetkisi-yok-239254h>

⁵ Related news: <https://www.birgun.net/haber/kizilay-baskani-ndan-8-milyon-dolarlik-bagis-aciklamasi-vergi-kacirmak-baska-vergiden-kacinmak-baska-285948>

⁶ One of the news on the subject is here: <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/siyaset/deprem-telasinda-kizilay-ahbapa-cadir-satti-2055423>

⁷ One of the news on the subject: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/483596/kizilay-baskani-kerem-kinik-cadir-satisi-icin-buyutulecek-bir-hadise-degil-dedi>

⁸ One of the news on the subject: <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/02/26/ahbap-depremedeler-icin-kizilaydan-cadir-satin-aldigini-dogruladi>

⁹ Despite Kerem Kinik’s resignation, there are reports that he still retains his title of “chairman of the board” in Kızılay companies. Kızılay made a statement announcing that Kinik’s duties in the companies had ended with his resignation from Kızılay’s presidency.

¹⁰ Murat Ağirel’s said article: <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/murat-agirel/kizilhac-ve-kizilay-35-milyon-avroluk-battaniye-parasini-inkar-etti-ama-iste-o-belge-2059559>

Interview with Tülin Kesiktaş Teoman and Beritan Onuk

Interview by Beyhan Sunal

The disaster from a gender equality and women’s solidarity perspective

Disasters disrupt life for everyone, but the problems that arise are not evenly distributed. Women have to deal with multidimensional issues both during and after their occurrence. We witnessed during the aftermath of the 6 February Earthquake that the women’s movement in Turkey is leading the way in terms of building solidarity networks. In this interview, in which we approach the subject of the earthquake from a gender perspective, we spoke with Tülin Kesiktaş Teoman, the Vice President of the Turkish University Women’s Association (TÜKD), and a volunteer for the Women’s Platform for Equality (EŞİK), and Beritan Onuk, a psychologist and board member of the Mimoza Women’s Association.

In the early days of the earthquake, saving lives is the most crucial task, but afterwards, the challenges of dealing with issues such as cold weather, hunger, shelter issues, and the specific needs of women come to the forefront. Let’s delve into these a bit more. How have these needs diversified over time, and what has been done to address them?

Tülin Kesiktaş Teoman: I was among those who experienced the chaos in Hatay from the first moments of the earthquake. Events occurred at a very intense tempo. It was very dark, very desolate. There was a place in İskenderun that was on fire. It was a very frightening scene. The situation worsened when we reached the city center. It was dark, and there was no one around. You were running from one place to another to help people, but it was impossible to do anything in that darkness. Almost all the buildings had collapsed. There was huge chaos... The panic and the state of not knowing what to do continued for two days. Everyone was expending huge efforts to save their loved ones. Your emotions froze to the point where you could not fathom what was happening. It felt like a horror film at first. Two days later, when the gravity of the situation gradually emerged, people headed towards Hatay. During this period there was a tremendous lack of coordination,

I have been involved in the field of women’s rights for years, working for civil society organizations and women’s rights since I was eighteen years old. From my experiences I understand that we have formed a civil, feminist solidarity without even realizing it. With the help of an incredible network of international feminist solidarity and communication skills... I didn’t realize we were so organized.

desperation, helplessness, and chaos across the city. Two days later, AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency) and similar aid organizations started to arrive... The traffic on the Belen road was very bad and the road was damaged. Those coming from that direction formed very long queues. In the other direction, those who had survived but whose homes had been destroyed were also forming long queues to leave the city.

On the third day, AFAD teams arrived. Their numbers were crowded, but they were sitting next to the debris and doing nothing. We asked them why they were not doing anything, in desperation, but they said they didn’t have any tools, cranes, etc. Naturally you get angry. You question how they can come so unprepared when every hour, minute, even second is critical. I think Adana

Bar Association came first with eighty lawyers. They brought whatever they could find to help, including iron cutters and sledgehammers. They rushed into the city. For three days, those young people worked tirelessly in the villages, struggling to reach people, and doing whatever they could. Then, gradually, the equipment started to arrive from AFAD. Due to the collapsed buildings and blocked roads, construction machinery could not enter the streets. It was a helpless situation.

Finally, aid organizations started pouring into the city. Foreign aid organizations also came to help with the debris removal and the rescue operations, but they were unable to get responses to their questions or communicate because they couldn’t find people who knew foreign languages and who were also familiar with the city’s planning and building



Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin

What could a woman's needs be? Would you believe that it is underwear? Imagine that you haven't taken a shower for ten or fifteen days, or even longer because there is no electricity, no water in the city, and the weather is cold.

locations. As a result, they didn't know what to do. They had more advanced techniques than our teams. But the lack of coordination began to frustrate them. I want to mention at this point that the miners made extraordinary efforts. After they had arrived, the rescue operations sped up significantly because they knew the techniques and were truly experts in the field. Meanwhile, the weather was very cold and rainy.

What I understood from these events is that social solidarity gained significance. The most positive aspect of the earthquake response was social solidarity. I would also like to add this: I have been involved in the field of women's rights for years, working for civil society organizations and women's rights since I was eighteen years old. From my experiences I understand that we have formed a civil, feminist solidarity without even realizing it.

With the help of an incredible network of international feminist solidarity and communication skills... I didn't realize we were so organized. Ms. Ezel from France, Ms. Zeynep from Bodrum, Ms. Yeşer from Bulgaria – we had never even met them before, but they immediately delivered urgent needs to us. I delivered approximately sixty or even a hundred trucks of aid to Hatay. The reason we were able to organize so quickly was because we were already organized and involved in civil society organizations.

After a while, of course, the provision of shelter became the most crucial need for people. We can't say that the housing problem has been solved yet. Even today, women and people who still need containers or tents are reaching out to us. There was a need for basic food items and tents, and at that time, it was almost impossible to obtain tents. Everyone was directing people to AFAD, but the situation with AFAD is well known. People started to ask individuals out of desperation. We tried to help wherever and however we could.

What could a woman's needs be? Would you believe that it is underwear? Imagine that you haven't taken a shower for ten or fifteen days, or even longer because there is no electricity, no water in the city, and the weather is cold. People were trying to live under incredibly difficult

conditions. We realized that sanitary pads, underwear, anything related to sanitation, were not being provided. People were totally focused on what they considered to be essential needs, such as food, etc., but within those essential needs, there should also be room for hygiene products, underwear, products for women and children, baby formula, and many other things. We started requesting these items, and lists began to form. I cannot continue speaking without mentioning that, while we women tried to organize ourselves well, the young people were also amazing. The volunteers and young people formed incredible teams. Trucks would come to us, and we would distribute the aid to villages with the young volunteers of the Community Volunteers (*Toplum Gönüllüleri*) or independent young people. Frankly, I didn't expect young people to be so sensitive and organized. There are always complaints about Generation Z, but both Generation Z and the generation above them are genuinely compassionate and work extremely systematically. One advantage they have over our generation

Meanwhile, we forgot about the animals. One day, a volunteer brought food for the animals. I cannot forget the joy of those stray dogs.



Photo: Erdoğan Alyamut

is that they plan and program before acting – that made our work much easier. In addition to that, cars came from people we had never met before, with the aim of providing support. They sent their drivers. They would come out in the middle of the night and would say “We brought these for you.” We did not know them, but they would organize everything themselves and leave their cars.

Meanwhile, we forgot about the animals. One day, a volunteer brought food for the animals. I cannot forget the joy of those stray dogs. After the basic needs were met, specific needs started to emerge. There was a lack of baby formula. And, unfortunately, due to the inability to take a bath, there were problems such as fungus, lice, itching, and similar issues. The Chamber of Pharmacists worked very well, they organized themselves quickly and efficiently. Since we were in the field, we quickly informed the professional associations about the shortages, and they immediately tried to organize and reach out in some way.

Unfortunately, the disaster gathering areas had been built over. Since people didn't know where to gather in the event of an earthquake, they were running around helplessly and without coordination. The number of tent cities began to gradually increase, and new tent cities started to form, but the weather was rainy and windy, and living conditions

in the tents were difficult. Then, the number of containers started to increase. Were there enough containers and tents? No, there were not. When I look at Hatay now, it looks like a construction site, everywhere is dusty. The debris is being cleared so quickly that I wish the same effort had been made to save people. This is very painful, unfortunately. The debris is being cleared ruthlessly. But from the moment the earthquake happened, terrible looting began. Gunshots were heard across the city, and it was necessary for security forces to enter the city. This security gap led to many incidents of theft and looting. What should the role of the government be here? It should ensure security. It should organize quickly and meet the basic needs such as shelter and food. Unfortunately, we saw that we have not learned our lessons from the '99 earthquake, and the government did not fulfill its duty. AFAD presented a report which exposed its own deficiencies. Thankfully, they didn't walk around with the mindset of “we did our duty, and we are very successful.”

By the way, when we traveled around the field, we saw this: even in the face of the disaster, women were not able to experience their own pain because they were still trying to gather their families, cook meals, clean, etc. even though many had lost their children or parents. The Women's Platform for Equality (EŞİK)

prepared a comprehensive disaster report. In this report, we emphasized that in our country, where gender equality is severely lacking, the majority of the deceased were women because the responsibility of taking care of the children and the elderly falls on women. Unfortunately, women were found dead in front of their children's bedrooms, or they sacrificed themselves to save the elderly.

Aside from this, children in schools were not informed about first aid or how to act during an earthquake. Girls in particular were more affected. Unfortunately, there have been many cases of amputee girls. In the traditional mindset there is concern not to rush outside in bedroom attire. Women always want to get dressed properly before going outside. Unfortunately, this concern also prevented them from being able to evacuate the building quickly, and many of them were not able to get dressed quickly enough. During the field visits we conducted while preparing the report, the same point emerged: there were many women who stated that they had to wear something decent in the middle of the night, or that they had to save their children first. Unfortunately, as a result, women and children are always the ones most affected by disaster.

Women were concerned about cooking and cleaning without water, keeping



Photo: Hayri Tunç



Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin

the family together in the cold weather without electricity. Besides that, women who had lost their husbands and were living alone with their children were forced to live in the same tent with many other family members. This inevitably led to increasing incidents of abuse. This is very concerning. As the Vice President of the Turkish University Women's Association (TÜKD), we are also trying to establish a settlement consisting of containers where single or widowed women can live.

There is also a need for privacy for women, isn't there? Abuse and the need for privacy are not experienced to the same degree by men.

T.K.T.: When establishing the women's settlement, we never considered taking women to a separate place; we wanted them to be part of the whole. We wanted them to have their own tents, their own containers, because if you isolate them from the social space, this also becomes a threat. If people know that this is a place where only women live, they start stigmatizing, and that then becomes a problem as well. This is why we tried to create their living spaces within a section of the large container cities. In order to let them have their own containers, their

own tents, and let them stay there with their children. We did not want them to have to sleep in tents with other family members, such as nephews, cousins, or uncles. The lack of toilets and bathrooms was also a significant problem here. There were no toilets. It was a huge deficiency not to have prefabricated toilets during the disaster period. In the early days, everyone struggled because they had to use the streets and the bushes. This was a very basic human need. Unfortunately this was harder for women, because in terms of morality, we have been forced into traditional molds for years, and then we are expected to urinate in the middle of the street. It is both a difficult situation and one which is susceptible to harassment. As a result of this, I realized that planning for disasters must be in line with the demands, rights, and freedoms of women, based on gender equality norms.

It appears that the government's inability to carry out effective and timely aid organization, along with its attempts to decide how the material collected through people's own initiatives would be distributed, hindered the aid efforts.
Beritan Onuk: I was also part of the coordination team, and what women

As a result of people's low expectations from the government, there was good coordination or self-management within civil society organizations or among the people themselves, which allowed us to reach the affected areas and immediately form a team. We were able to distribute the list of urgent needs, and the essential supplies. If we hadn't established that coordination and self-management, things could have been much worse, and we could have experienced greater losses.

needed the most was underwear and sanitary pads. There were even situations where aid was hindered deliberately. There is a disaster situation, and the government was responsible for doing something from the very beginning. Yet instead of organizing disaster response



Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin

efforts or a coordination team, in the areas which experts have indicated are vulnerable for the past two years, they sold the tents. This is a much more alarming situation. I don't think this only relates to negligence; there seems to be deliberate acts as well.

One of the first things I observed was that those of us who went to help and to coordinate, those of us who work for civil society organizations, also contributed towards hindering the aid by blocking the roads. I travelled on the third day. Mersin-Hatay is normally a three-hour drive, but

Many Syrians suffered from violence as a result of racist tweets. Along with the online lynching culture, there were also looters in the Hatay region who were lynched, subjected to violence, and even died while in custody.

the traffic was so horrible that it took us twelve hours to reach the city. This led to the way being blocked for ambulances, fire trucks, and people who needed urgent access. Yes, there is a very human reflex there, as everyone was trying to reach their destination, but at that point, the government should have intervened by closing one road and keeping it open for ambulances and fire trucks while allowing two-way traffic on the other road. The early arrival of the ambulance and fire trucks was much more important and urgent than our arrival.

I would also like to mention self-coordination. As a result of people's low expectations from the government, there was good coordination or self-management within civil society organizations or among the people themselves, which allowed us to reach the affected areas and immediately form a team. We were able to distribute the list of urgent needs, and the essential supplies. If we hadn't established that

coordination and self-management, things could have been much worse, and we could have experienced greater losses.

I also want to touch on the grieving process of people. The government was lacking in this aspect as well. They couldn't save people, couldn't reunite them with their loved ones, and couldn't even let them retrieve their deceased loved ones. People couldn't mourn properly. Many people didn't have a grave to mourn at. When I was there, people were saying: "We no longer expect you to save them alive, but at least give us the dead, so we can bury them, so we know where to cry." As a result, the grieving process remains incomplete. If there is a possibility that the person is still alive, it means hope also remains alive. This is a situation that consumes people further. They did not take DNA samples from many adults, only from children. A lawyer friend who was there told me that the prosecutor had informed them about

this. It seems that the blood samples of adults can deteriorate more quickly, and there was no place to store these samples since the hospital had been destroyed. So they are only took samples from children. Serious negligence is involved here.

They appointed trustees to solidarity coordination areas. I don't understand how a trustee can be appointed to perform solidarity, but a trustee was appointed, and there was an intervention. But many Syrians suffered from violence as a result of racist tweets. Along with the online lynching culture, there were also looters in the Hatay region who were lynched, subjected to violence, and even died while in custody. There is a case where a local Hatay resident, whether Turkish or Arab Alevi, died while in custody. As such, we were not only dealing with earthquake relief, but also discussing how we could assist those victims of violence and intervene in various cases of legal negligence. Our only intention initially was to distribute aids as effectively as possible, but when that culture of violence and lynching emerged, much worse things began happening. When we first arrived, there was no distribution process; everything was piled up, aid was not being delivered to people. People would have taken them if they had had the chance to come there, but the important thing was to establish those coordination centers in every neighborhood, close to the center. That's what we did.

We worked in a very organized manner. There was a separate hygiene department, a separate food department, a separate shoe department, so that people could easily access them. In a disaster situation like an earthquake, people are experiencing terrible trauma and shock, many people have lost loved ones, and they may not realize or understand their needs when they initially come there. A box had arrived for our team, a small bag, and I wanted to give it to a young girl. I said I would randomly choose a 15 or 16-year-old girl and give it to her. And indeed, by coincidence, that girl's need came out of the bag. It was earplugs. She was so happy and said, "I didn't know where I would find them." There were so many needs... the needs of people with celiac disease, the needs of those with ear problems... The first thing that comes

The priority for women is safe accommodation areas, because there are children and women who are widowed, and they have to stay in the same tent with a couple of other families. These areas pose serious risks in terms of safety because they are prone to abuse and harassment. It is necessary to create safe living spaces for them in containers until safer permanent residences are provided.

to people's minds is to send their old clothes. This became a huge obstacle for us. New clothes were needed, but old clothes were a burden for us – they just gathered as a pile on the floor. People didn't want to take those clothes because they were not suitable for the season, and as Ms. Tülin said, it was seriously cold, and the sent clothes were not appropriate. I think the public should also be informed and educated. This should be another duty of the government. Earthquake awareness should not be limited to "collapse, take cover, lie down", which did not work in an earthquake of this magnitude. Needs should be identified, awareness campaigns should be carried out for the public, old clothes should not be sent, and underwear for women and men is a very urgent matter because there are no shower facilities or toilets. Personal hygiene items are very important.

Let's discuss the future needs, such as employment opportunities for residents of the region and ensuring they live in safer housing. Can you talk about your projects or suggestions on these issues?

T.K.T.: Increasing the available living space is essential for the return of people who left Hatay. The priority for women is safe accommodation areas, because there are children and women who are widowed, and they have to stay in the same tent with a couple of other families. These areas pose serious risks in terms of safety because they are prone to abuse and harassment. It is necessary to create safe living spaces for them in containers until safer permanent residences are

provided. We, as the Turkish Association of University Women (TÜKD), have such a project. We want to establish a women's settlement for women whose husbands have passed away, who have small children, who live alone and we want this settlement to be a part of existing residential area. Why do we think these settlements should be a part of the whole? Because you cannot isolate women. If you integrate them into the whole living space, it will contribute to both their children's education and their own social life. We have decided to establish a women's settlement in collaboration with Samandağ District Governorship in areas where they can receive food support, education support, and security support. Our efforts in this regard are half completed. After the earthquake, the workload of women has also increased significantly as they try to maintain the living standards of the household members in areas with limited water and limited access to food. They have to cook and maintain hygiene with limited water, and keep their children occupied since they cannot go to school. Their workload has increased even more. For women, we first need to ensure a normalization process, and enhance their living standards. The priority is to open schools. As schools open and container cities increase, people and women who left Hatay will return to the container cities. There were already writings all over the city saying, "We will not give up, we will return to Hatay". Those were the most heartbreaking street writings. They want to return to their cities. We also want to create living spaces for women in areas where their children can receive education, so that schools can start as soon as possible, both for children to have access to education and for women to have a little bit of relief. To achieve this, a big concert was organized in Bulgaria with the participation of bureaucrats and ministers. With the revenue of this concert, we secured the opportunity to establish a preschool, primary school, middle school, high school, and teacher housing in a 1,740-person container city. This was very pleasing for us because education has been disrupted both by the pandemic and the earthquake. It is important to increase the number of educational facilities first and foremost. For this purpose, we are establishing an educational facility in Gülderen, in collaboration with the Provincial

Directorate of National Education and the Bulgaria-Sofia Businesswomen. They have organized a major event in their country, a charity night that involved high-level bureaucrats at the national and international level. Midas Menkul Değerler Inc. also supported this project, ensuring the establishment of a large educational facility.

The third stage is to provide employment opportunities for women. By ensuring a safe living environment and then opening schools, women will be able to have a little relief. Afterwards, we need to create job opportunities for them to enable them to stand on their own feet. These efforts have slowly begun, but of course they are still insufficient. We are also trying to establish various sectoral shops in containers with the donations we've received. We plan to allocate these container shops to each woman, allowing them to keep half of the income for themselves and save the remaining half in a pool to open new shops gradually. Self-sufficient women would contribute to the socio-economic development of Hatay and improve the living standards of her children and family. It will also prevent them from being dependent on anyone and needing a man's support.

There was a tremendous physical destruction along with the earthquake. With new technologies, people can have other jobs even if they are not physically present. Perhaps it would be possible for those women to work remotely online. As far as I understand, the efforts made so far have been focused on small businesswomen. You also mentioned such a mentoring program.

T.K.T.: Thank you for reminding me of this. There were naturally internet connectivity issues in the beginning. It wasn't possible to practice remote e-commerce or conduct business remotely due to the transportation and shipping problems. But since feminist women had showed such a beautiful example of solidarity, our sisters in other cities started a social media campaign – "Let's support them and buy their products." This helped to ensure that everyone bought whatever the women in the earthquake-affected region was producing, whether foodstuffs or the products of women's cooperatives. This really gave them a lifeline. There were some difficulties with shipping,



but gradually, with such high demand, the shipping companies adapted more quickly. This provided very valuable support.

After the elections, we are considering pursuing the following agenda – women who have jobs in major cities can extend a helping hand to other women in Hatay or the eleven provinces affected, through a mentoring program. In this mentoring program, we envision each woman communicating with another woman and providing them with guidance. It will be beneficial both in terms of improving women's business development and attracting different sectors to the region. For this purpose, we are holding comprehensive discussions with women's business associations. We

want to implement it as soon as possible because revitalizing the economy in Hatay is one of the most important parameters for normalization. As the economy revives, women will recover both mentally and psychologically and contribute to the normalization process. Apart from that, as far as I have observed in Hatay, there are also women farmers working in agriculture. They have come together and organized themselves in order to sell their products across various parts of Turkey, since the majority of Hatay is agricultural land. There are very professional female farmer entrepreneurs who are striving to improve their products, which is very commendable. Even though there was an earthquake, agricultural production did not stop. There are still products

being produced by the agricultural fields, and women are doing their best to feed Turkey.

B.O.: Firstly, clean containers or tents should be set up specifically for women and girls in earthquake-affected areas. There should be separate and constantly cleaned toilets. Women are more susceptible to infections due to their sensitive bodies. In order for women to have access to hygiene products, a project should be developed in the form of cooperatives or small market-style establishments operated by women. Women who are producers and entrepreneurs living in earthquake-prone areas should be supported after the earthquake. As an example – there was a woman who owned a flower shop.

Her husband was unable to work due to illness and her shop was destroyed in the earthquake. When she moved to another city she had no job and was looking for work. This woman was a producer, an entrepreneur, and had built economic freedom in her previous life. A policy should be developed to enable women to regain their economic freedom, or cooperatives should be established which employ only women. There was a mosaic artist in Hatay who had a mosaic workshop and produced magnets, souvenirs, etc. An employment initiative should be implemented for women working in this field. It is necessary not to limit women's productivity only to pickles and jams; they also have artistic and creative sides that can be developed and supported.

You mentioned that they were not able to grieve properly.

B.O.: This is a topic that applies both to people still living in the earthquake-stricken region and those who have migrated. It should be identified, information should be documented, and local governments and the state should provide psycho-social support. Access to psychologists or psychotherapists specialized in therapy for disaster survivors should be provided for this psycho-social support. This support should be provided both to those living in the earthquake-stricken areas and those who have migrated. There is a group of people who are currently considering leaving Mersin, but there are also efforts by those who plan to stay here for at least three more years to

rebuild their lives. What they currently need is psycho-social assistance. We have recovered from the shock, but now there is a high demand for psychological support. We witness this among young women in particular. I believe that adult and married women somehow set themselves aside and focus on their children, prioritizing them, but university-aged young women are left entirely alone with themselves, so their traumas become more pronounced. Regarding mourning in the Hatay region, many people were unable to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones. In some cases bodies were extracted from the debris and taken to hospital, but then would disappear. Such cases have been frequent, leaving these people's mourning incomplete. I previously likened this unfinished process of mourning to the Saturday Mothers, a group of women seeking their missing loved ones. They also know that their loved ones are no longer alive, but they want to see them. They want to touch and hold the soil and say, "My son, my daughter, my husband is here, I know it," and accept their mourning. Mourning is a feeling that persists as long as it is not accepted. That hope never truly fades away. At some point, they see someone resembling their lost family member, and that feeling resurfaces. Many people in the earthquake-stricken areas are experiencing this and will continue to do so. This will be one of the problems in the subsequent stages.

There are rumors about children being abducted. What do you think should be done specifically to prevent children, especially girls, from going missing?

B.O.: KSince the abductors have connections to the government, the first responsible and accountable party should be the government. It is the government's responsibility towards people to protect children. If this responsibility is not fulfilled, child protection organizations, civil society organizations, and associations need to step in. They have already done so, but many people could not reach them. We discussed this in the EŞİK platform, and it was mentioned that the number [of missing children] has not been disclosed. There are girls staying in dormitories, and no one is allowed to see them. In the first weeks following the disaster, Meral Akşener made a statement announcing,

"I worry about the underage girls the most." I'm not sure if she was referring to the Gölcük Earthquake, but she said, "There have been many cases of missing girls, and I know that they were handed over to religious communities." This is something that a political figure with power has been hiding for years and has never revealed.

And of course, she did not pursue this either.

B.O.: Yes, not pursuing the matter is indeed another way of being complicit in the crime. Those young girls went missing, and we know whom they were handed over to. The same thing happened in this earthquake. There are a significant number of missing girls. People probably think their children are dead, and they will rightfully not pursue trying to find them, because they don't believe they can get answers from anyone, they don't have evidence, and there is no platform or institution they can reach out to. These are the reasons why they don't pursue it. Families, child organizations, and associations can only carry this issue to a certain extent. This is how girls disappear without a trace.

This is another wound.

B.O.: This is another wound which leads to other things. For one, it contributes to an increase in the number of girls being married at a young age. These girls are probably forced to marry after reaching a certain age. One of the issues we, as Mimoza Women's Association, currently aim to prevent is child marriage and forced early marriages. Regarding the earthquake-stricken areas, I would like to mention that although we don't live in those regions, we have contacts there. Based on the information we have received, there has been an increase in cases of incest and child sexual abuse in tents and tent cities. This needs to be prevented. The tents should be suitable for families or in the form of containers with separate rooms, but there are still people who cannot even access a tent, or multiple individuals living in the same tent. There is a lack of trust in the institutions, but the state institutions should be present there to carry out the necessary follow-up and monitoring.

Women's associations have been trying to reach out to women's associations in the earthquake-stricken areas, but we

Mourning is a feeling that persists as long as it is not accepted. That hope never truly fades away. At some point, they see someone resembling their lost family member, and that feeling resurfaces. Many people in the earthquake-stricken areas are experiencing this and will continue to do so.

have observed a lack of solidarity. This also indicates the absence of women's solidarity and organization there. Solidarity associations and organizations established by and for women, which would enable us to reach out to them, should be established there. These organizations should be managed and represented by women themselves. These places should not be governed by a male mindset because a male mindset would aim to suppress women, deprive them of productivity, and force them into marriage. Women who are in the process of divorce and have returned to their parents' house may have been forced to go back to their abusive spouses during the earthquake due to the concern of burdening others. In such cases they are forced to return to the homes where they experienced violence. In marriages where women lack economic freedom, women can be compelled to return to their ex-partners out of necessity. The family becomes an obstacle in such situations and makes the woman feel a burden. In earthquake-stricken areas, there should be organizations that support women in these situations. Women's organizations and cooperatives focused on employment and entrepreneurship should be established. Projects can be developed where women can transition from living in tents to becoming producers.

During this process, women should also receive legal support. All women's associations, platforms, and organizations in Turkey should provide free legal counseling. Women who want to divorce or who have experienced violence after the earthquake should be provided with both legal and psychological support

Photo: Erdoğan Alyamut



Looking at it from the perspective of gender equality, what should be done and how should organizations be structured when constructing new cities? What should the role of women's organizations be in this context?

T.K.T.: This is an important question. Many platforms have emerged to assist in the reconstruction of the city. It is crucial to rebuild the city while preserving its cultural values, and the people of Hatay are very meticulous about this. There should never be reckless construction. In fact, we strongly advocate against the immediate construction of permanent housing. Secure container cities should first be established. We believe that hastily built housing projects like those carried out by the government's Housing Development Administration (TOKİ) and Emlak Konut are not safe. Aftershocks are still occurring. We want the aftershocks to stop, ground surveys to be conducted, and then permanent housing to be built. It is especially important for women to have a say in the construction of the city. City architecture that is sensitive to gender equality is extremely important and is in greater demand worldwide because a city is not just a living space for men. There should be a city design that is safer, modern, and inclusive for women to live in, as well as for LGBT+ individuals. Hatay's advantage is that everything is currently in ruins, so everything can start

from scratch with safer and healthier structures. In the reconstruction of this city, we particularly want women's civil society organizations to be part of these platforms and consortiums because they should also contain daycare centers and elderly care areas. Municipalities should allocate budgets specifically for women. Let me give you an example: for people with disabilities and women who have children with disabilities, socializing and being present in social spaces is very difficult in a city where the design does not consider people with disabilities. It is essential to consider gender equality-based city architecture not only for women but also for individuals with disabilities. Again, using Hatay as an example, there is a great ethnic diversity in the area due to various ethnic groups living together. There were small local businesses that contributed to the continuity of cultural elements such as traditional cookies (*kömbes*) and handicrafts, and they were enjoyable. Those were also tourist attractions, providing both income for the city and a source of livelihood for women. Moreover, they played a role in preserving cultural values. Therefore, taking these factors into account, it is essential to involve civil society organizations, architectural associations, women, and many others in the decision-making process when designing the city. I believe we should not allow the

We should not allow the re-emergence of the types of cities and concrete buildings which are rapidly and hastily constructed solely by men.

re-emergence of the types of cities and concrete buildings which are rapidly and hastily constructed solely by men.

The fundamental principle here is to ensure women's participation in the city along with their safety and mobility within the city, right? Of course, employment opportunities should also be arranged accordingly.

T.K.T.: Exactly. This requires collaboration with local governments and also the work to be conducted together with public officials. It is not solely the responsibility of either the local or the public sector; it can be achieved only through joint efforts. In this regard, women's civil society organizations need to apply pressure and act as a driving force. We cannot wait for them to come to us and ask for our input. On the contrary, we need to know what we should do to be part of those formations, how to open up these spaces. It is essential to stay engaged both within the local context and in communication with the public sector so that we are well-informed about everything. ☺

“We will stand against the plans which have been made in spite of the public after the earthquake”

Associate Professor Dr. Hakan Güneş, an academic at the Faculty of Political Sciences at Istanbul University, was the first candidate of the Workers' Party of Turkey from Mersin in the May 14, 2023 elections. Güneş, who was also responsible for the coordination of his party's activities after the earthquake, stayed in Hatay for more than two months until his candidacy was announced. In this interview, conducted just before the May 14 elections, we talked with Güneş about his plans for the cities in the region, particularly Hatay, to recover and rise again during the post-earthquake period. Regardless of the nature of major changes likely to be experienced in the aftermath of the election, Güneş underlined that their approach towards citizens in the earthquake zone is based on one main principle: To act together *with* the people, not *in spite* of the public.

You are the Mersin candidate for the Workers' Party of Turkey. You were involved in relief efforts in the earthquake zone, especially in Hatay, immediately after the earthquake. What will you and your party do for the region after the election?

Hakan Güneş: I am the Chairman of the Scientific Committee and Earthquake Coordinator of our party. I will continue

my earthquake coordination efforts whether I am elected as a deputy or not. I already made this promise to the residents of Mersin during my election campaigns and asked them for permission to continue working in the earthquake zone. Mersin voters supported my attitude. First of all, Mersin is a city that has a lot of kinship with and is also in close contact with Antakya,

both historically and in the present day. In addition, Mersin is the city where earthquake survivors took shelter and settled in the highest numbers. The number of earthquake victims here is higher than in any other city in Turkey. This is owing to the presence of their relatives here. This is the place where they migrated to first. My decision to be a candidate for Mersin while I was



The basic disaster measures and urban planning principles do not need to be produced in consultation with the public. But, besides these basic scientific issues, it is necessary to consult the public in terms of how these processes will be constructed and developed, and to conduct these efforts according to the decision of the people.

the Earthquake Coordinator of Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP) was mainly due to this fact. The elections will be over by the time this interview is published. It will be clear who the President is and how the next Parliament will be shaped. The share of TİP in the parliamentary distribution will also be clear. Regardless of whether I am elected or not, in both cases and regardless of the extent of TİP representation in Parliament, we will continue our activities as the community that established the largest civil earthquake coordination centre in

the earthquake zone. We established this centre on the second day after the earthquake.

You started your efforts two days after the earthquake. What do they include?

H.G.: In the first week we focused on search and rescue. Afterwards, we distributed supplies and supplied tents. Then, we started building container cities. We are currently building new container fields. After the election we are due to build a 120-unit container city on ten acres of land. Space has already been allocated for this.

Are your efforts carried out only in Hatay?

H.G.: We are currently working intensively in Hatay. We established some centres on the Elbistan-Adiyaman borderline and sent aid there, but our work is mostly based in Hatay. This is because our party's organization in Hatay is very strong. Due to our links with the locals, we have an organization that is able to build a distribution network village by village, street by street. We are able to work more effectively in Hatay. We will also try to deliver aid to Pazarcık, Elbistan and Adiyaman, and then to other regions soon.

As you mentioned, you've taken steps to resolve the temporary accommodation problem. What's the next step?

H.G.: We can consider the search and rescue, distribution of humanitarian aid, and shelter as the first phase of the response. As part of the second phase we are trying to develop agriculture-centred ecological development projects. We are making proposals for the development of policies towards this – we are proposing laws, applying political pressure. We are trying to carry out efforts through organizing the public.

Have concrete steps been taken for the second phase?

H.G.: We first opened living and production spaces by providing containers for four women's cooperatives. Those whose production had been interrupted due to the earthquake were able to start producing again, or those who were not producing in the first place started producing. We are trying to organize small producers in particular. In the third phase, we will consider the question of how to rebuild Hatay at the macro level.

This is harder work. How are you progressing?

H.G.: We have the Local Administrations and the Right to the City Working Group in our scientific committee, which is mostly made up of architects, city-regional planners and engineers. We have been working on this issue for a long time. First, we published a report titled *Earthquake Crimes*. We prepared this report with the contributions of Gezi detainees Can Atalay, Tayfun Kahraman and Mucella Yapıcı. With this report we have taken the first steps towards bringing to justice those responsible, in order to prevent such a disaster from recurring. We will follow up the prosecution of the perpetrators of the crimes who we indicated in this report. Secondly, we are working on how to re-plan the city, according to the law, and on how this planning should take place. We have a team in the field for this purpose and they are conducting the study as we speak. I will not go into any details here such as whether the Defne district should be shifted in this direction, whether it should be two and a half floors or three floors, what material it should be made of, etc. We will explain this study in the publication of the detailed report. But I can underline its basic principles. We believe that an arrangement is required

which is located at a reasonable distance from existing fault lines. But planning should be carried out in coordination with an architectural arrangement which ensures that settlements do not move far away from the ancient history, culture and residential areas of the city, which would leave it empty. We know that the government has hired various agencies to work on this issue. We are also aware of how many unqualified professors are being employed on this subject. We also know that they will do nothing except establish a new concrete empire. We also know that they are planning to build something without consulting the public, and which they will again try to sell to the public. This is also a plan which will drive the low-income public away from the region.

This is the current situation. Might there be a change after the elections?

H.G.: If Erdoğan wins the election, the current policies in the earthquake zone will continue. If the opposition wins, a new process will begin for the earthquake zone. In both these cases, we will assume this role: on the one hand, we will continue to increase and strengthen the projects I mentioned, together with the

What we mean by consulting the public here is not meant in the populist sense. It means acting in a way that doesn't disturb the cultural and historical texture of the settlements, in terms of the needs and expectations of the people. And, of course, in terms of city planning. This means not making social engineering interventions and not causing demographic changes, in pursuit of ensuring earthquake resistance and a high quality of new buildings to be built, while also preserving the spirit of the settlements.

public. If the Erdoğan regime continues, we will strongly oppose their policies. If Kılıçdaroğlu comes to power, we will warn them. However, I can already say that, in both cases, we will object to the planning and decision making being



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conducted without consulting the public. We strive for the emergence of multi-level structures which will enable the organization and representation of the people, and we strive for the coordination of these structures. We have already succeeded in organizing a civic solidarity that is not limited to any political party in Hatay. What we are trying to achieve in Hatay goes far beyond the efforts of the Workers' Party of Turkey. We have achieved something more than we could have done just with the power of our party. People with different political views have lent us a hand. This is not just because they have read, and agree with, our party's program but because they trust us, and continue to do so, and because we offer these efforts up for the benefit of the public. It is obvious that we have received more than just political support for our earthquake aid.

These are your views and practices as the representative of a political party. Considering that you are also an academic, I would like to ask a theoretical question. After the February 6 Earthquake, some residential areas in the region were completely destroyed. This is like a reset for the region. New urbanization efforts will emerge.

This is our general principle – we believe that it is not possible for politicians to deal with the reality of the earthquake if they take action only in line with daily concerns about their number of votes. This is a fact, no matter what party it is. At this point, a very serious amount of public resources needs to be mobilized against earthquakes. Plans should be made both at the level of buildings and cities, and serious preparations should be made for the post-earthquake response including personnel, assembly areas, hospital infrastructure, fire extinguishing units, response tools and training.

Simultaneously, it is possible to claim that the policies created so far for settlement areas such as in Istanbul, where a major earthquake is expected to hit, have also been reset. In short, all the preparations for any earthquakes have actually been reset. As a political scientist, what do you think the next step should be? I believe we should have a policy, but what should it be?

H.G.: The second part of my answer to the previous question was a kind of answer to this. We are advocating for principles that will not change, independent of who will come to power in the next election. There are major fault lines in Turkey, which carry great risks. We've witnessed how no precautions have been taken so far. It is debatable whether adequate precautions have been taken after the 1999 Earthquake, despite the expectation of the great Marmara Earthquake to come. The same is true for Adana. This line also partially covers Mersin. Threats like these still continue. This is our general principle – we believe that it is not possible for politicians to deal with the reality of the earthquake if they take action only in line with daily concerns about their number of votes. This is a fact, no matter what party it is. At this point, a very serious amount of public resources needs to be mobilized against earthquakes. Plans should be made both at the level of buildings and cities, and serious preparations should be made for the post-earthquake response including personnel, assembly areas, hospital infrastructure, fire extinguishing units, response tools and training. It's a whole package. Some settlements need to be moved away from the fault lines and reconstructed with agricultural and ecological planning in mind. Job opportunities are required to be generated in areas far from earthquake zones with attractive plans so that the population in relatively risky areas can be resettled there. Then, more of the population can be accommodated in those residential areas with lower-story buildings.

You often repeat the principle of “doing it together with the public” and “not in spite of the public.” However, they say that the nongovernmental organizations in the eight cities in the earthquake zone were not strong. Maybe Hatay was a bit different in this respect. The importance of civil society, in terms of recovering

from an earthquake, is evident. How do we strengthen civil society in these regions? How can we involve the public in the process, without a civil society organization?

H.G.: You are right, this is an important factor. Saying “Let's ask the public at a general level, let's not do anything in spite of the public,” might not always be so clear cut. The public can suddenly demand the death penalty, for example, but you shouldn't just hold a referendum and ask them this question. Being against the death penalty is a fundamental principle of human rights. Likewise, taking precautions against earthquakes can and should be done by the public authority, on behalf of future generations. If we act the other way around and ask the public, “Do you want a four-storey or a ten-storey buildings?”, the public may choose the ten-storey building option. What we mean by consulting the public here is not meant in the populist sense. It means acting in a way that doesn't disturb the cultural and historical texture of the settlements, in terms of the needs and expectations of the people. And, of course, in terms of city planning. This means not making social engineering interventions and not causing demographic changes, in pursuit of ensuring earthquake resistance and a high quality of new buildings to be built, while also preserving the spirit of the settlements... This is what we mean by doing it together with the public and not doing it in spite of the public. Secondly, we mean in terms of preventing the public from being moved far from the settlement centres. Since the city centres are the areas of main settlements, it causes them to move away from the gentrified regions. The residents of those areas are being forced to leave because they can't afford the higher rents. It's necessary to develop plans which will not cause the residents of the region to be displaced and which will not lead to re-urbanization being carried out in spite of the residents of that region. Let me summarize it this way: the basic disaster measures and urban planning principles do not need to be produced in consultation with the public. But, besides these basic scientific issues, it is necessary to consult the public in terms of how these processes will be constructed and developed, and to conduct these efforts according to the decision of the people.



Photo: Hayri Tunç

You mentioned somewhere that “the demographic structure should not be deteriorated”. Large numbers of Syrian migrants moved to the earthquake area, especially to Hatay, and the demographic structure in these areas has already changed greatly in the past years. It has not been mentioned much, but the earthquake also struck just beyond the border. We know that there is great destruction and loss of life in the war-torn residential areas of Syria. Is it possible to talk about a new wave of migration as a result of these conditions?

H.G.: It is believed that the earthquake changed the number and distribution of the migrant populations who have made their homes here in the last ten years. However, it is difficult to understand the extent of this, since no detailed studies have yet been carried out. A certain number of people travelled to the countryside of Idlib. This is not a very high number, and I'm estimating based on the information we received from our local sources. These are the reports coming from journalists watching the crossings at the borders. We also know this: the situation in Syria is still not very secure and Turkey remains a transit country. At the end of the day, Turkey still offers more economic opportunities in comparison to Syria. The return of Syrian migrants

to Syria as a result of the earthquake was low given all these factors. There were also those who migrated to other parts of Turkey, but this rate was also not very high. This might be because the places where the earthquake struck the hardest were not the places where Syrian migrants were concentrated. This is important. Antakya, Defne, Samandağ and Arsus are not places where there are many migrants. I'm not saying there are no migrants in these areas, but most of them were in Reyhanlı, Altınözü, and Kırkhan. The earthquake did not cause great destruction here.

There was no destruction in Reyhanlı.

H.G.: No. As a result, migrants are continuing to live in undestroyed houses or tent and container cities in these settlements. Let me share that information as the first point. The second point is this – the fact that the demographic structure has changed is now a reality. There are those who are very uncomfortable with this, and there are those who are somewhat OK with it. Experts estimate that around twenty percent of the migrant population will return to Syria once the war is completely over. This would reduce Hatay's heavy migrant burden to an extent. The movement of migrants to

At the end of the day, Turkey still offers more economic opportunities in comparison to Syria. The return of Syrian migrants to Syria as a result of the earthquake was low given all these factors. There were also those who migrated to other parts of Turkey, but this rate was also not very high.

other cities after the earthquake also changed the balance between the locals and the migrants in Hatay. I think that a more harmonious and integrated life can be established over time with those who stayed. The people of Hatay have concerns and I understand them, but in the end, we need to face the fact that these people have fled war and have taken refuge here. Apart from some jihadists, of course... The public authority should ease the concerns of the people and it should not use these concerns for political benefits. It is the responsibility of the public authority to make arrangements that will not cause citizens to confront citizens, or locals to confront migrants. ☺

Pictured on the ruined wall: Hurry up, Ali!

The earthquakes, which struck one after the other in Kahramanmaraş on February 6, 2023, affecting eleven cities in the region, brought the reality of the earthquake threat to the fore in the most destructive way. A large number of nongovernmental organizations and volunteers travelled to the region to help ease the pain of the earthquake, at least to an extent. Another painful reality revealed by the earthquake was the state's lack of preparation and coordination. As a result, search-rescue and aid teams were not able to reach the region for the first three days. People struggled to hold on to life with their cries for "help"... We asked the poet and writer Nesimi Aday, who conducted research in the earthquake area on behalf of the Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP), about their impressions and observations in the region.

"We didn't use party signs in our charity work"

Our friends travelled to the earthquake zones immediately after the earthquake. Tents were set up in the region and people took part in the search and rescue efforts. HDP had an ethical approach during this process – we refrained from using the party emblem, flag, etc. in our work. We paid maximum attention to this fact. Neither the name nor emblem of the HDP nor the Green Left Party was made visible – not in any of our tents, nor in our aid efforts. We paid attention to maintaining this ethical attitude in our relationships with the public and with earthquake victims.

As the party's Alevi Desk Co-spokesperson, I arrived in the earthquake region on February 22 as part of a team. The purpose of our team, and that of similar teams, was to review and report on the situation in the region. We conducted our study with this aim in mind. I participated in efforts in Maraş, Narlı, Pazarcık, Adiyaman, Elbistan, and Ekinözü. We stayed in Elbistan for a week. We conducted examinations in the villages of Elbistan and Ekinözü and produced a report about the social situation there. We travelled mostly to Alevi villages – the majority of villages we visited were Kurdish Alevi villages. The situation in the provincial and district centers was in the public eye, to a degree,



Photo: Nesimi Aday

but no one was paying attention to the situation in the villages. We also worked here.

I went to Narlı after Maraş. There was no big apparent damage in Narlı, but houses and structures were scattered like pomegranate seeds. It was truly a shocking sight. We visited the Narlı Djemevi. Half of the Djemevi had been destroyed. There was a very ironic mural behind the ruin. It had pictures of the Prophet Ali and Hüseyin on it. Below was written the words "Yetiş ya Ali, Yetiş ya Hüseyin" meaning, "Hurry up, Ali!" They could not hurry enough. The djemevi had been demolished. We encountered similar murals in the villages we visited. Prophet Ali and the Twelve Imams were standing as if they had been witnesses of what had happened to the walls of houses with collapsed roofs.

Sharing and solidarity, in pain

We travelled to Pazarcık after Narlı. As the epicenter, Pazarcık had been devastated. Pazarcık is divided into two parts – lower and upper Pazarcık. Alevis mostly live in Yukarı Pazarcık. The place is located on the hill, the neighborhood is built on a slope. Other citizens live in Aşağı Pazarcık, which is mostly a flat and sandy place. This was one of the places that suffered the most from the earthquake. In other words, the bad luck of the Alevis, who have taken refuge in the mountains since the days of Yavuz Sultan Selim,

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Silopi Soup Kitchen in Pazarcık, for instance, was serving not only the earthquake victims but also the public personnel. I mention this because it illustrates how, in the face of the system continuing to marginalize the Kurds in the region, people from Şırnak and Cizre still rushed to help. There was a commonality in their pain, and solidarity in the pain they experienced there.

became slightly more positive during the earthquake. The structures in their villages were a little less damaged.

Alevis celebrate important days in February. It is called Hızır Month, or Hızır Days. Since we were visiting the neighborhoods in the month of Hızır, we distributed Can Lokması (a form of dessert) in both Adiyaman and Maraş. Speaking of food, let's not forget to mention the soup kitchens set up by the HDP municipalities. As is well known, trustees have been appointed to most of the HDP municipalities. Only three district municipalities currently remain in HDP's hands, plus two towns. These municipalities opened soup kitchens in the earthquake zones of Silopi, Patnos and Çınar. They showed great solidarity in those snowy winter days. Süleyman Soylu, the Minister of Interior at the time, was unhappy about these. He dismissed them with the words, "I didn't like it very much, but..." He had no choice but to dismiss them. Silopi Soup Kitchen in Pazarcık, for instance, was serving not only the earthquake victims but also the public personnel. I mention this because it illustrates how, in the face of the system continuing to marginalize the Kurds in the region, people from Şırnak and Cizre still rushed to help. There was a commonality in their pain, and solidarity in the pain they experienced there.

"Oh my god, this is Adiyaman"

We travelled to Adiyaman after Maraş. There is an Adiyaman folk song, with the lyrics "Oh my god, this is Adiyaman". That was the state of Adiyaman. The whole city was in a state of hawar [a long howl].

Adiyaman Djemevi was still standing, despite sustaining minor damage, and almost all the Alevi community was taking shelter there. We would also encounter this scene later in Elbistan.

Rıza Tanrıverdi, the Deputy Chairman of Alevi Culture Associations and also the head of the djemevi, had lost his life in the earthquake in Adiyaman. Zülfiyar Yılmaz, Head of the Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Association Adiyaman Branch, was also one of the Alevis to lose their lives. The pain and sadness of the Alevis in the region was even more acute due to these losses. Until that moment, no one had brought help to their villages, other than Alevi institutions.

The earthquake also damaged the foundations of Alevi faith. Mount Nurhak looked as if it had been plucked out. It was as if the mountain had shed its excess; stones, boulders were scattered along the roads and valleys. The Nurhak road was like a laboratory of horror. We encountered terrifying nature there; we witnessed the anger of nature.

The Anger of nature

We travelled to Elbistan via Nurhak after Adiyaman. I would like to mention the relationship which exists between Alevis and nature. Alevi faith is a belief system with a heavy emphasis on the ecology. When Alevis pray, they wish goodness and health to the mountains, stones, trees, wolves, birds, and insects. The earthquake damaged not only humans and animals, but also all living and non-living things. In other words, the earthquake also damaged the foundations of Alevi faith. Mount Nurhak looked as if it had been plucked out. It was as if the mountain had shed its excess; stones, boulders were scattered along the roads and valleys. The Nurhak road was like a laboratory of horror. We encountered terrifying nature there; we witnessed the anger of nature. We would see this later in Ekinözü. Imagine a mountain, its peak divided into two, terrified by fear. We



Photo: Nesimi Aday



Photo: Nesimi Aday

witnessed this. The situation in Ekinözü was not at the fore in any press coverage, maybe because it is a smaller district than others, or perhaps because the death toll was lower. However, it was one of the epicenters of the earthquake. The damage was terrifying. The house of Uncle Imam, which we saw in the Kurdish Alevi village of Miranlı, was unforgettable. The house was almost like an “earthquake specimen”. It was as if the fault line had passed through his very home. But, although the house was seriously damaged, it did not collapse. It had merely shifted to the side, moving at least five meters. It was displaced. Uncle Imam showed us the trees: “That cherry tree was at least five meters tall, and it came down. That apricot tree fell from the top, but half still remains there.” We saw the relocated plankton with our own eyes. The destruction suffered by nature was truly terrifying.

The emergency response and aid teams had not arrived in the first days. In fact, people in the villages had somehow solved their own problems; they did not sit and wait for AFAD. The local associations had reached them, but the state could not.

Another thing that was interesting was the death of the sheep and goats in the villages of Elbistan. Sheep and lambs were dead. But it was mostly the lambs that had died. We were intrigued about the reason for this, so we asked. The absence of any signs of bruises in the dead lambs had also drawn the attention of veterinarians. They showed us the photos. We saw some with our own eyes. This situation was never reported in the press. Veterinarians performed autopsies on the lambs. They found that they had died of a heart attack. Imagine – animals died of a heart attack during an earthquake.

There is also spiritual damage

The impact of all this destruction on the faith of Alevis is very high. As we mentioned, Alevis attribute sacred meanings to the mountains, stones, animals, and bugs, and they find them to be altruistic. They are present in their belief system. It is necessary to view and examine the destruction caused by the earthquake from their perspective. There was also immense spiritual and psychological damage. Children were being educated in KESK tents in Narlı by teachers from Eğitim-Sen. It was cold, there was snow on the ground, and the teachers were showing the kids “Ice Age”. It was ironic. One of the earthquake survivors told us that the teachers had brought drawing

books, and were letting children draw pictures to escape the psychology of the earthquake. The children were drawing pictures of dead people. I don’t know what has been done, or is being done, about the psychology of people, particularly children, as a result of the trauma they experienced. Undoubtedly, this is a problem that requires the correct expertise

The nearby associations had reached there, but AFAD was not able to

We visited most of the Alevi villages in Elbistan and Ekinözü. We reported from the villages of Toprakhisar, Sevdilli, Alxas, Kantarma, Yapılıpınar, Atmalı Kaşanlı and Ekinözü of Elbistan district, such as Çiftlik, Nargele, Anbar, Aşağı İçmeler Village, Gözpinar, Gurbetçiler, Miranlı / Değirmenkaya.

This was what they said in all of these villages: “AFAD reached us a week later. They left a small number of tents, water and food in the village square and then left.” The emergency response and aid teams had not arrived in the first days. In fact, people in the villages had somehow solved their own problems, they did not sit and wait for AFAD. The local associations had reached them, but the state could not.

Even though fifteen days had passed since the earthquake by the time we

visited, the food and hay needs of the animals had still not been met. People were saying, “We will buy it with our money but we cannot find the food, even though we have money.” They were asking and waiting for help from the state, but they weren’t able to receive any. We witnessed this. Some of them sold some of their livestock for half the price. A villager said, “I had two cows, I sold one for half the price to save the other.” They spoke with tears in their eyes.

A night club on the village road

This is a subject slightly removed from the earthquake issue, but we also witnessed another thing which I want to mention. We saw a sign that said “Kristal Night Club” on the way to Ekinözü Çiftlikkale. It was a night club. It caught our attention. It wasn’t like it wouldn’t catch our attention anyway. What is a nightclub doing on a road to a village? When we asked the villagers, they said “We tried very hard to have it closed, but the AKP municipality gave them the license, and they ignored our requests.” In an Alevi village, the AKP municipality, which constantly cites religion and belief, gave permission to an immoral entertainment place (according to their values). The villagers were complaining and very disturbed by this situation, let alone the pain of the earthquake. They placed particular emphasize on this.

Migration

We compiled our impressions from the region in a report. The main theme of the report was migration. We searched for an answer to the question of what the migration situation in the region was. As you know, after the Maraş Massacre in 1978, there was a serious migration of Alevis away from the villages. As a result, there were almost no young people in the Alevi villages in the region. They are in European countries. There are no job opportunities, no fields to keep young people here. We also observed this in Adiyaman; everyone was migrating away.

But this point should also be underlined – in the villages, people embrace and protect their ethnic and religious identities to a high degree, such as in Erzincan, Sivas, and Dersim. They speak Kurdish / Kurmanji in their daily lives. There are people who go, live abroad and return to their villages when they

retire. In this sense, we can observe a political resistance to migration. This was an important element in keeping the community alive there. There were those who had migrated to live with their relatives, especially in the Mediterranean and Aegean regions after the earthquake. But people said that most, if not all of them, would return. Unlike other earthquake zones, the Kurds in Maraş are highly politicized. We met people who knew and followed the political agenda and had a high level of awareness. For example, someone mentioned the 1925 Eastern Reform Plan, which was planned with the aim of exterminating the Kızılbaş Kurds in the region. There were also people who noted that the 1978 Maraş Massacre was also an intervention against the Alevi demographic. We talked to a lot of people who believed that the camp in Terolar village was not actually a refugee camp, but rather a camp of Al Nusra and ISIS fighters, and had been established in order to dilute the Alevi population.

Although the general population of villages is in a similar situation regarding migration, the situation in cities is different. What can a tradesman who has lost his shop, workplace, goods and products do to hold on to life? We saw this clearly in the district center of Elbistan. There were people trying to save their goods under the debris, despite the risks. On the one hand, the construction equipment was working to remove the debris, and on the other hand, people were hurrying to retrieve their goods of economic value from the debris.

They are saying that loan debts will be deferred. A tradesman expressed his concern. “But with what am I going to re-pay that debt in six months, seven months from now?” The tradesmen did not know what to do amidst all this uncertainty and anxiety.

Looting and theft has also occurred. It was not the Syrian migrants who did this, as was widely reported, but the “locals.” This was the answer we got when we asked. There were nights when guns were firing until the morning. People were guarding the front of their wrecked shops. Particularly jewelers.

As far as I could observe, the trauma was more serious in cities than in villages. It’s



Photo: Hayri Tunç

hard for people to recover economically, for the economy to get back on track. Of course, it will pass, but it’s risky. It is even more risky for the Alevi community. They have already preserved their existence within small spaces, they have almost created ghettos. They have been able to protect themselves against other dominant ethnic and religious structures, but it will not be easy for them to recover.

Discrimination

To be objective, we did not observe an attitude of “This is the Alevi region, let’s not go there” from the state. But it was said that reports for fully or half damaged houses were issued on purpose. No one appeared on behalf of the state in the first few days, even in the center of Elbistan. There were no soldiers, no police. Is it the job of citizens to wait with

arms, or to use those arms to guard their shops? Of course not. AFAD tents were only just being set up when we arrived. Some Alevi citizens believed, and told us, that they were being discriminated against, in terms of tents. We did not witness this ourselves. But there were people who said “I don’t want tents from AFAD, please find me another tent.” Unfortunately, we did not have

the opportunity to provide this because AFAD had confiscated our aid trucks on the road. They also confiscated the Hasankoca aid center that we set up in Maraş.

There are reports, detections, warnings, but...

The occurrence of a serious earthquake in the region was foreseen, reported. A



Photo: Nesimi Aday

drill was even held in Maraş, with the participation of Süleyman Soylu. Then, nothing. The danger was swept under the rug, and the region was left to its fate.

Let me tell you something interesting. I have in my possession a publication called "History of the Month" published by the Prime Ministry General Directorate of Press and Tourism. The flood disaster in Adiyaman is mentioned in the August 1956 issue of this magazine. On August 27, 1956, a flood occurred in Adiyaman. Ninety-two people died. According to this publication, the President of Pakistan at the time, İskender Mirza, sent his condolences to the President of the time, Celal Bayar.

On 15 March, there was another flood in Adiyaman, which had not yet healed from the wounds of the earthquake. It

happened in Urfa and Adiyaman and twenty people lost their lives. It suggests that there is a permanent risk of flooding in that region. A similar disaster to that which happened in 1956 happened in 2023, and there was again a loss of life. Sixty-seven years have passed, but no precautions have been taken. So what are the local and central governments doing? We are facing an irresponsibility which is costing people's lives. After experiencing this Maraş-centered earthquake disaster, after witnessing that tragedy, most of us have become even more worried about what will happen in Istanbul. I'm sure it is the same for anyone who is aware of the seriousness of the problem. What can be done? This is a situation that is beyond our sphere of influence and our power as citizens. This is a public problem. There is a saying of Sheikh Edebali, which is used a lot by those who govern us: "Let

What can be done? This is a situation that is beyond our sphere of influence and our power as citizens. This is a public problem. There is a saying of Sheikh Edebali, which is used a lot by those who govern us: "Let the people live so that the state can live." Is anyone doing what is necessary, according to this concise and fair saying? Unfortunately, no.

the people live so that the state can live." Is anyone doing what is necessary, according to this concise and fair saying? Unfortunately, no. ☹️

HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS AS A MECHANISM OF ASSISTANCE: OPPORTUNITIES THEY OFFER AFTER A DISASTER

Hometown associations were one of the most important pillars of social solidarity to emerge after the February 6 Earthquake. We interviewed Tevfik Usluoğlu, chairman of the board of ASİ-Der (Antakya, Samandağ, İskenderun Districts Association of Culture, Solidarity, and Environmental Volunteers) to understand the benefits which such associations can offer in the context of disasters. Harun Arslan's essay based on the interview with Usluoğlu foregrounds the phenomenon of fellow citizenship and the potential role and function of hometown associations.

It has been over four months since the earthquakes struck. With approximately 13.5 million citizens affected,¹ and with the financial damage estimated to be around \$104 billion,² it's hard to imagine that the region will recover quickly after such great destruction. The economic devastation will likely affect the region's socio-economic situation for decades to come. We have witnessed, in the most painful way, that Turkey is not prepared for disasters. While we hope the central government will learn some lessons from this process, non-governmental organizations should also look for ways to improve their capacities. It is estimated that the earthquake predicted to occur in the Marmara Region will affect more than 25 million people. As we have seen after the Kahramanmaraş and Hatay earthquakes, the fatal outcome of the earthquake won't be limited to the immediate destruction. The brutality of the conditions after the earthquake will also pose a risk to future victims. It is therefore necessary to consider all possible methods in order to meet the needs of disaster victims in this environment. In this context, it will be beneficial to introduce new approaches

with new actors into studies on disasters. The role of hometown associations is an attractive option in this respect, with their knowledge of the local, which is very valuable in the post-disaster conditions, and their experience of assistance and solidarity.

Building fellow citizens

It is worth mentioning that the fellow citizen communities and their identities are not a "natural" phenomenon. Citizens who gather around hometown associations form a new collective identity built as a result of incorporating the cultural characteristics of their city of origin into our country's urban lifestyle.³ These associations aim to keep the culture of the city of origin alive in the province to which they've migrated through cultural activities, and to ensure that their members do not lose the values of their original homes. They also ensure that the members become acquainted through events and that a community is formed and developed. The social network created by those who embrace the identity built on this common culture provides special opportunities for the association's environment.

Cultural events constituted a significant part of the pre-earthquake activities of ASİ-DER. In line with Hatay's cultural cosmopolitan structure, the association organized its activities to cover Hatay's diverse cultures. Ras'el Seni, Gadir-i Hum, Easter, Ramadan, and Haririt Adar are among the number of festivals of different religions and sects that the association celebrates. In this regard, Usluoğlu states that the association has a particular stance: "We have certainly had, and will continue to have, such solidarity with groups that are defined as the 'other' in this country and that cannot or are not allowed to exercise their rights in terms of equal citizenship fully." In addition, we can say that the discriminatory style towards Syrians, a subject of great debate at the national level, does not exist in this association. Usluoğlu describes their approach as follows: "Syrians are shown as the 'other', the enemy, but we saved people from demolished buildings with their help." It can be said that the association defines the "Hatay people" in a way which aims to consider cultural groups in Hatay in a pluralistic way.



Photo: Özcan Yaman

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Pre-earthquake activities

Cultural activities were a significant part of the association’s activities before the earthquake struck. The association’s activities and collaborations, which were established with a pluralist perspective, are advanced. Usluoğlu stated that before the pandemic, the association counted a music group and a theater group among its activities and that they also organized Arabic language courses. These activities were interrupted after the pandemic.

He also mentioned collaborations with local governments in both Hatay and Istanbul. Usluoğlu describes the association’s relationship with local governments as follows: “We have a political stance; NGOs have to have a political stance. This is not, of course, the stance of a political party. It is a political

stance in terms of its worldview. We do not have a political party preference as a hometown association. But people have their choices, and they should.” Different parties govern the municipalities he lists. He states that they are open to working with different local governments, but in general, the approach in Turkey takes the mindset of “whether x association is close to us or not.”

The association is involved in both domestic and international collaborations on cultural activities. Usluoğlu mentions that they were part of the team which organized the Hatay Days in Istanbul. When the Culture and Art Festival was held in Serinyol, they held a symposium on the history of Alawism and resistance which was attended by participants from Argentina, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. They also participated in similar events in Mersin and supported similar activities conducted by the organization of Arab Alevi Youth Assemblies in Istanbul.

Another essential feature of hometown associations are the aid and solidarity networks formed by the people gathered around the identity of fellow townspeople. Examples such as collecting money through the method of common

pooling, providing scholarships for students, receiving help for health emergencies, distributing food on religious holidays, meeting urgent cash needs, meeting food and clothing needs, etc. are examples of the economic solidarity and cooperation produced by these associations. In addition to direct economic aid, members can access opportunities thanks to the social capital which the association’s circle offers. These benefits include finding a job, finding housing, and reaching experts in health, the law, etc.⁴

Hometown associations are highly experienced in the provision of aid and solidarity relationships. These associations emerged during the rapid migration from rural to urban areas, enabling migrants to adapt quickly to the unfamiliar and challenging conditions of the new city in the first days of their migration. They then became an address for members who had settled in the city and who were seeking solutions for the new challenges they faced. This feature of hometown associations has been an important topic of discussion in the relevant literature. The relationship between local and central governments and hometown associations has been

defined as a relationship of “exchange”. According to this approach, which is expressed as public choice theory, politicians expect votes, bureaucrats expect reputation, voters expect benefits, and pressure groups expect rent as actors who are involved in the exchange. They thus maximize their benefits of public goods and services without any risk. In contrast, the structure of hometown associations which puts priority on the interests of their members, and exerts pressure on local and central governments are defined as having a “protective” relationship. The definition used in the literature for hometown associations is that of “pressure group.”⁵ Interest groups, which are defined as “groups acting together to provide material or moral benefits,” are considered to be a pressure group when they begin to directly/indirectly influence the political process in order to achieve their interests.⁶ This feature of hometown associations is considered in the literature to mark them as a potential institution⁷ which can provide the democratic participation of citizens and act as a discriminatory support mechanism due to “patronage” and “clientelism” relations.⁸ No matter how these relations are defined, they have the potential to help solve problems caused by great destruction within the defined areas covered by hometown associations.

In this respect, prior to the earthquake ASI-DER followed a path not dissimilar to that described in the literature. Usluoğlu describes how the ones seeking jobs forwarded their CVs to the business people of Hatay and that doctors close to the association were just a phone call away for those experiencing health problems. These activities are illustrative of the association’s social network outputs. In addition, they provided scholarships to students with the dues collected from the members of the association or with donations from different circles. They also cooperated with the European Arab Alawite Federation for support for scholarships. According to Usluoğlu, each of these activities costs around 50-60,000 liras, and the association’s equity covered them.

After the earthquake, donations and support came from many places, which exceeded ASI-Der’s base before the

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quake. The economic solidarity network managed to reach people who previously had no relationship with the association or even to Hatay. Parallel to the pre-earthquake situation, they received aid and support from abroad. The aid was collected through existing relations, and new donors saw the association as a reliable mechanism to channel funds. The opportunities which the association had offered through social networks prior to the earthquake also continued after the earthquake. Usluoğlu mentioned that they provided free placement for 67 disaster victim families for a year and organized the delivery of help and support in line with the region’s needs, meeting with local governments, companies, and other non-governmental organizations

The organizational potential of hometown associations

Afetlere hızlı müdahale için afet in order to respond rapidly to disasters, it is essential to have an understanding of the potential risks before the disaster and the needs that arise immediately after. If the risk is not clearly recognized, decision-makers and policy-makers at all levels of authority may experience communication, coordination, and control difficulties within their own institutions during the disaster. A clear recognition of the risk at the local level by first responders and emergency managers should be complemented by a clear understanding of the risk

by senior management, who are the ones to provide resources and mutual assistance for the response.⁹ The tragic consequences of most disasters are often not related to its scale or as a result of a lack of resources. Rather, it is the lack of coordination and cooperation among stakeholders which hinders intervention activities.¹⁰

In the earthquake example we are experiencing, the crisis preparedness and crisis management did not comply with the requirements listed above. As Usluoğlu stated, municipal buildings, the AFAD’s building, hospitals, and the buildings of law enforcement agencies were damaged or completely destroyed. Usluoğlu described the environment created by this situation as follows: “The phones could not be accessed. There was a severe catastrophe and it was undetectable. Hatay was not even in the press on the first three days. In fact, for the first three days, or even five days, many officials did not and would not go to some places.” As a result, ASI-Der had difficulty finding an institution to distribute the aid they had collected. Usluoğlu stated that they organized quickly in the first hours of the earthquake and sent the materials to meet the acute needs with trucks and the excavators which they got from a company he had a relationship with. But when they contacted the local administrations in the region, they received the answer, “We are also earthquake victims.”

He also described conflicts between local governments and the central government and how AFAD was trying to distribute aid through headmen. Usluoğlu added that ASI-Der quickly formed a volunteer network in the region and ensured the delivery of aid through this network – both in order to avoid such conflicts, and also due to the rumors that some headmen of the region were distributing aid in a discriminatory way. Usluoğlu stated that during such a process, NGOs have a lot of work to do; because of their strong network, they focused on organizing as the most pressing task. However, he also said that they had experienced a conflict with the central administration during this process: “We sent excavators. But the police pulled them into the garage of the Highways Branch Directorate in Antakya and kept



Photo: Tamer Arda Ersin

them there for days as they were waiting for instructions. This is the weakness in our country, unfortunately. There should be extraordinary interventions in extraordinary situations.”

Usluoğlu emphasizes that their purpose is not to form a resistance to the state by making these criticisms. His main concern is to question why a country that has already experienced many earthquakes is not prepared for the occurrence of new ones. He added that ASİ-Der is not an association which was founded in response to disasters. But even as a hometown association, they were able to quickly manage the coordination network between the earthquake zone and other provinces; in comparison, institutions whose main job is disaster management were inadequate in this respect. But Usluoğlu stated that ASİ-DER's ability was also limited during this process and that their aim was not to intrude in the fields of other associations and institutions. He described the aims of the association as follows: “To knit together logistical support, to support people in need in the field, to provide their needs, to provide tents and the food needs of volunteers working in the field; these should be our primary duties.” It is important to talk about the remarkable work which the association carried out in this context. He also stated that they had visited neighborhoods and villages with the help of motorcycle volunteers. These volunteers prepared lists and ensured that only strictly necessary aid was taken, instead of delivering a bulk of unwanted material and causing a loss in limited resources.

ASİ-DER established commissions in cooperation with different institutions from this perspective. They established cooperation with the Turkish Medical Association in order to produce the health commission. Usluoğlu summarized ASİ-DER's role in this cooperation as follows: “The duty of the association's health commission is not to incorporate the Chamber of Physicians' mission into the association. It is to coordinate with the Chamber of Physicians or the doctors, the hospitals there, to identify the needs and support them.” As for the legal commission, another commission under the association's coordination, Usluoğlu described its objectives as, “organizing the process with our legal colleagues

there in order to solve legal problems, making preparations from here, and supporting them in this regard.” In the later stages of the interview, he added that they had travelled to the region and contacted each neighborhood to enable earthquake victims to be able to reach these commissions and connect with them via a WhatsApp line. He also mentioned that they were in contact with the Chamber of Architects and the Chamber of Veterinarians. ASİ-Der, a hometown association, therefore became an essential facilitator for experts who wanted to help earthquake victims with its golden local knowledge.

With members who have spent at least a part of their lives in Hatay, ASİ-Der provides a vital bulwark against central government's policies that do not suit the needs of the locals. Usluoğlu argued that the insistence on gathering everyone in uniform tent towns was wrong. Placing people who live in rural areas in tent towns meant pulling them from their gardens and away from their animals. This detached people from the means of their production. Usluoğlu argued it would be much more efficient if they were allowed to contribute to the city with what they're able to produce from their resources. Instead of taking a person who owns a cow from the village and housing them in the city center, it would be better to collect the milk produced in their village through the municipalities, make cheese, and then distribute the milk and cheese to disaster victims. He argued that “not every prescription fits every patient” and that policies should be created which are specific to Hatay's conditions. Another example is the earthen houses which Hatay people have lived in for a long time – earthen houses reinforced with wood or additives that do not harm nature can be used as an alternative to containers and tents.

He said that ASİ-Der had distributed tents with this outlook. Although they supported AFAD and other official institutions in supplying vehicles for distribution, they disagreed on the organization of temporary housing. He stated that people living in the countryside, had been able to set up their tents wherever they wanted. The tents they distributed in the city were used for socialization, which was missing in the tent towns. He argued that the lack of

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socialization areas for children, men, and women in the tent towns would lead to violence, suicides, harassment, and rape. In line with Usluoğlu's argument, we did indeed start to hear about femicides from the region. According to Usluoğlu, tents and containers should be used in order to provide the physical conditions to prevent such violence, and to create activities to provide psycho-social support. He also stated that they had sent a barber to support the region as a form of psycho-social support. He added that they were also working to ensure that children were continuing their education. As part of this they had also forwarded their tent and container stocks to schools, and distributed test books to students during the exam period.

“Not a new Antakya, but Antakya again”

Allowing people to stay where they live is the basis of ASİ-Der's perspective for aid and projects in the disaster area. Usluoğlu elaborated on this approach: “Antakya is a historical place. In other words, it is a unique region that has been destroyed eight times and has been cultivated again eight times. [...] It is where Ramadan, Gadir-i Hum, Easter, Passover and Virgin Mary are celebrated together. It is a place where Arabs, Turks, Armenians, Syrians, Alawites, Sunnis, Orthodox, Greeks, Catholics, Protestants, Jews live together and are neighbors. [...] What makes this city what it is, and which adds its historical and cultural value, is not that it is an archaeological site, but that people actually live there.” Usluoğlu also stated that the key to this cultural structure is the fact that the community is not disintegrated and that it would be necessary to prevent the permanent outward migration of people in order to improve the city's economy. In line with this approach, ASİ-Der had lead municipalities outside the region in order to provide seedling and food support to



Photo: Özcan Yaman



Photo: Özcan Yaman

the region, and to enable the farmers affected by the earthquake to start producing again. He added that they had provided tents to those victims who had stayed in greenhouses due to the lack of tents. In addition, he stated that they were no longer outsourcing the drinking water, but were trying to supply it from within the region, in order to promote the development of the tradesmen of the region.

ASİ-Der also has a holistic project to help in the development of the region's economy. Usluoğlu stated that they want Hatay to be declared a tourism city, named Hatay Tourism Re-Development Project. He mentioned that Hatay has been a maritime city since the Seleucids, that it has gained prosperity through its ports and that it had been rebuilt on multiple occasions. He argued that "history should repeat itself" and that the area from Çevlik to Arsuz Konacık line is not suitable for agriculture and therefore, would be suitable for constructing the proposed port. According to Usluoğlu, Hatay is not like Kocaeli, and the tourism sector should be turned to as a source of development for the economy. He argued that the port would make use of the natural and cultural beauties of Hatay. After toxic substances have been

removed, the wreckage of the buildings destroyed by the earthquake would be able to be used as filling material in the port's construction. Following this approach, he argued, would reduce significant cost. He highlighted that the opening up of the region to tourism should be done following an ecological approach, not following the "all-inclusive, huge hotels" based model such as that in Antalya. Opening boutique hotels would enable the products of ecological agriculture in the countryside to find direct buyers; this would also benefit urban agriculture and animal husbandry. According to Usluoğlu this approach would be the only way to make the environment conducive to encourage the people of Hatay, who have already started to make their lives in other provinces, return to the region.

He also discussed his ideas and concerns about rebuilding the city center. He argued that the city's neighborhood or community relations should be preserved in order to allow the city's culture to recover and survive. He argued that the residents of the city should be directed to areas close to them during the restructuring process, and that a resettlement policy should be followed which protects different

communities. The uniqueness of Hatay emerges from the particular culture of coexistence which exists between diverse communities: "These relations will not return if we build the place following a TOKİ mindset and squash people together. The soul of the city would perish if we take this course." He defended the protection of property rights of property owners but said that they should also listen to science – if there was a possibility that it would pose a risk in future disasters. Another part of the project should entail the excavation of part of the existing city center by archaeologists, in order to unearth the layers formed by the repeated destruction of Antakya in the past. He suggested that this place could become an open-air museum.

He argued that this process could not be carried out "with an architect in Istanbul, and a bureaucrat in Ankara" [...] and that the local experts, local opinion leaders, local religious community leaders, sociologists, psychologists, historians, university professors should be the ones to carry out the reconstruction process. He also noted that they had tried to participate in the meetings where tenders were being held and had filed a criminal complaint against the declaration of the city center of Antakya a risk area. This

had been transferred to the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization through the legal commission. He said they had articulated their objections in many ways but that these, and those of other working groups, had not been considered during the planning process. He noted their concerns about the construction processes happening in Kadifekale, Sulukule, and Sur. He also mentioned that during the debris removal process, debris had been dumped on agricultural lands and near settlements without considering the concerns of the city's residents about their future impact.

Usluoğlu added that they were planning to present their projects regarding the city's future to the ministries and then apply for European Union's funds if they received positive results. He stressed that the government would be decisive here. The government plays a key role in projects aimed at re-developing the city's economy through tourism: "Incentives should be provided before the city is declared a tourism city. For example, SSI incentives, tax exemptions, provision of lands accordingly, ease of zoning, ease of materials, etc., should be provided. The investor will not be interested without such incentives from the state." The association's primary purpose in the post-disaster context can therefore be summarized as allowing the urban people to stay in the region in order to protect urban culture, developing the city's economy, and bringing people who have migrated away from Hatay back to the region.

Conclusion and recommendations

As can be seen in the example presented by our interview with Usluoğlu, hometown associations, with their existing networks, can be potential influential actors in disaster response situations. The emergence of a form of assistance and solidarity, which was born from ensuring the adaptation of migrants to their new cities, is a contributing factor towards this. These associations have experience in charity and identifying those in need. The most crucial feature enabling this is the common culture of the community, which enables people from different professions and economic and political positions to be brought together. As was illustrated in their response to the disaster, they also have the potential to collect aid quickly and deliver it through logistics companies. They have essential advantages in terms of distribution, and in organizing and coordinating needs assessment since they have a good knowledge of the society and geography of the province of origin. The network of relations which these associations have with non-governmental organizations, professional organizations, and local and central governments, which have been developed in pre-disaster situations for the purpose of solving problems of their members, also indicates their ability to establish essential cooperation. Urban identity and culture are crucial for these associations, as the cultural predominance of pre-earthquake activities shows. For this reason, hometown associations can potentially be a stakeholder in protecting the cultural assets of cities. They are also active as

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a form of pressure group regarding the participation of the city dwellers in the planning process, even despite their limited membership structure.

It is necessary to benefit from the golden opportunities which these hometown associations offer in future emergencies and disasters – in particular the expected Marmara Earthquake. It will be beneficial to cooperate with these associations in the context of disaster preparedness and post-disaster relief efforts. Efforts to increase the capacity of associations that do not have the structure to organize quickly in the ways that ASİ-Der do will enable the emergence of new actors who can also be effective in this regard. Addressing these associations as a stakeholder can also transfer disaster awareness to hard-to-reach groups.

¹ <https://csb.gov.tr/bakan-kurum-deprem-nufus-itibariyla-13-5-milyon-vatandasimizi-etkiledi-bakanlik-faaliyetleri-37415#:~:text=BAKAN%20KURUM%3A%20E%28%09%20N%20N%3%9CFUS%20%4%4%BOT%4%4%BOBARIYLA,13%2C5%20M%4%BOLYON%20VATANDA%20ETK%20ETK%4%BOLED%4%B0%28%09%20>

² <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-depremin-yikici-maliyeti-yaklasik-104-milyar-dolar-754490.html>

³ Hersant, J. and A. Toumarkine (2005), "Hometown Organisations in Turkey: An Overview," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 2.

⁴ Akgış, Ö. and E. Karakaş (2018), "An Applied Research on the Role of Hometown Associations as a Social Network in Combating Poverty: Bilecik Sinop People's Aid and Solidarity Association," *Ege Journal of Geography*: 21-34.

⁵ Kurtoglu, A. (2012), "Fellow Citizenship and Watching in the Context of Political Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations," *Ankara University SBF Journal*, 1: 141-169

⁶ Daver, B. (1993), *Introduction to Political Science*, Siyasal Kitabevi, Ankara, page 236.

⁷ Özdemir, G. (2013), "Hometown Associations from Buffer Mechanism to Political Acting," *Turkish Studies*, 8(6): 943-959.

⁸ Kurtoglu, A., *ibid.*

⁹ Kapucu, N., Özerdem, A. and S. Abdul-Akeem (2023), *Managing Emergencies and Crises: Global Perspectives*, Jones Bartlett Learning, s. 267.

¹⁰ Auf der Heide, E. (1996), "Disaster Planning. Part II: Disaster Problems, Issues, and Challenges Identified in the Research Literature," *Emergency Medicines of North America* 14(2): 453-480.

The role of participatory citizenship in disaster resilience

In the face of destructive, shocking, and disruptive developments which pose a vital threat (including natural disasters, crises, and similar events), the concept of “social resilience” encompasses collective actions and resources which aim to enable society to withstand disaster, sustain life, be prepared for future similar situations, and establish a well-functioning social order. The resilience approach focuses on the strengths, potentials, and capabilities of individuals, institutions, and communities.

Within this framework, ‘disaster resilience’ can be defined as being aware of the risks related to natural events and shocks that have the potential to lead to mass destruction and damage; being prepared for them; generating rapid solutions by implementing pre-planned measures during a disaster; adapting to changes; and enhancing our capacity for recovery and resilience in the post-disaster period.

Citizen’s Voice for Disaster Resilience, a study which will be carried out by Citizens’ Assembly throughout 2023, focuses on developing solutions within this framework. It aims to promote active collaboration between civil society and local administrations in order to enhance citizens’ resilience against disasters in the cities of the Marmara Region. The project plans to carry out various activities such as workshops, working group meetings, and summer schools. The main objectives include increasing citizens’ awareness of disaster risks and preparedness, monitoring the strategies and activities of local governments and relevant local institutions from the perspective of disaster resilience, and facilitating experience sharing among civil initiatives and solidarity communities in the working areas.

The inaugural meeting of the project, which took place online on April 24, 2023, was followed by the first regional-scale meeting at Postane Istanbul. The main agenda of the approximately three-hour meeting was questioning how to build local solidarity and organizational models suitable for disaster resilience. The

meeting was attended by representatives from institutions such as Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IBB), Istanbul Planning Agency (IPA), Neighborhood Assemblies Initiative, Marmara Municipalities Union, Center for Spatial Justice (MAD), Istanbul City Council, Open Radio (Açık Radyo), Public Expenditures Monitoring Platform (KAHİP), as well as researchers from Istanbul Bilgi University, Boğaziçi University, Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University and Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University.

One of the main questions discussed during the meeting was how disaster resilience can be built at the neighborhood level. As participants highlighted, although neighborhood solidarity is the cornerstone of effective civil organization in the context of disasters, neighborhood-scale initiatives have their own limitations. Particularly in a densely populated city like Istanbul, which encompasses diverse socio-cultural dynamics, disaster efforts must vary from locality to locality. In other words, the limitations of the “resilient neighborhoods” approach should be considered.

Another prominent topic of discussion during the meeting was the importance of citizen participation and oversight in local government’s disaster management policies. The possibilities and means of creating opportunities for citizen participation in local government

policies were discussed as part of this conversation. The question was also raised of how to increase collaborations between municipalities, civil society, and citizen initiatives in terms of disaster management.

Another important issue raised at the meeting was the importance of producing municipal strategic plans from the perspective of disaster resilience. This issue will also be examined in the workshop activities, due to be carried out under the scope of the *Citizen’s Voice for Disaster Resilience* project.

It was underlined that the level of active citizen participation depends on monitoring the extent to which disaster risks and resilience measures are included in the strategic plans of the municipalities; how much disaster resilience is prioritized in the activity and investment programs of the municipalities, and consequently, the allocation of budgetary resources towards these efforts.

Field meetings will be organized in other cities of the Marmara Region in the upcoming months, where local issues which are specific to each area will be addressed from the perspective of disaster resilience. The aim is to explore ways to enhance collaboration between civil initiatives and local governments in order to reduce regional disaster risks, and to increase societal resilience in the face of these risks.



Photo: hCa Archive

One can help one another even in the smallest matters: What is the situation of being a neighbourhood resident of Istanbul?

After the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes of February 6, 2023, the concept of ‘neighbourhood’ and being a ‘neighbourhood resident’ have come to the fore in terms of the potential resilience they offer in the face of natural disasters. Given the fact that the interventions and help in the first few hours of the earthquake came from residents of the neighbourhoods, the necessity for organized solidarity of the citizens in their living spaces has been emphasized across many platforms.

Author Köksal Alver explains the concept of the neighbourhood in his article titled “Mahalle: Mekân ve Hayatın Esrarlı Birliği”:

“The neighbourhood is the main element, essence and core of the city. The neighbourhood, one of the mandatory spaces of the city, symbolizes the intertwining of space and life, an example of them complementing and shaping each other. The neighbourhood is both a form of space and a certain way of life. Therefore, the main element of the neighbourhood is human relations and spatial forms. Establishing a neighbourhood is not only about creating a place, it is also about preparing an environment for versatile human relations. The neighbourhood is the mysterious coexistence of space and life.”¹

An article written by Selin Turan, a research assistant from Istanbul Technical University Faculty of Architecture, Department of City and Regional Planning, and Prof. Dr. Hatice Ayataç, focuses on the concept of ‘social resilience’. It questions whether this concept is compatible with the neighbourhood of Feriköy in Kurtuluş district of Istanbul, and defines a ‘resilient neighbourhood’ as follows:

“By increasing the sense of community, belonging, cultural identity and social adaptability of the society in which it is in social resilience with; it creates a more conscious, active, collective society open to learning, while also contributing to the physical space and making the concept of neighbourhood an important subject to be comprehended. Behind the need to adapt the concept of social resilience to the neighbourhood lies the idea that this effort can contribute to the sustainability of the neighbourhood and neighbourhood culture by producing spaces that can adapt socially and environmentally to changing and dynamic processes, while preserving their cultures and identities over time.”²

Kumru Çılgin, a research assistant from Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Faculty of Architecture, Department of City and Regional Planning, produced her doctoral thesis on the topic of *Saving the Neighbourhood from the ‘Saviour’ of Transformation: An Approach Inspired by the Struggle of Sariyer Neighbourhoods, Neighbourhood Planning*. She notes that, although the neighbourhood unit plays a key role in organizing public participation in administration, this issue has not yet been discussed in the Turkish planning literature:³

“It is emphasized that the neighbourhood is the ‘smallest unit’ of the planning process, that this phenomenon should be recreated to build a sense of local identity and collective belonging through planning, and that the neighbourhood unit plays a key role in the participation of the public in the administration.

Although it has not yet been discussed in the Turkish planning literature, neighbourhood planning has achieved a remarkable position in various

periods, in different geographies, especially in the American and European planning practice; and has even been recently reformulated in the UK. It was developed in a way that allows it to respond to the needs of communities in a coordinated manner while allowing residents to participate in the formulation of policies that closely affect their daily lives and plan their own futures.

Today, this approach is deemed a solution in the search for establishing a new balance between the state and the individual by transferring power in political decision-making and implementation processes to local institutions and citizens depending on the ‘localization’ trends that came to the forefront in many democratic countries in the early 2000s.”

The Citizen’s Voice for Disaster Resilience study, which will be carried out by Citizens’ Assembly-Turkey throughout 2023 also aims to encourage citizens, non-governmental organizations, academics, city council representatives and all individuals who want to have a say in local governments to increase their resilience to disasters. It seeks to encourage them to participate in local disaster studies, as well as to examine the results of these studies. It further aims to offer suggestions to the problems and also to interpret from a new perspective those areas which are currently lacking.

The main agenda of the study, the first meeting of which was held at Postane Istanbul, included the following – the organization of neighbourhoods in Istanbul; studies carried out on disaster resilience by organizations at the neighbourhood level; and questioning what kind of work should be carried out in addition to these efforts. Participants of the meeting discussed the concept of ‘neighbourhood’ in the context of

Istanbul and the organization efforts and studies for future disaster at the neighbourhood level. Participants included Meral Camcı from the Heybeliada Neighbourhood Council, Tolga Bektaş from the Neighbourhood Council Initiative, Dr. Feyza Akınerdem from Boğaziçi University, Department of Sociology and Dr. İnan İzci from Argüden Governance Academy.

“We can claim that such diversity is unique to Istanbul”

Faculty Member Dr. Feyza Akınerdem from Boğaziçi University stated that it is very difficult to give a single definition for the concept of neighbourhood in Istanbul. Due to its size, its crowdedness and as a result of its diversity, Istanbul is a city containing multiple forms of neighbourhood, each with their own dynamics. According to Akınerdem:

“It is very hard to define a neighbourhood concept that is unique to Istanbul. If we try, we would be making a huge generalization, which would be wrong. In my opinion, there are multiple forms of neighbourhoods in Istanbul. The neighbourhood, which is determined by class differences, compatriotism, the industry people work in and many other factors, also consists of neighbourhoods that are structured in different ways. For example, in Çekmeköy district, neighbourhoods which consist of housing estates, villas, slums and independent apartments and shops are all intertwined. While these neighbourhoods are divided in terms of class, they interact as workers-employers, service recipients-service providers. From time to time, they establish communal living spaces based on solidarity and sometimes on the necessities of capital reproduction. We can assert that such diversity in a single space is unique to Istanbul.”

Akınerdem notes that urban mobility is one of the main determinants of the demarcation of groups of people, emphasizing the importance of following the same ‘route’, rather than just sharing the same living space, in the building of local solidarity.

“The social dynamics in the city are established by the closeness and contact between those who follow

the same route, work in similar sectors, work the same shift in the 24-hour work cycle, and establish their life around their child’s school, beyond just the closeness of localities/neighbourhoods. The forms of interaction and solidarity that will affect society in general should therefore consider urban mobility and the diversity of forms of contact, along with neighbourhoods themselves.”

In terms of disaster resilience, the Neighbourhood Disaster Volunteers, which is one of the non-governmental organizations engaged in this field, is quite advanced in education, training, and organization, according to Akınerdem. She also added that there is a need for organizations to strengthen partnerships between local organizations and the public, the private sector, and citizens.

“The concept of the neighbourhood in Istanbul is multi-layered and differentiated”

Meral Camcı from Heybeliada Neighbourhood Council pointed out that the concept of the ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘neighbourhood organization’ in Istanbul varies from region to region and is affected by regional dynamics. For instance, while the neighbourhood scale works a certain way in the Princes’ Islands district, it does not progress in the same manner in Beyoğlu district. According to Camcı:

“The concept of neighbourhood in Istanbul is multi-layered and differentiated. The level of differentiation can occur at the scale of the street in very crowded places. In some cases, it operates on the scale of an apartment or a housing estate... However, there are also neighbourhoods which have been able to organize within the already existing Neighbourhood Councils and MAG (Neighbourhood Disaster Volunteers), and which have maintained their neighbourhood structure and network of relations, as well as their neighbourhood rights.”

Camcı noted that neighbourhood organizations, which form the core of grassroots organizing, have the most effective role in determining local problems and producing solutions

to them. She suggested that raising awareness at the scale of the urban level would only be possible in line with demands coming from the local level.

“Organizing at the grassroots/local level will create the driving ground for the acceleration of solution processes of local problems, based on the principles of the right to the city and neighbourhood rights, while also raising awareness at the urban scale and facilitating mass initiatives at the city scale.”

Highlighting the importance of the first 72 hours in responding to disasters, Camcı underlined that the main help offered during this time period would emerge from within the neighbourhood.

“I think the neighbourhood scale is important in mobilizing the local knowledge of its direct residents. There is a high potential to be direct and be the first to act in the first 72 hours of disasters thanks to the knowledge of inhabitants, who know where people live, their age, their occupation and health status. Fast action can be facilitated through a predetermined organization of neighbourly relations and acquaintances, at the neighbourhood scale.”

“Neighbourhoods are small and local urban living spaces of Istanbul”

Tolga Bektaş of the Neighbourhood Councils Initiative noted that the neighbourhood culture in Istanbul has mostly disappeared due to the loss of public spaces. According to Bektaş, socializing areas have been destroyed on a local scale by the opening up of parks and gardens to construction. This has had the effect of depriving citizens of spaces where they can meet and socialize, and is preventing the building of solidarity within the neighbourhood.

“Neighbourhoods are small and local urban living spaces of the ancient Istanbul.” The phrase ‘This place used to be a mulberry field’ provides a reference to this. I grew up in Nişantaşı in a neighbourhood that used to be a ‘mulberry field’. In this respect, the neighbourhood is a large and interrelated community. We can discuss the alienation of people from



Photo: hCa Archive

each other as a result of increasingly modernized lives. The concept of neighbourhood is livelier in Istanbul, especially in old settlements called the ‘old town’. One of the biggest reasons why the neighbourhood concept has lost its purchase is the loss of the influence of the public sphere. From centres of worship to the playground, from the coffeehouse to living spaces, all of these can be included in this respect. As we open these areas to construction, there is no concrete place left for the common interaction.”

Bektaş noted that it is not possible for citizens who are ignorant of each other to organize locally. As such, he suggested that neighbourhood acquaintances would emerge from the protection of socialization areas (that is, public spaces), and that the cultivation of such spaces would also facilitate the culture of living and working together.

“If people in the neighbourhood are slightly familiar with each other it inevitably creates benefits for the culture of working together in the event of crisis and disasters. People who have become acquainted thanks to living in the same space behave in a more organized manner in the event of any crisis. We can state that the neighbourhood ensures its existence as the smallest disaster unit. On the other hand, crises and disasters form an organic process within the

neighbourhoods, creating a disaster union. Although we can define this as disaster union, it fuels the culture of solidarity among people.”

Following on from Meral Camcı, Bektaş also mentioned the uniqueness of the neighbourhood culture in the Princes’ Islands district in Istanbul. He pointed to the importance of the role of local associations in developing and preserving this.

“When it comes to the concept of neighbourhood in Istanbul, we cannot claim that it dates back many years. The culture of generations living in the same house or neighbourhood together no longer exists. But regarding this point, it is possible to mention the uniqueness of the Princes’ Islands. Inevitably, due to its physical location, we can define the Princes’ Islands district as being the last neighbourhood of Istanbul. I think that neighbourhood associations and local associations have been very resourceful in developing this.”

According to Bektaş, the first response to the question of ‘What should be done?’ besides the work of local and regional associations, is that studies should be carried out at the local and grassroots scale, not ‘from above’.

“The most important criterion of the studies on this issue is that they

should not be conducted ‘from above’. What I mean when I say ‘from above’ is that they should not be performed by the state. Every neighbourhood has its own dynamic. The state should make room for this; for example, by building a park. Maybe they should even build a bakery with a stone oven, just like the fountainheads, which were social spaces that used to be in villages. Spaces like these are very effective in building a community between neighbourhoods and small neighbourhoods. The most important reply to the question of ‘What should be done?’ may be that public spaces should not be sacrificed for the pursuit of construction. Our expectation from the state is that they will open up these channels to the public and make them active.”

“Each neighbourhood has an impact on the structure and life of Istanbul”

İnan İzci from Argüden Governance Academy argued that the number of neighbourhoods that still have common physical, economic, social and cultural characteristics is quite high, despite the dense population in Istanbul and the huge diversity within its population. İzci underlined that there are still places across the city where people know each other or can get to know each other with a certain degree of effort. He also stated that every neighbourhood in Istanbul has an impact on the structure and life of the city at large.



Photo: hCa Archive

“The most important feature of the neighbourhood is that it is the place where common *realities* directly emerge from, rather than the perceptions produced by the minds. There is a certain degree of commonality of different identities, preferences, and living conditions. There are familiarities, acquaintances or similarities. These can be both positive and negative but, most importantly, they are held in common. The neighbourhood is also the place which marks the beginning of the relationship between the individual and the social, the human and nature, and even with society and the state. In this respect, neighbourhoods have great potential in terms of social issues.”

Nevertheless, İzci highlighted that the number of neighbourhoods where people mostly know each other or have common characteristics is low. He added that despite all this, the neighbourhood stands out as the smallest scale of local administration and the place where people can reach each other. The neighbourhood therefore offers the most convenient, direct and healthy space

where citizens can act together against common risks.

“The neighbourhood is considered to be a residential area both physically and socially. It includes culturally similar characteristics where social relations occur along with geographical proximity - although this is not always the case. It can therefore be deemed to be the closest administration scale to the individual human. The experience of different disaster risks such as earthquakes, floods, and epidemics may differ at the neighbourhood scale. Disaster risks have different qualities and intensities according to the environment, constructed area or social texture of the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood therefore stands out as the most relevant and accessible living space in terms of obtaining information, taking precautions, monitoring practices or by being involved in managing disaster risks such as earthquakes.”

İzci stated that the voluntary aid efforts, which started after the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes on February 6, have

already evolved into joint efforts for the anticipated Istanbul earthquake. He noted that work which involves all social segments and aims towards concrete targets will be beneficial in this regard.

“After the February 6 earthquake, people came together across many neighbourhoods. The experience of solidarity, which first started in the immediate help given to the earthquake region, gradually led to considerations about the possible future Istanbul earthquake and what could be done about it. An event was held following the call of the Istanbul Neighbourhood Councils Initiative, on the initiative of volunteers. The main purpose of this event was to invite all segments of society to mobilize at a neighbourhood scale against the common threat of the earthquake. ‘Forgetting’ about the 1999 Earthquake had dire consequences in 2023. I believe that working on a neighbourhood scale, with the involvement of all social segments and with concrete targets to aim towards, will definitely create benefits to ensure that the same thing doesn’t happen again.”

¹ Köksal Alver, “Mahalle: Mekan ve Hayatın Esrarlı Birlikteliği,” *İdealkent*, 1 (2): 116-39

² Selin Turan ve Hatice Ayataç, “Günümüzde Mahalle Kültürünü Sürdürebilmek ve Yeni Bir Kavram Arayışı Olarak ‘Sosyal Dayanıklı Mahalle’: Kurtuluş-Feriköy Örneği,” *Tasarım+Kuram*, 16 (31).

³ Kumru Çılgin, *Mahalleyi Dönüşümün ‘Kurtarıcılığı’ndan Kurtarmak: Sarıyer Mahallelerinin Mücadelesinden Esinlenen Bir Yaklaşım Önerisi, Mahalle Planlaması*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Istanbul: MSGSÜ.



