Turkey Country Profile

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Turkish civil society has gone through a significant era of transformation in the last decade and continues to do so. The turn of the millennium came with some catalyzing events for the sector, which resulted in an increase in civil society organizations (CSOs) quality and quantity, as well as importance in the public realm. Yet, civil society in Turkey is still in its nascent stages and presents more weaknesses than strengths.

Civic Participation

Level of participation in civil society – be it through activism, membership, volunteering or donations – remains rather low in Turkey. Although there is a positive trend in membership and volunteering rates in recent years, the majority of the population remains detached from civil society. Yet, depth of civil participation remains rather high, meaning those that participate do so rather intensely.

CSO’s Organizational Strengths and Weaknesses

Insufficient human and financial resources, along with a lack of communication and cooperation are the greatest weaknesses of CSOs, presenting obstacles to mobilization. Only 20% of CSOs employ professionals and the majority (60%) operates with 6 to 20 volunteers. On the other hand, technological resources and access to support organizations have developed over the years and present great potential. Governance and transparency levels are also rather weak, practiced by only a few large CSOs that enjoy international funding.

Relations with Public and Private Sectors

With the clarification and deepening of Turkey’s EU integration process since 2001, governments have been eager to conform to EU demands; legislative reform packages involving amendments concerning civil society have passed; new and vast financial resources for civil society emerged; accompanied by new channels to affect policy making at the national and EU levels.

While reforms to laws and regulations demonstrate the will to grant civil society more autonomy, it seems actual practice and the mindsets of some government agencies are not comfortable with these changes yet. In addition, laws and regulations continue to express vague language, increasing the discretionary powers of government authorities to decrease the autonomy of civil society. Finally, the state only seeks to dialogue with a small sub-set of CSOs on an ad hoc basis. There are still no defined or institutionalized terms and rules of engagement, and government funding to civil society is quite minimal.

Private Sector and civil society relations are improving, as companies in Turkey appear to be increasingly aware of their role as donors and supporters of CSOs. However, they are lacking sound strategic practices in making grants and working with CSOs beyond a ‘one-off’
sponsorship level. Regional differences are also an issue, while some regions enjoy great support from local companies, others receive almost no funding from local private sector.

As a result, the major source of funding for CSOs is not the local private sector or government, but rather international donors. The major source of funding for CSOs in Turkey continues to be the EU. Several Consulates (such as the Dutch, USA, British and Swedish), international aid agencies and some American and European foundations are also giving grants on a project basis.

**Service Delivery and Policy Impact**

Given the relatively nascent stage of the sector overall, a handful of CSOs are demonstrating an impressive ability to respond to societal needs in education, health and other areas. There are also successful examples of public-private partnerships.

Policy impact remains rather low despite the increasing number of CSO initiatives on a broad array of issues from freedom of speech to torture and right to trial, women’s rights, and children’s rights. Not only are these organizations providing services to disadvantaged groups (e.g. shelters for women and street children, legal aid); they also take active positions on a number of policies affecting their target populations.