

**Between East and West**  
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**Turkey is currently in the throes of fundamental social and economic transformation, embracing a vision of a strengthened democracy and inclusion in an enlarged Europe. As a result of rapid reforms – many of which are due to European Union pre-accession criteria – fundamental changes in Turkey's civil society are taking place. The wave of optimism accompanying these reforms notwithstanding, there is still much to be done to ensure sustainable development and future growth of civil society and philanthropy in Turkey. This article looks at some of the key changes in civil society infrastructure that will be needed.**

Recent reforms have brought much needed momentum to the public, private and third sector. Civil society is increasingly mentioned in the media, corporate and individual donations are on the rise, and volunteerism now features as an important part of leading university curricula and business culture. Public officials are also more aware of the role and value of civic organizations, and citizens are keen to mobilize to address key issues.

Numerically speaking, civil society is already a significant force in the country. Today Turkey has over 152,000 associations, 4,500 'new' foundations and 5,000 'old' (pre-Republic) foundations inherited with the Ottoman tradition of philanthropy. The old foundations, mainly mosques, libraries and fountains, form a significant part of the cultural heritage of Turkey and are now administered by the state's Foundations Directorate (since the majority of their descendants have passed away). As the only autonomous sphere that existed during the Empire, these foundations have provoked debates on whether they constituted a form of 'Islamic' civil society.

Today's civil society organizations have their roots in the Republican Era, which allowed development of new frameworks for associations and foundations. Over the past decade, these organizations – whether NGOs or foundations (almost all Turkish foundations are operating foundations) – have developed rapidly, in terms of number, capacity and activity. From the first Foundations Forum of the UN Habitat II meeting in 1996 to the devastating earthquake in 1999, and through the recent EU accession movement, the civic sector has emerged as a vibrant and dynamic force in modern Turkish society.

However exciting this era may be, it is important to note that major changes will be needed if civil society institutions, NGOs and foundations are to play an increasingly strategic role in Turkey:

- legislative and regulatory reforms, in the context of a new contract between state and civil society;
- changes in the role of foundations, which will need to shift from charity to philanthropy and begin to take on a grantmaking role;
- nurturing giving by companies, the new actors in Turkish philanthropy.

**A new contract between state and civil society**

The impact of pre-accession criteria has created significant leverage in promoting changes in laws governing NGOs. Although there has definitely been some progress in reforms, for example with regard to freedom of association and expression, fundamental changes in the 'system' are still required to promote better state-NGO relations. These changes are not limited to law reforms, but extend toward translating new laws into practice. Due to historically strained relationships between public officials and civil society, a new contract must be developed, based on mutual trust and cooperation.

As other Central and Eastern European countries are now doing, Turkey must focus its attention on developing appropriate mechanisms for managing state regulatory and oversight functions (e.g. the Croatian Office for Cooperation with NGOs). Of course, NGOs have a critical role to play in developing these new systems. Paradigms are slowly shifting as NGOs and public officials realize that new solutions to old problems will develop through dialogue and joint cooperation. Thus a new mandate for policy analysis and support for regulatory reform has emerged for NGOs, while public officials are learning to clear blocked channels of communication with civic organizations.

One positive development is the recent creation of a joint commission on human rights which brings together leading CSOs to monitor implementation of human rights-related criteria. Alongside other formal mechanisms, it helps foster development of a new contract between the state and civil society. Hopefully additional multi-stakeholder commissions will emerge in the near future.

**Changes in the role of foundations**

The practice of charity is deep-rooted and widespread in Turkey, owing much to Islamic teachings and ideals, represented by mechanisms such as *zekat* (alms giving) and the *vakif* (foundation). Charity and giving have manifested themselves over time in a number of ways, formally and informally, but have always retained as their basis a deep concern for the welfare of communities and society at large. Indeed, it was the *vakif*-owned caravanserais, inns, marketplaces and bridges that maintained the trade routes

between east and west for centuries. Their functionally critical role was augmented by the religious significance given to charitable activities.

The transition from Empire to Republic fundamentally changed many aspects of Turkish society – with ideas and forms of philanthropy a significant part of this transformation. In fact, an entirely new legal framework and governing structure was developed for foundations formed in the Republican era. As a result, while the pervasiveness of charity in modern Turkey, at personal and institutional level, is still clear, the scope for new foundations to play the extensive role that their predecessors did during the Empire has been severely curtailed. When state bodies assumed the role of main provider of public goods, private providers (foundations) were relegated to secondary status.

As Turkey enters another era of socioeconomic reform, 'new' foundations face a different set of challenges with regards to function and purpose (operating vs grantmaking) and realizing the conceptual shift from charity to philanthropy. Though foundations continue to play an important role in providing key services, grantmaking has never been part of the Turkish philanthropic tradition. In addition, 'charity' is still the operative concept for foundations, which continue to allocate significant resources to service provision/bricks and mortar types of activities.

However, Turkish NGOs increasingly require local funding for key projects addressing social change and justice issues. With foundations and NGOs both taking on an operational role, competition for funding and overlapping of activities create a serious obstacle. Foundations have the financial capacity to provide this support, but require examples of good practice and awareness-building if they are to consider grantmaking as a possible method of allocating funding to balance the development of the sector. Equally if not more critical, foundations must begin to appreciate the potential of philanthropy to go beyond 'helping' to empowering communities. It is only then that the practices and tools of grantmaking can yield the transformative outcomes that encompass social justice.

### **The new philanthropists**

In the last few years, the increase in NGO activity and momentum has attracted the attention of companies, which have started to make donations and develop joint projects with NGOs. Though not quite sophisticated enough to be labelled 'corporate philanthropy programmes', this activity demonstrates the first practice of grantmaking in Turkey and poses significant opportunities for mobilizing local resources for the civic sector.

These opportunities bring new challenges to further develop the local funding sector in Turkey. Companies are an important source of resources, which makes it even more important to develop targeted programmes to promote donor awareness and skills in grantmaking, and to recognize the strategic value of corporate philanthropy. This will harness the momentum and regulate practices so that the funding sector can flourish.

### **Conclusion**

Turkey is at a pivotal point of socioeconomic transition, which creates a new mandate for civil society as well as exciting opportunities for increased civic participation. New paradigms of state-NGO relations, philanthropic approaches and local funding sources are emerging, which must be further strengthened with models of best practice to apply in the local context.

The key challenges highlighted in this article address some of the core infrastructure issues Turkey's third sector faces as it rushes to meet the changing needs of its citizens, participate in the rapid reform processes, and, above all, become part of the New Europe. Although there have been an increasing number of new initiatives to address issues of NGO capacity-building in the last five years, initiatives related to developing the sector's infrastructure have remained relatively small-scale. Given the current conditions and climate for change, it is even more important to expand their scope to address how the third sector, in its 'new' form, will relate to the public and private sectors and leverage the current momentum to create a sustainable future.

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