

The Spirit of Volunteerism

Re-building Civil Society and Delivering Jobs through
Youth Networks in Turkey

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The ICTD field is filled with individual success stories extolling the benefits of ICT access and fluency. These stories are often highly influential because they are rhetorically powerful, memorable narratives that create lasting frames to contextualize and interpret other data. Unfortunately, they are often driven by the demands of public relations as opposed to rigorous analysis.

When the goal is to share the story of a super star and tug heart strings for PR purposes, important details can be omitted. To understand how ICT programs work for *typical* trainees, to spread narratives that illuminate deeper dynamics and to amplify broadly useful lessons, stories should be researched and constructed with intention and rigor.

CIS is developing a methodology and story series that attempts to tap the rhetorical and qualitative explanatory power of detailed, contextualized, and personalized ICT case studies. While tension may sometimes exist between the PR desire to feature certain cases of success and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, a methodology built on intensive questioning and storytelling rich in the right details can uncover and communicate evidence of successful programs.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools and by training NGO managers and grant makers in these techniques, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the PR needs of NGOs and donors with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities. Properly constructed, evidence-based stories can serve the ends of rigorous analysis and public relations.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape.

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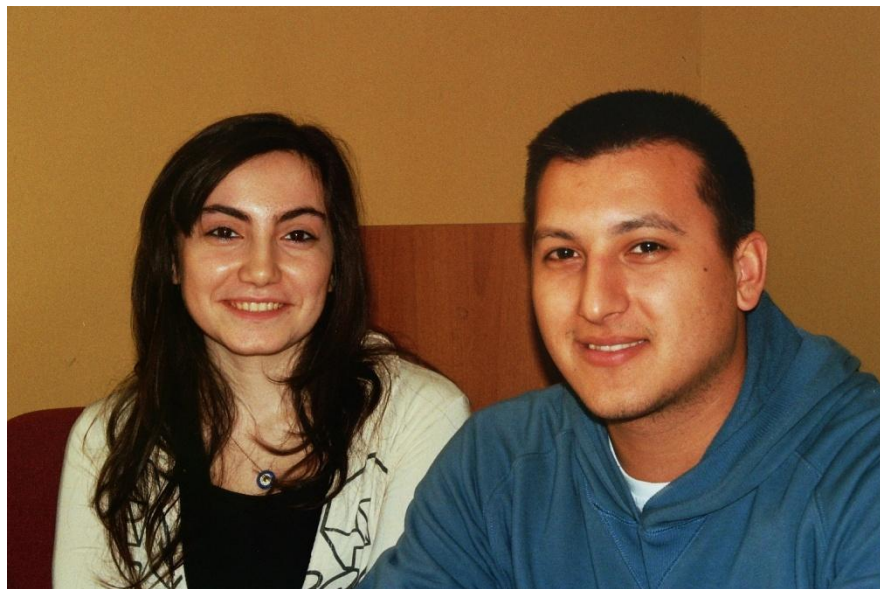
Neslian and Said are part of the one-two punch that marks a growing trend of volunteerism in cities and towns across Turkey. The first punch: dedicate yourself to a network of youth organizations as a trainer in ICT skills, building the capacity of thousands of young people to better compete in the changing Turkish economy. The second punch: after a couple of years of teaching and learning, trade the valuable work experience and fresh e-skills for a solid profession of your own.

For Neslian Sahin the result is a job as a graphic designer at *Hurriyet*, one of the leading national newspapers based in Istanbul – the cosmopolitan seaside city that bridges Europe and Asia. Despite her heavy workweek and dizzying deadlines at the paper, Neslian won't leave her volunteer roots far behind. Every Saturday she rejoins her old telecenter to continue training, pro bono.

And for Said Cetin, the ICT skills and training experience have translated into a job in the international development sector. He now works as a coordinator for the United Nations Population Fund. Asked about the relevance of his new e-skills on the job, Said laughs.

PowerPoint? "Every week, I have to create new PowerPoints." They have to be interesting too, he

explains, or the youth he works with will get bored. Said uses Windows Media Player to insert films into his presentations, including a recent PSA produced for the UN project.



Neslian Sahin, a master trainer at Istanbul-based Youth for Habitat (left), and her former student Said Cetin. Neslian is now a graphic designer at one of Turkey's leading national newspapers, Hurriyet. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr> After a year and a half as a student and trainer at Youth for Habitat, Said then landed a job at the United Nations Population Fund.

Before becoming a student and trainer of e-skills at the national association Youth for Habitat, Said's competency was limited to Word. A year and a half later, when he interviewed for the job at the UN, and then heard back in an email from the hiring coordinator, he wasn't surprised to receive an offer. "I already knew I got the job," Said recalled. "I just knew." The employability generated by Youth for Habitat isn't just about the ICT mastery, he insists. The newfound knowledge is a necessary element, but other qualities complete the picture: "volunteer skills, self-esteem, and communication networks" are essential to making the ready professional, according to Said.

Like Neslian, Said's new success on the job market has not severed his ties with his old team. Despite his excellent salary and prestigious position he continues to volunteer at Youth for Habitat, even attending long weekend conferences to strengthen the youth association that helped create him.

Youth Network, Jobs Network

The home base – from which Neslian and Said refuse to stray too far – is an Istanbul-anchored network of 200 volunteer trainers and telecenter managers working in 43 cities across the country. Together the volunteers and their centers form an affiliation reaching many key sectors of society: local government, trade unions, industry, schools, and local youth councils. This multi-faceted approach builds communication with important stakeholders in the near term, and also leads to "sustainable development through local participation" in the long run, according to association director Basak Demir.



An ancient city with rich culture and traditions, Istanbul is home base to the national network Youth for Habitat. ICT training programs are a centerpiece of the association, delivering e-skills to 11,000 graduates in the past two and a half years.

Evidence of the network's impact is unmistakable: 11,000 people have been trained in ICT skills in the past two and a half years. And Neslian and Said are not the only team members to find work with their new skills.

When asked about the jobs impact, Neslian, the graphic designer at the national daily *Hurriyet*, thinks back to the most recent five-week ICT course she taught at Youth for Habitat. The class was made up of about ten high school graduates who did not have the opportunity to attend university, and needed vocational and technical training

to find work. The students were not computer novices, they had some background, and they specifically requested training in certain programs like Excel in order to build secretarial skills. Immediately after the course, three found work: one in marketing firm, one as a registrar in a hospital, and another as a record keeper with a tax office. This number of recent graduates finding employment – roughly 30% – is typical for general NGO ICT training programs directed at the unemployed. What sets Youth for Habitat

apart is the strong network it has established nationwide. A network that continues to nourish graduates after its training programs through job mentoring, friendships, and activist campaigns.

The three examples Neslian recounted did not seem unusual to Said. "It is normal," he insisted. "Every employer is looking for IT skills, every small shop needs them." Said added that the certificate from Youth for Habitat and Microsoft is credible evidence of an

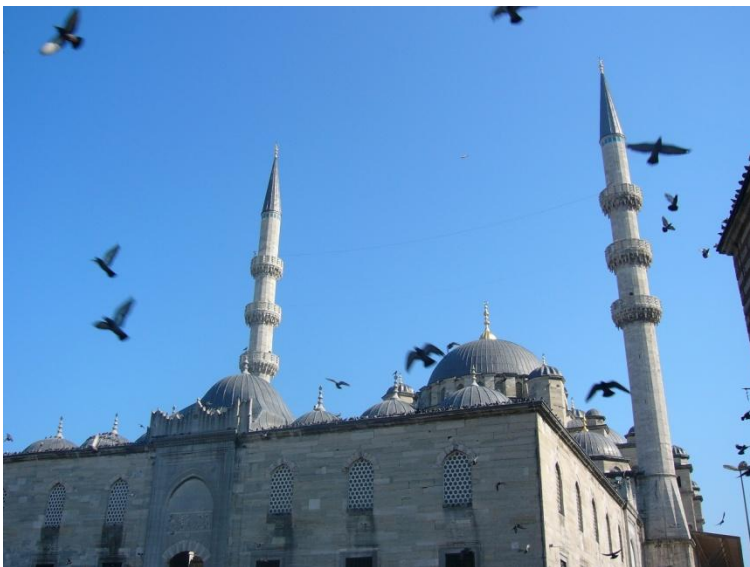
"Every employer is looking for IT skills, every small shop needs them"... the certificate from Youth for Habitat and Microsoft is credible evidence of an applicant's professionalism: "the paper means something" to these prospective employers.

Said Cetin, former Youth for Habitat trainee

applicant's professionalism: "the paper means something" to these prospective employers. But Said is not satisfied with the training program's results, insisting that they need to do more, including instruction in CV writing, job searches, and negotiation skills. The association has recently begun such additional employment skills training, expanding its curriculum to include these skills after looking at the results of a pilot program.

21st Century Turkey

The director of Youth for Habitat, Basak Demir, puts these examples of newfound jobs into a broader cultural and historical context for Turkey. "There is a high level of unemployment," Basak explains, and civil society has not always been a vigorous agent of change to address such problems. In 1980 a



Turkey is a nation undergoing a significant social and economic change. High unemployment and a vast need for e-skills in the marketplace are twin problems facing the nation. ICT skills may be part of the answer to both problems.

military coup resulted in twelve years of martial law, a period in which the freedom of assembly was banned. As a result, civic organizations were all but snuffed out. Even after the lifting of the ban on assembly in 1992, an entire generation of Turkish youth had unlearned grassroots citizenship. Even the word "organization" continued to be greeted with mistrust.

Slowly, civil society began to be rebuilt. In 2002 Youth for Habitat was underway, developing its networks with local youth councils and municipalities, and tapping into the energy of young people to bring new resources to the changing marketplace. Basak

emphasizes that the development of modern workforce skills is not enough to strengthen her society:

“the culture of volunteerism is important for Turkey. Especially for young people because we are a nation in transition.”

The transition is far from complete, and – like in many nations – its direction is uncertain. One might say the future of Turkey is developing one youth at a time.

Neslian recalled the story of one of her recent graduates – the young woman hired at the marketing firm – as an example of the transition, and the clash of cultures, underway in 21st Century Turkey. The former student is now well-situated at the Marketing and International Trade Office in the Karakol district of Istanbul. She has a full-time job with a good salary at twice the minimum wage, as well as retirement benefits and health insurance. But getting there was far from easy.

“The student had clear pressure on her from home,” Neslian remembered. “On the third day she said ‘I want to tell you something’ and then began to cry. ‘Help me, if I don’t learn this I will be put in a marriage with an older man.’” Arranged marriages are referred to as a *gorucu usulu* – roughly translated as a blind date, or literally as “the one who watches you” – and are not uncommon in modern Turkey. This young student was facing an ultimatum from her father: get a job or get married.

Neslian provided the extra tutoring the woman needed, and a compassionate ear, and together they made it through. Word and Excel were the emphases in their work together, and slowly over the five week course Neslian drew out the confidence in her student, and helped guide her to financial independence.

Speaking not only of the case of the young woman at the Karakol marketing firm, but of the program as a whole, Neslian says feedback from students is a key to the organization’s continuing development. “These people expect a lot from us, they need to be listened to” she says. The feedback is actively sought, and it translates into new elements for course curriculum and new directions for the network as a whole. The team describes its organization as “an ecosystem” – one that receives inputs from students, from Microsoft partners, and from studies on youth and employment such as a recent national analysis by the organization Social Impact.

Amending the Constitution

Together, this ongoing feedback from clients – and advice from trade unions and industry – forms a strategic program with precision tactics. When housewives studying Windows Office began to explain that they were concerned about their kids’ unregulated use of the Internet, the association responded by offering training in the Online Safety and Security program. When youth around the country began to question why the age of eligibility for holding elected office is 30 rather than 25, Youth for Habitat set out to change the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey. In two months, it was changed.

Basak Demir attributes the success of the campaign in large part to ICT development. “At the same time there were these parallel movements,” Basak recalls: the growing consensus among youth that the age for election was too high, and the growth in e-skills training, telecenters, and youth activism that infused the consensus. In the world of politics and mass media, the time horizon for making change is extremely

short. Youth for Habitat focused their energy on the campaign for an intensive two months, the centerpiece of which was gathering signatures for a petition.

When asking Basak about the involvement of her organization, the scale of the effort became clear. “So how many people were involved? Hundreds?”

Basak exploded in disbelief, “Oh, c’mon!” And then turned to a colleague, “How many was it?” Then back to the questioner, “Well, the petition *alone* had over 100,000 signatories...” Youth for Habitat, it seems, is more than just the two hundred volunteers, and more than its 11,000 graduates in ICT. It is a movement. A movement that should not be confused as an agent of external pressure, but instead seen as a partnership with local government and a provider of a valuable resource to the changing Turkish economy: a skilled and motivated modern workforce.

Pressed about the role of ICT development in the nationwide campaign, the obvious slowly became clear. Basak listed the ways that ICT was essential to the effort. Email was the central nervous system, enabling fellow campaigners to stay in touch with one another and the press. Digital media put a face on the campaign, bringing the issue to life through photos and footage sent to and among media



In between courses, one of the Istanbul training rooms where students learn the Microsoft platform and its applications, as well as leadership and advocacy skills to better exercise their citizenship.

outlets. Scanners became documentation and dissemination tools, transforming copies of the petitions into digital evidence, which was then emailed to members of the Turkish National Assembly. The list went on and on.

After the campaign was complete it took the National Assembly just ten days, and the law was passed. “This is the first time,” Basak explained. “All the legal changes were done from the top down in Turkey, and now you see changes from down to the top.”

Staying True to the Volunteer Roots

The nationwide impact of ICT training in Turkey is growing, but it has a long way to go. In a 2004 study the United Nations Development Program concluded that access to computing remained extremely low across Turkey, with only 4% of citizens owning personal computers, and 11% with access to the Internet. While these numbers have since increased to 20%, according to Youth for Habitat, the challenges highlighted by the UNDP remain large.

For an organization, the impulse to expand brings with it both opportunities and risks. Other non-profit ICT training providers struggle with decisions over whether and how to scale up in order to reach a greater number of clients, and to help them fulfill their potential. Youth for Habitat has already made

the decision. Their goal is to extend their reach from their current 43 cities to 81 cities all across Turkey. They are forging new partnerships with schools, local youth councils, community training centers, and government-supported community internet access points. They have a new building – donated by the municipality of Istanbul, and evidence of their good relations with local government – and are now turning it into a future ICT and Leadership Academy.

One way that Youth for Habitat continues to expand while avoiding the hazards of growth is through the spirit of volunteerism. The selflessness of the volunteers is a common theme that emerges in conversations with current and former staff, and it appears to provide a psychic income that enables the team to do their work against tough odds.

With all the successes in the first years of activities, the association still faces significant cultural as well as economic hurdles. Bora, a trainer of management-level government employees in the civil servants program, notes one difficulty facing her generation in Turkey. “In our culture, young people are not very well respected. They are not considered as partners.” Early on in her training, Bora recalled, her middle-aged students were laughing and not paying attention. As the course progressed, however, the students came to realize what she knew and what they didn’t. Slowly Bora earned their respect. In the end she received two internship offers – one in a government accounting office, and one in a private company as a system administrator.

Bora echoed the words of Said, saying: “The impact comes not just from the knowledge of ICT, but from how to deliver these skills.” In the philosophy and practice of Youth for Habitat, the delivery is a mix of technological know-how and selfless dedication – an uncommon partnership. As uncommon as a city with one foot in Europe and the other in Asia. A city with one hand holding the riches and traditions of the past, and the other grasping the new challenges of the 21st Century.

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In South Asia, Mark's research and work focus on the resistance networks of rural Dalits, or "untouchables," with a particular interest in the grassroots campaigns of barefoot lawyers. In Central and Eastern Europe he has worked to improve the transparency and communications of newly developing court systems. Since 2007, Mark has begun conducting fieldwork with the CIS on the economic and social impact of ICT programs in marginalized communities around the world.

Mark has served as a rule of law consultant with the United States Agency for International Development in Eastern Europe, and as a Human Rights Field Mentor with Stanford Law School. He holds a J.D. from the University of Washington, and is a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Communication and Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University.