

26 In search of agency

Participation in a youth organisation in Turkey

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Since the mid-1990s, in part due to the accession talks to join the European Union, there is a myriad of activities and projects focused on participatory governance and youth participation in Turkey. These are happening across the nation in a variety of institutional, community and/or informal settings, supported by all kinds of national and international public, private and non-governmental entities. This chapter is based on research that sought to identify and study cases where children/youth are able to exercise agency. We define *agency* as ‘having the power to make decisions that impact on self and others and to act on them’; and consider participation as a precondition for agency. We are particularly interested in agency directed towards and/or grounded in *place*.

In our search we reviewed internet sites and wrote to and interviewed a number of informants to identify ongoing activism or organisations established and led by disadvantaged youth aged 18 years old or younger. Here we tell the story of the Young Volunteers, the only organisation that we found that met our criteria, its formation, membership, relationship with other organisations and with the government (central and local), its programmatic activities, accomplishments and challenges. We use the case to illustrate how the governance and administrative structures, attitudes and norms, political conjunction and cultural factors affect this form of youth participation as well as its sphere of influence. The description is based on interviews with the elected leader and another founding member of the organisation, project reports and media coverage, and workshops with neighbourhood children who are involved in various capacities.

Background: context and issues

In Turkey, where (according to the 2007 census) 44 per cent of the population are 24 years of age or younger, youth are perceived as the major resource for the development and prosperity of the country, as well as guardians of the Republic, a role ascribed to them since the formation of the Republic. The official rhetoric of the state acknowledges the well-being of Turkish youth as a requirement of economic and social development, although reality on the ground belies the sincerity of such statements. The majority of the youth population is comprised of economically disadvantaged individuals, and youth unemployment is a serious problem. A leading cause of youth poverty is widespread, continuous migration

from rural to urban areas and from east to west, resulting in large families living in poverty in big cities and the rural hinterland.

The social and economic development of the nation clearly depends on the realisation of the full potential of a young population to become productive members of society. The participation of youth in decisions that affect them is an essential aspect of this process. Youth advocates hypothesise that participation benefits individual youth, their communities and the wider society in both the short and the long term. International agencies and various non-governmental organisations in Turkey and elsewhere endorse youth participation in planning, and principles and techniques to guide practice on the ground are widely available. Despite such progress, youth involvement in governance and planning is rare, indicating that there are significant barriers in practice (Checkoway, Pothukuchi, and Finn 1995; Adams and Ingham 1998; Hart 1997). In Turkey, having a majority of youth in poverty is a major impediment in this regard. Due to both lack of money and separation from places that incorporate adequate functions, disadvantaged young people lack access to the means for encouraging their participatory actions, visions and sense of community (Fitzpatrick et al. 1998). Moreover, in low-income communities parents generally view their children as generators of income (Kagitcibasi 1986), leaving them with no time to devote to other types of activity. As a result, there are very few youth-initiated associations across the nation. Most are in central and western Anatolia, especially in communities where income and education levels are high. Almost all the associations target only university students, which comprise no more than 4 per cent of the total youth population of Turkey. Furthermore, few remain active over time. A study of Istanbul youth organisations found that only a small percentage of children and youth participate in civic associations. Almost all of these bodies are composed of university students (ages 17 to 25). A majority of members are boys, and most are from economically wealthy and educated classes (Yenturk et al. 2006).

Cultural attitudes and norms also affect the level and type of youth participation in civil society. As guardians of the republic, youth have been assigned the duty of putting the country back on course, should governments go astray on the road to a just, prosperous and scientifically and technologically modern nation or when national unity is under threat. Ironically this mission empowers youth as an oppositional force, one that Turkish youth has historically fulfilled time and again, but not as members of civil society with equal rights for participation in day-to-day decision making. Parental permission is required by law if a child applies for membership in a registered association. Moreover, today, parents who experienced oppression due to their political affiliations during the military coups (1970–1980s), do not want their children to get involved in any activity that may be perceived as social activism. These attitudes also affect the programmes of youth organisations, especially those supported by international or government agencies. These organisations, rather than focusing on transformative activities that will enable youth to have more control over their immediate environments, engage in one-off events and project-specific initiatives that often target non-controversial issues and concerns that are somewhat removed from young people's immediate localities.

A youth organisation in Ayazaga, Istanbul: Young Volunteers

Young Volunteers is a rare example of a youth organisation, established by disadvantaged youth in 2004. The headquarters of the organisation is located in Ayazaga, a squatter neighbourhood in Sisli, one of the most prestigious municipalities of Istanbul (Plate 26.1). The neighbourhood is surrounded by middle- and high-class residential communities and is adjacent to a forested area and a small private university campus.

Despite the locational advantages, unemployment and illiteracy levels remain high. Most of the residents are third-generation immigrants from the Black Sea coast who are still in touch with their rural roots. They are highly conservative, and tied to their traditional values.

Young Volunteers was founded in 2004 by a 16-year-old high school student, Eyup Coskun (Plate 26.2). During his high school years, Eyup belonged to an environmental club and was involved in periodic neighbourhood clean-up and tree planting activities. He started questioning adult-initiated, tokenistic activities and decided to form his own organisation where youth would become the engine of community change towards self-governance, and help to solve significant problems. In 2003, with a group of around ten high school and university students, all from Ayazaga, Eyup went to the mayor of Sisli and asked for help. Their bold initiatives and the potential for funding from European Union grants impressed the mayor, who agreed to provide space and pay for utilities in an apartment building in downtown Ayazaga. The executive board of Young Volunteers, whose ages vary between 16 and 35, elected Eyup as the president and the organisation embarked on a wide range of activities, including setting up branches in a number of cities beyond Istanbul and forming a membership in Ankara, the capital, to enable easier communication and follow-up with regard to project proposals at the seat of the central government.

One of the first and most highly profiled activities of the organisation was to establish the 'People's Assembly of Ayazaga', attended by 550 people from the



Plate 26.1 Ayazaga. Copyright: the authors and children of Ayazaga



Plate 26.2 Eyup Coskun and children of Ayazaga. Copyright: Fahriye Sancar

neighbourhood and where they discussed neighbourhood issues and problems and formed a dozen committees to work on them.

It is unclear whether these committees achieved tangible results on the ground. Nevertheless this initiative must have played an important role in the neighbourhood's embracing the youth organisation as its own. In the following years, Young Volunteers focused on a variety of projects that were national, regional and local in scope. Another highly profiled project that was funded by the European Union focused on alleviating hit-and-run gangs and drug abuse among youth in Istanbul. In these projects the organisation solicited the participation of adults, experts from university faculties, representatives from relevant government agencies and elected officials. In a related project it successfully organised a retreat (on the Black Sea coast), with a series of workshops and panel discussions with participation of youth offenders and volunteer youth from Turkey and European countries. A particularly unique category of activities involved school restoration and library projects in their parents' and grandparents' home towns in the Black Sea region. At the national level, Young Volunteers developed links with international youth to learn from each other's experiences and to contribute to multicultural understanding. Again, whether any of these activities are sustainable in the long term, or how lasting or broad their impacts are, remains to be seen.

Activities of Young Volunteers at the local level have been the most enduring, with tangible impacts. They established free preparatory courses for high school and university entrance exams for children and youth who cannot afford to pay for private courses. The after-school and weekend programme, where the volunteers help Ayazaga children with their academic work, has close to 200 registered students, more than 50 per cent of whom are girls. Seasonal environmental programmes are also part of the after-school activities. According to a media report, these educational programmes helped to improve Ayazaga children's academic performance (Salman 2006). We observed that a core of fifteen to twenty children (ages 8 to 12) come to the 'association place' daily to help out with the chores and take care of the space. This type of dedication shows that ongoing activities with and for the neighbourhood generate a sense of place and ownership. Similarly, in a participatory photography study with the children who use the facilities, we

found that they are highly perceptive and knowledgeable about physical, social and economic problems in their own neighbourhoods, sensitive to issues of children in other parts of the city and capable of finding solutions to these problems. They were enthusiastic about the prospects of improving their environments and confident of their own abilities (Plate 26.3).

The organisation recruits volunteers from the private university in Ayazaga, thus helping to integrate the otherwise insular campus into the neighbourhood. A recent project to tackle land tenure and property ownership in Ayazaga was scheduled to take place on campus facilities but was thwarted at the last minute by 'the authorities'. As we will discuss in the next section, local activities that arguably have the most impact have turned out to be the most controversial, to the point of threatening the organisation's very existence.

Drivers of and challenges to success

In reviewing the activities and impacts of the organisation, we observed that the Young Volunteers Association is unique in several aspects when compared to other youth organisations in Turkey. First, it was initiated and is governed by youth. Second, it represents disadvantaged youth from low-income families. Third, it is based in a low-income *gecekondu* (squatter) neighbourhood. Fourth, its activities include provision of services for the neighbourhood children, and other place-based initiatives meaningful to the residents. In our interviews we asked Eyup Coskun, the founding leader of the organisation, and Kerem Ates, a founding member, to articulate the reasons for the successes and describe the main challenges they face.

Kerem Ates (currently the leader of a national environmental youth organisation) noted that other youth organisations do not function properly because leadership positions are often distributed arbitrarily. Only those young individuals, such as Eyup, who know local issues well and who have developed strong attachments to their neighbourhoods and cities can be successful as leaders. He added that developing competence by doing issue-specific projects is a helpful strategy. For instance, Eyup, who had worked previously on the issue of youth crime, initiated and directed projects that were related to alleviating hit-and-run youth gangs and



Plate 26.3 The environmental club: taking care of local places. Copyright: the authors

drug abuse among youth in Istanbul. First-hand knowledge of the local environment, building on previous experiences, enthusiasm for changing the condition of disadvantaged youth, and the learning and practice environment offered by the organisation have led to the success of the Young Volunteers' activities.

Eyup Coskun explained that one of the most important principles of practice they had adopted was to be politically and ideologically neutral in guiding their members, and instead to aim only to develop their skills. He stressed that the organisation has been especially careful to be inclusive in its membership and provision of services:

Everybody is welcome, regardless of their political views or ethnic backgrounds, but has to respect others. No one can use the organisation as a platform to advance some political agenda. People come here to fulfil their social responsibility.

Thus, because of its distant stance towards political parties, equal attitude towards children from different ethnic, age and gender backgrounds, proficient knowledge of local issues, and intent to improve and shape the neighbourhood, the Young Volunteers established a strong relationship of trust with the local residents. Another strategy for success was intergenerational collaboration (Plate 26.4). Some of the executive members of the organisation are adults who have experience with social development projects. These people did not take on leadership functions, but helped Eyup and his young colleagues with project proposals, grant writing and networking.

Referring to the formative years of the association, Kerem Ates stated that:

Although there were some adults in the executive board, all of the leading actors and the event planners and organisers were youth. Adults were there only for guiding the youth. Almost everything was done by the young members.

All these factors enhanced the effectiveness of project interventions at the local level.



Plate 26.4 Intergenerational collaboration. Copyright: the authors

Maintaining good relationships with the municipal government and the mayor was another key factor in helping young activists to move forward. During the formative phases, the mayor supported the organisation by providing space in a central location adjacent to other community facilities such as community courses for women, a computer-literacy training room and community day care. Local officials participated in some of the projects, such as the people's assembly project. However, the organisation's policy of staying away from local politics became a sore point in its relationship with the mayor, whose party had received slightly less than 50 per cent of the votes in Ayazaga precinct during the last local elections. When we visited the organisation in 2006, unlike the year before, communication with the mayor had reached breaking point and Young Volunteers was asked to leave the premises. It all started when the mayor fixed a signboard to the entrance of the apartment with the name of the organisation, followed by the name of the municipality. This was read by neighbourhood residents who had voted for the competing party as allegiance to the mayor's political party; while expected the organisation to provide services regardless of the availability of space or resources, since they now perceived it to be part of the municipality. Youth leaders took the sign down and the mayor retaliated by asking them to leave the building. Opposing factions in the neighbourhood tried to take advantage of the conflict and to buy off the organisation by offering new space, but fortunately the municipality had the foresight to back down, and the organisation continued to operate in its original location as an independent entity. This experience demonstrates the inherent tension between elected officials and youth organisations that operate at the local level in contexts where local elections are dominated by party politics, as they are in Turkey.

Engaging in local issues, while essential for youth organisations, can also be a source of conflict, especially when the discussion threatens powerful interests. This was apparently the case when the Young Volunteers decided to organise a day-long panel workshop about land tenure and property ownership. The issue of secure tenure is arguably the most important and sensitive issue in Ayazaga, a squatter neighbourhood surrounded by high-value property and destined to become the next large swathe of urban redevelopment. This initiative was thwarted by closing off the venue (the auditorium of the university) at the last minute, allegedly because an of electric power cut.

Finally, all youth organisations are faced with the challenge of filling leadership positions, since their leaders are obliged to pass on the torch when they grow up. The terms of office for these organisations are much shorter than for any other public service. This is even more challenging in Turkey, where military service is compulsory for all aged 18 years or older, unless deferred by enrolment in higher education. Youth often define their attachment to an organisation in terms of their relationship with a caring, experienced leader (Pittman 1992). When a leader transfers his/her position to another member of the organisation, the relationships formed over time between the leader, the youth and the local residents are lost, leading to frustration and a loss of confidence among the members (Matthews 2001). When Eyup left the organisation in 2006 (only two years after its establishment) to perform his military service, he did leave other members in his place and the organisation survived his absence, even though it was less active during that year.

Conclusion: place as a central concept for youth organising

During our interview, Eyup Coskun told the story of how the organisation found its place:

They offered us space in a nice building located in central Nisantasi. We did not accept it. We said, ‘What kind of problems do the wealthy folks in Nisantasi have? Maybe traffic congestion?’ Let them solve it on their own. In other words, we wanted to begin a movement for development here in our own backyard. We can instigate our projects from this place and reach out. And that is how we began. If we can solve problems here, we can do the same anywhere. This is our context where we can learn.

When we review the experiences of the Young Volunteers we find that *place* emerges as a central concept. When a youth organisation is clearly bound to a particular place, its membership, leaders, activities and choice of projects are local and specific to that place but may represent a broad range of socio-economic and environmental issues rather than narrowly defined interests or problems. Being place focused compels the organisation to establish and rely on local resources and develop social capital. Intergenerational collaboration is a natural driving force *and* an outcome. Youth servicing the children of the neighbourhood is an obvious strategy that creates a multitude of positive outcomes, including establishing trust and nurturing future youth leaders. The physical environment becomes salient and significant when an organisation is place based. Activities and projects begin to have explicit spatial components. Heightened sensitivity towards the immediate environment, in turn, enhances sense of place, desire for care and improvement, and intensifies attachment to place (Plate 26.5).

Developing place-specific competence often translates into understanding and effective participation elsewhere and begins to transcend the narrow confines of



Plate 26.5 Children annotating place pictures. Copyright: the archives of Young Volunteers

particular locales. Having a place to originate from facilitates branching out, both in sense of establishing links or sub-units and in crafting approaches to deal with national or global issues and problems.

On the other hand, being place bound creates tensions and a host of challenges. Unless the organisation can deal with these effectively, instead of realising the benefits, the process may result in failure or marginalisation of the organisation. A politically neutral stance and assuring ethnic and value diversity are essential for establishing relationships based on trust with the non-political actors. However, this is likely to disappoint local elected officials, especially if party politics (and patronage) is strong in municipal elections. Since place-bound youth organisations are likely to depend on allocation of resources by local government, they run the risk of losing financial support when they engage sensitive issues. The experiences of Volunteer Youth in Ayazaga underscore the complexities of youth involvement in urban planning. Current efforts largely focus on capturing the youth voice and, in so doing, help them become active and engaged citizens (Race and Torma 1998). More ambitious initiatives aim at establishing youth councils within the municipal government. We are doubtful that such a strategy would be in the best interests of youth or the public if adopted in a place such as Ayazaga, where there is a real danger of co-optation. Perhaps the strategy of building trust, serving local needs and maintaining neutrality, if practised consistently and for a significant period of time by a youth organisation, may establish it as an independent voice that the planning agencies do not dare to ignore.

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