



Hicmet photo

Ancient tradition of giving reborn

ŞAFAK TİMUR - Turkish Daily News

When one first looks at the philanthropy community in Turkey, it is easy to recognize that it is a very young grouping just getting its start in the development world, when compared to those philanthropies outside of Turkey. Indeed, statistics seem to prove this. The total assets of 135 tax-exempt foundations in Turkey, constituting 85 percent of the largest foundations, is some "105 billion. The total assets of European foundations today is estimated at "70 trillion.

Yet, Turkey has inherited a centuries-old history of great Ottoman philanthropy. While resurrecting and integrating it into the modern era of philanthropy with new regulations, Turkey still maintains a vivid and developing charitable sector, as both activists and professionals agree.

"There is a leap in Turkey as civil society is participating much more in our social lives while the third sector, especially the foundation sector, is about to explode," said Üstün Ergüder, the chairman of the Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (TÜSEV), in an exclusive interview with the Turkish Daily News. Some holdings, such as Sabancı, Koç and Doğan, jumped quickly ahead by restructuring their foundations, which were

To help alleviate consumer claustrophobia, building technology for the modern shopping malls has become more and more advanced, and Panora is leading the way into this new world of shopping centers. Panora has been constructed with an emphasis on new materials and green space.

like a secondary operation of their holdings, bringing a renewed purpose and identity to the foundation and transferring successful staff to work in the foundations, Ergüder said. The number of people who want to establish foundations and are asking for assistance from TÜSEV is increasing, he said, which is leading to a new service area for the organization: counseling organizations. Rather than merely reviewing statistical information about the number of foundations in Turkey, these are positive indicators that the sector is developing, according to Ergüder.

Sure enough, a rapidly developing civil society has recently taken its place in Turkey. The United Nations Human Settlement Program's meeting, Habitat II, gathered national and international NGOs together in Istanbul in 1996. The meeting, according to activists, created an atmosphere of awareness within the society as it became understood that Turkish society could improve. Also, the accession process in Turkey towards European Union membership positively affected civil society programs as well, through the impact of EU funds dedicated to various projects in Turkey. Further, the tragic disaster of the 1999 Marmara Earthquake fundamentally inaugurated a process, as civil society became newly self confident and trusted within the society. "People reached those places where the state could not reach," Ergüder noted.

Both the perspective of the state towards civil society and the civil society itself is changing, according to Ergüder. The mainstream ideology in Turkey, of predominantly being dependent upon the state, resulted in people not organizing themselves to solve societal problems. However, things are changing. The contribution of civil society in solving local problems has increased, Ergüder said. "There is a return to the Ottoman period," he believes.

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Ancient tradition gets a contemporary face

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In an atmosphere like that, the 1990s stood out as a critical period for foundations in Turkey. The number of officially registered foundations greatly increased in the first half of the 1990s, as research about the financial conditions of Turkish foundations by Davut Aydın from Anadolu University discloses. While the number of registered foundations was 145 in 1990, it reached 439 by 1996, and has declined somewhat since. The main reason for this increase, according to Aydın, is the movement by those people who wanted to found associations, to be organized in the form of a foundation to avoid the legal procedures for establishing an association. This situation affected the foundations in a negative way, also, Ergüder said.

However, the 1990s is also positively marked by the philanthropy of civil society as a whole in Turkey. Filiz Bikmen, the former adviser to the board in TÜSEV and the current manager of the institutional development and programs in Sabancı Vakfı, regards the 1990s as "a new period of growth" for foundations, and says Turkey is, "at the brink of a third golden age," in an article published in the quarterly, Effect.

From hardware to software

One of the main changes that both Bikmen and Ergüder highlighted is the change from support for "hardware," meaning buildings and facilities, or individual support in the form of educational scholarships, to "software," that is to say needs like programs addressing policy issues. For instance, the Education Reform Initiative supported by a consortium of foundations and NGOs, is an example of software needs. "TÜSEV is a catalyst in this process to move from hardware to software," Ergüder said.

The Mother and Child Health Foundation (AÇEV), Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), Society Volunteers Foundation (TOG), Turkish Foundation for Reforestation, and Protection of Natural Habitats and Combating of Soil Erosion (TEMA) are among the well-known foundations that can be examples of software philanthropic activities. Rather than investing in buildings, investing in what is inside the building is critical, Ergüder said. "That is what we encourage," he noted.

A different figure

İbrahim Betil, founder of the well-known Education Volunteers Foundation and the TOG, stands out as a different figure in Turkish charity work, representing a much more software kind of philanthropy. "I have a different approach for philanthropy," he said, rather than one-sided charity work it is an approach to mobilize civil responsibility, sensibility and volunteerism. For instance, the Neighborhood Disaster Volunteers Foundation (MAG) represents a great example of mobilizing civil sensibility, according to Betil. It is a new foundation that was established to create groups of volunteers in each neighborhood and make them ready for a possible disaster like an earthquake. Foundations, such as TEMA and TESEV, move beyond philanthropy and encourages civil participation, Betil said.

Betil also believes that there will be a move towards this kind of foundation understanding with the rise of participatory democracy throughout the world in the 21st century. "NGOs have a mission to act as a bridge between the electorate and the elected," he said.

The most important goals of foundations and NGOs should be creating social sensibility, transparency, dependency and accountability, according to Betil. He also believes that great amounts of grant money is an impediment in maintaining the continuity of foundations. Because of this, TOG prefers not to take very large amounts of grants but, rather, smaller ones. When large amounts of money are donated to the foundation, they prefer it be distributed in smaller amounts during a longer time period to sustain continuity.

Tradition goes on, too

Although there is a shift in software support, the tradition of charity and hardware support, is still strong in Turkey. From the 1960s onwards, those traditional foundations were established mainly by industrialists in Turkey and funds channeled for those hardware needs averaged some 30 million per year. One of the major contributions of that type of charity assured that thousands of students had greater access to education through countless educational facilities including dormitories, schools and universities, along with scholarships. Almost one-third of Turkey's universities have been built and operated by private foundations. Sabancı and Koç universities, together with Bilkent, are the first foundation universities in Turkey and most often recognized by the public.

The Hüsnü Özyeğin foundation is a successful example of a traditional hardware charity charged with building and repairing 23 school buildings and 27 dormitories around Anatolia, including a new university in Istanbul. Focusing on education as an area of charity work, the foundation supports some 10,000 university students with free scholarships.

"Since 1990, the Finans Foundation by Hüsnü Özyeğin [the former owner of Finans Bank]...seeks to contribute to education in Turkey, not to find solutions to educational problems," said Ali Nazım Belger, the vice chairman of the foundation. "Finding solutions is the responsibility of the state. NGOs or foundations could not solve the issues that the Turkish Republic could not solve," said Belger, who is a former ambassador as well, adding that this might sound like an archaic thought, but he and others were raised with this belief.

However, the Hüsnü Özyeğin foundation, is also preparing itself to move towards software charity work. The foundation is not that alien to software work, Belger said. Maintaining a dialogue with the Education Reform Initiative, the foundation now looks for ways of contributing to the personal development of those students continuing their education in Özyeğin's schools. "We are aware that we are not finished by establishing only the substructure," said Aslı Silahdaroğlu, the project specialist for the foundation. However, the need of the Anatolia for substructure still exists, Belger said. The foundation plans to reach their target of building one hundred girls' dormitories and then move on to software charity work.



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Chairman
Prof. Üstün Ergüder