

## Youth Volunteers in Turkey<sup>1</sup>

The first age group that comes to mind when someone mentions volunteer services in Turkey is the youth and they are expected to volunteer much more than other members of the society. People of working age state that *they cannot find time for volunteering* and retirees mention that *they worked a lot and want to rest now* and as such, they leave the field of volunteering at young people's responsibility.<sup>2</sup> It is possible to say that the social perception of volunteering as young people's job is common in Turkey. The social structure and culture that conceives young people as dynamic, having too much free time, willing to struggle, determined, and idealist plays an important role in the establishment of such association between the youth and volunteering.

Before we touch on the basic issues regarding youth volunteering, it is necessary to bring up matters related to volunteering in Turkey as a whole. Volunteering in Turkey is understood as something interchangeable with concepts such as charity and philanthropy. The differences between said concepts and services are mostly neglected by the general public (Şentürk&Turan, 2016, p. 338). The perception and understanding of volunteering in young people for the most part does not differ from that of society at large. They, too, define works done to provide for and solve the problems of people and nature as volunteering. Volunteering is providing help (material or not) to those in need. In other words, volunteering is understood as a service-based phenomenon. From the historical and social perspective, volunteering is an esteemed value and behaviour. Good deeds done by a person to other beings without involving reciprocity or interest are known as volunteering. Volunteering, which is done selflessly, springs from the belief system and culture of living of a society. In that sense, it is historically related to beliefs and values and constitutes one of the foundations of society's culture of living.

In Turkey, it could be said that the youth perceive volunteerism as rather an individualistic behaviour and a way of helping people or nature, and their links to NGOs, self-organisation, and collective thinking are quite weak. The principal reasons behind the distancing of young people from NGOs include their unfavourable opinions on NGOs, NGO-related safety

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2 It should be emphasised that the participation of elderly and working people in volunteering is on the rise in the last 20 years.

concerns, and the difficulties of teamwork. In this respect, only a small portion of university students and graduates associate volunteering with advocacy and participation. It could be stated that in recent years, more and more young people connect volunteering with advocacy and activism. The fact that some NGOs well-known in Turkey intensively associate volunteering with active citizenship and participation played an important role in this development. As such, it is necessary to realise the individuals' semantic world in certain parts of analyses regarding volunteering. On the other hand, *membership* and *volunteering* significantly differ in Turkey both legally and in practice. Membership in any given organisation does not mean being an active volunteer. It is possible in Turkey to volunteer without an official membership in any institution. A volunteer is a separate status from a member. It comprises solely the relationship and interaction between institutions and volunteers.

A substantial part of Turkish youth in school-age has their experience with volunteering in their university years. According to a TEGV (Turkish Volunteers in Education Foundation) research, participation in volunteering increases with the level of education (Atılğan, Erdoğan, Günim, and Güveli, 2008). On the other hand, one research done on university students<sup>3</sup> shows that volunteering becomes popular in high school. 39,9% of university students have declared that they volunteered in high school, while 34,5% were involved in volunteering during university years. Those who materially supported a person or an institution (either in kind or financially) equalled 60%. While one of every three university students participated in volunteering, two of every three provided material support (Şentürk&Turan, 2016, p. 338, 339). Taking into consideration that volunteering in high school usually involves one-off actions and generally revolves around charity and philanthropy, we could suggest that volunteering among university students is more broadly-based. According to the findings of the said research, most of those who got involved in volunteering during high school continued to do so at the university (Şentürk&Turan, 2016, s. 340).

There is not as of yet any research data from Turkey regarding the volunteering experience of youth after their school years. It could be said that once they begin working after

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<sup>3</sup> In this work, we share research with a relatively wide sample of young people in Turkey. For studies with more limited sample groups, check: (TEGV, 2010; TEGV, 2012; TÜSEV, 2013; Toplum Gönüllüsü Gençlerin Profili, 2015).

graduating from high school or university or they get married, they withdraw from volunteering. Based on the young people's experiences, we could argue that they do not continue volunteering or if they do, their average weekly involvement decreases due to the comparatively high youth unemployment, especially among university graduates and, thus, high competition in their first years on the job market, long working hours, and intensity of life in the metropolis. On the other hand, engagement in volunteering either ceases or decreases also after marriage. In Turkey, factors specific to Turkish family structure such as the closeness of married people with their families, intense relations within the family, having children, and roles taken up in childcare lead to changes in how they spend time. While such sociological aspects haven't been determined in empirical studies yet, they appear in studies with limited sample groups and evaluations conducted with NGO professionals. Marriage and having a child may lead to a pause in volunteering activities or decrease the time dedicated to them. Yurttagüler (2020) shows that the primary reason for young people's involvement in more short-time volunteering is the transition to working life and moving. Due to these changes, young volunteers may end their cooperation with organisations. In Turkey Volunteering Research, it was established that students volunteer for 16 months on average. The fact that participants without a job volunteered for approximately 31 months (2,5 years) shows that the volunteering period depends on employment status as much as on age (Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci, 2020, p. 8). In other research conducted in 2012, it was determined that young people volunteer in one organisation for 2 years on average (Erdoğan, 2012 via Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci, 2020, p. 8). In Turkey, the fields of activity and institutions involved in volunteering show greater variety when it comes to university students. They volunteer in university clubs, NGOs (associations and foundations), civil initiatives, and online. According to one study conducted at Istanbul University, of students involved in volunteering, 42,9% did it in NGOs, while 57,1% in other places (Şentürk&Turan, 2016, p. 341). It could be said that university students prefer projects and events with a more limited time frame.

The study conducted in 2016 on Istanbul University students showed that of students engaged in volunteering during university years, 60,1% volunteered in education, 51,1% with children, 46,7% with youth, 42,1% for the environment, 27,8% to fight poverty, 27,4% in religious services, 26,5% in healthcare, 25,6% with elderly, 22,5% in human rights, 21,8%

with disabled people, 21,4% with women, 213% with animals, and 13,9% regarding labour/work. It was observed that university students were more engaged in volunteering regarding *education, children, youth, and the environment*. The volunteering fields pointed out in in-depth interviews within the scope of the study were also *children, education, social support, and the environment* (Şentürk&Turan, 2016, s. 342). It could be said that young people are drawn more to service-focused fields. On the other hand, these choices are not only limited to university students. High school students or working people, too, have similar preferences when it comes to volunteering. Another study conducted in 2019 determined fields in which various age groups were active. 64% of working adults volunteered in education, while the same could be said for 69,9% of young people. At the same time, 48,% of working adults and 56,5% of young people worked with children. As for working with youth, 29% of working adults and 34,4% of young people engaged in it (Yurttagüler, 2020, p. 104). The choices of youth participating in this study regarding fields of volunteering may change according to the topic and target group. Young people state that they volunteer the most in the fields of education, children, and youth, and emphasise that when it comes to volunteering, it is important for NGOs to be trustworthy and well-known. When it comes to volunteering with children, university students are at the forefront (Yurttagüler, 2020). It could be said that the will to support those coming after them is among the primary reasons for this situation. Moreover, we see that the fact that volunteering in those fields is easier, more accessible, more acknowledged, and more transparent affects their popularity. Young people in their school years try to dissipate the disadvantages experienced by younger children and peers. According to Yurttagüler, working with children and in the field of education is both accepted and supported by society. Additionally, NGOs focused on education are more trustworthy and recognisable due to their field of activity and popularity. Moreover, in comparison to other fields, there are more NGOs focused on education and children and instead of voicing requests for structural change, they meet the needs of target groups by providing services (2020, p. 105). In recent years, it was observed that young people are drawn to volunteering in *humanitarian aid and disaster relief*. This situation is in direct relation to the dramatic increase in the number of migrants in Turkey and disasters experienced across the country. In a state left alone by the international community among the wars and migrations and increasingly facing permanent instead of transit migration such as Turkey, an increase in migrant-oriented volunteering may be

expected in the mid- to long-term. While currently, humanitarian activities aimed at migrants are at the forefront in Turkey, in the near future, it is expected that works focused on education, children, youth, and human rights<sup>4</sup> will become even more popular.

The lowest position of work-related volunteering is related to the limited effect the working life has as of yet on students. Nevertheless, in recent years, due to both university clubs and NGOs emphasising vocational development and career support in their volunteer programs, students started to volunteer in these fields as well. Looking at professions and fields of volunteering, we could state that there is a significant correlation between the professions of students and volunteering fields of their choice. 27,2% of students think that they can choose volunteer programmes suitable to their career plans. While it is not a major concern for university students when choosing the field they want to volunteer in, they take their profession and career plans into consideration (Şentürk&Turan, 2016, p. 343).

We could say that in Turkey, young people tend to favour institutionally strong NGOs in their volunteering endeavours. Institutionally strong NGOs could be defined as those conducting their activities with a large, professional/working team, with adequate resources, transparent and accountable, adopting and implementing contemporary administration and organisation principles, and accepted by the society at large. On the other hand, young people may quickly distance themselves from institutionally strong NGOs since their professionalism may violate the flexible and humane nature of volunteering. Moreover, young people may have a hard time participating in processes in such NGOs. According to one study conducted in 2019, volunteers differ depending on their age, young volunteers differ from their older peers with regard to their motivation and expectations from institutions. Young volunteers state that their participation in decision-making is limited (Yurttagüler, 2020). It was observed that excessive professionalisation in NGOs with corporate structure leads to young people quitting volunteering due to problems related to participation in decision-making. This situation is one of the reasons leading to the shortening of volunteering time of young people. Afterwards, youth may move to more flexible and dynamic institutions or establish their own civil initiatives. Some of these with time turn into NGOs. At the same time, it could be said that as digitalisation continues,

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<sup>4</sup> There are already significant volunteering projects aiming at migrants with regard to education, children, youth, and human rights. It is stipulated that in the near future, these fields will overcome humanitarian aid.

young people create more and more civil initiatives and begin to come together in digital spaces. As digitalisation progresses, online volunteering increases<sup>5</sup>. Online volunteering has the potential to change the culture of volunteering in Turkey. It is important to follow it and digital culture closely.

The foremost reasons for young people in Turkey to become a volunteer are *happiness born out of helping people, moral gratification (beliefs), will to contribute to society, and conscious responsibility*. Additionally, the desire to see the effects of volunteering on others and the moral gratification upon seeing them are important for young people (Şentürk&Turan, 2016, p. 343). Therefore, we could stipulate that there is an important bond between their choice of fields of volunteering in which they can instantaneously see the effects of their actions and their motivation. During focus group meetings within the scope of Turkish Volunteering Research, young people expressed the reason behind them becoming volunteers as “I wanted to do something”. Youth wants to feel useful (92,9%) and help where public resources do not suffice (72,2%). Regarding study data, Laden Yurttagüler (2020) states that providing a greater contribution to social life and living together, and “stating what they want to” constitute the youth’s motivation to become volunteers. Young people participate in elections but prefer to organise into NGOs rather than political parties since volunteering provides a possibility to contribute to social life. At the same time, young people perceive volunteering as free of politics. Neither youth nor other groups define volunteering as a political stance. According to Yurttagüler, the reason for volunteering’s perceived apolitical character is the association of volunteering with the charity.

It could be stated that one of the reasons for young people’s involvement in volunteering is the desire to change the discourse of spoiled/corrupted youth, which itself is a result of age discrimination towards young people. In this context, the factors such as the need for appreciation, becoming an exemplary member of society, and gaining respect could also be counted as sources of motivation for volunteering. The data from Turkish Volunteering Research do support this assessment. 65,5% of volunteers and 71,4% of young people defined “becoming respected by society” as their gain (Yurttagüler, 2020, s. 116).

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<sup>5</sup> Online volunteering has been developing independently of COVID-19 pandemics, yet, the pandemic has caused this process to speed up.

In the research conducted by TEGV in 2008, volunteers (not only young) declared *satisfaction from helping people (97,4%), getting to know new people (94,1%), contributing to solving issues in the neighbourhood (93,7%), making the world a better place for future generations (91,2%), and the possibility to work in one's area of interest (90,8%)* as the reasons for them becoming volunteers (Atılğan, Erdoğan, Günim and Güveli, 2008). In Turkey, especially among youth not receiving education, social sentiments, beliefs, desire to contribute, and the need to become a member of a group constitute the primary motivation for volunteering.

For young people who continue their education, especially university students, the willingness to put their time to good use is one of the most important sources of motivation behind volunteering. University students place importance on developing skills to utilize their time properly, providing for personal development, and as such strengthening their career prospects. For University students who volunteer, the effective use of time and the proper use of free time are important issues. As such, it could be said that factors involving professional development and career plans are involved (Şentürk&Turan, 2016, p. 346). Remembering that professional interest and plans for the future are primary factors in choosing the field of volunteering, university students while contributing to society and fulfilling their moral responsibilities, continue to be motivated by the desire to provide for their personal growth.

Regarding the reasons for not becoming a volunteer, we are faced with internal and external factors. To the most important external factors belong not receiving until now an invitation to volunteer and not stumbling upon a possibility to volunteer. In other words, “nobody has asked whether they want to be volunteers” yet. On the other hand, distrust towards NGOs is also among the factors impeding volunteering (Tayşir ve Erdoğan, 2019). Meanwhile, some young people do not want to accept the responsibility or feel dependent on an institution. As for internal reasons, the foremost factors include not having experienced volunteering and not knowing how and where to become a volunteer. Additionally, a significant group of young people do not believe that they can do anything and will not engage in such activities due to a lack of self-esteem. Those who think that activities conducted by volunteers are boring or do not believe that volunteering contributes to social life also tend to not become volunteers. Some of the young people do not become volunteers because of negative past

experiences. Volunteering activities not meeting expectations and looking down at their work decrease motivation in volunteers.

The common point of young people receiving education and those in the workforce is the fact that they have plenty of responsibilities and time management issues. The issues such as course load and exams take up a huge chunk of high school and university students' time. On the other hand, students are aware of their poor time management. In this context, the decrease in responsibilities and teaching them time management skills may increase the participation in volunteering of young people receiving education. As for young people already in the working life, most dedicate their energies to professional development in the first years of their careers due to high unemployment and stark competition. Some of them assume that volunteering would obstruct them in the job they currently hold.

Among the young people who engage in volunteering, *the wish to raise awareness, getting to know the society, working together, and conscientious satisfaction* are important sources of motivation. Young people who engaged in volunteering gain skills pertaining to certain fields. In Turkey Volunteering Research, the benefits of volunteering for working life stand out. The "to see the positive influence in the working life" statement was approved on average by 57,6% across the age groups, while the result was 69,9% for the young people. While this result may be important with regard to reducing unemployment, it may pose an issue considering social and political participation. Moreover, it may lead to exploiting the young people's labour as a cheap workforce instead of strengthening the youth (Yurttagüler, 2020, p. 114). Again, during the meetings of focus groups for the same study, young people brought up volunteering for the sake of a "career". Young people came together in support of the statement "I really learned a lot" in their volunteering experience. "Fixing coffee machine", "solving printing issues", and "providing solutions to urgent issues" provides young people with experience. While it is not its stated purpose, the experience of volunteering contributes to improved self-esteem, helps obtain new skills, and opens many new doors (Erdoğan ve Uyan-Semerçi, 2020, p. 36-37).

Along with moral competencies such as the sense of self-sacrifice and the awareness of responsibility, volunteers learn also skills related to effective time management for teams, written and spoken communication, presentation and design, and leadership. Making new friends, being in touch with people, and networking could also be counted as important

benefits for young people. Young people whose self-esteem rose together with their engagement in volunteering develop global awareness, gain information about the functioning of NGOs, and receive education on topics they are interested in. Data collected within the scope of Turkish Volunteering Research supports these claims. 82% of volunteers in general and 87,2% of young people chose “constantly learning new things”, while 88,3% and 95,4% respectively chose “getting to know new people” (Yurttagüler, 2020, p. 115).

Regarding the factors decreasing the motivation of volunteers, it could be said that young people are affected by the lack of results of their actions and setbacks in activities and processes. The attitude of NGOs and their workers, too, negatively affect the motivation of volunteers. During focus group meetings within the scope of Turkish Volunteering Research, young people stated that they experienced problems with contacting NGOs and possible “delayed” replies to applications. Not receiving an immediate answer to an application may lead young people to give up on volunteering (Erdoğan ve Uyan-Semerci, 2020, p. 26). Moreover, the emotional burden in the particular field may be hard on them. For example, young volunteers working with refugees or combating poverty were observed to become emotionally exhausted. NGOs in Turkey usually do not take into consideration the emotional burden of their volunteers. Young people may make mistakes or fail on duty. In the case of little failure, especially the motivation of young people who lack self-esteem may decrease. On the other hand, while volunteering, young people may think that they do not dedicate themselves to lessons (if they still receive education) or work and this situation may lead to loss of motivation to volunteer. Among the factors which shatter the most the motivation of young volunteers are lack of or insufficient participation in decision-making.

The Turkish government, universities, NGOs, private sector, and local governments conduct various programs to increase the motivation to volunteer in young people and ensure their participation. The important step was made by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sport, which not only conducts research and prepares publications on the topic, but also matches young volunteers with institutions searching for volunteers via a volunteer portal. Knowing that in Turkey, some young people do not know how and where they can volunteer, establishing online or offline platforms aiming at volunteer-institution matching is a useful endeavour. It is also worth mentioning that the Ministry has declared 2019 to be the year of volunteering and conducted many events within its scope. The establishment of

departments focused primarily on volunteering in the same ministry also shows that the government values volunteering. At the same time, the Ministry of Family and Social Services is another ministry working hard in the field of volunteering. By Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sport, from 2020 on, all universities in Turkey started to offer elective courses in Volunteering in which all students can participate. Unlike the Service to Society course which was compulsory for a few chosen departments, this elective course is more practice/application-oriented. Universities conduct programs to popularise volunteering both through student clubs and initiatives and various university centres. Meanwhile, NGOs conduct programs aiming to strengthen communication in order to incorporate volunteers which are the foundational element of their very existence into their activities. In a majority of NGOs in Turkey, there is close to no special departments providing for communication coordination, as well as people voluntarily conducting special programs for volunteers, as there are no professionals in the field. It could be stated that institutionalised and well-off NGOs try to popularise volunteering through their volunteer departments and communication strategies. Some of the NGOs introduce programs aiming at motivating their own volunteers. However, such programs are usually implemented in either well-institutionalised or small-scale NGOs where everybody knows each other. In a recent couple of years, it is easier to access NGOs and civil initiatives thanks to opportunities offered by the web. As digitalisation progresses, young people are increasingly aware of volunteering. In the private sector, especially large scale and institutionalised companies steer towards social responsibility projects and attempt to make their workers volunteer. In social responsibility projects, they try to attract the attention of the youth by working with NGOs and universities. The emphasis on promotion and communication in programs in the private sector may lead to volunteering taking a back seat. In recent years, local governments in Turkey get increasingly involved in promoting volunteering. Due to issues such as financial constraints and low number and quality of employees, they want to strengthen volunteering to achieve goals such as instilling a sense of belonging in the locals and developing a participatory model of government. No matter the legal basis, the *de facto* capacity of local administration is limited. They invite young people to volunteer through city councils and youth parliaments. There are also some which in order to motivate youth offer various gifts for the good deeds they do. For example, young people who separate waste may earn funds to be used exclusively in public transportation.

Young people are the group most incentivised to volunteer in Turkey. Both supranational institutions and NGOs encourage them to do so. Keeping in mind that young people in comparison to other age groups are both a grown-up workforce and still do not have a stable working life, their input into volunteer work is perceived to be valuable (Erdoğan, Uyan-Semerci, Yentürk ve Yurttagüler, 2020, p. XX). NGOs, universities, public institutions, and international organisations (EU, UN etc.) have developed various strategies to provide for youth's participation in volunteering. We should also focus on what should be done in addition to these strategies.

In Turkey, the road to popularising volunteering among youth by the government and NGOs leads through understanding its social and historical context. Historically, Turkish society has interpreted volunteering in its own way. Being aware that there are attempts to make international volunteering fit a certain mould, it is necessary to provide Turkish diversity and share its unique characteristics with the young people in a more concrete form. Thus, we can ensure that young people will realise how deep and broad cultural meaning does volunteering convey.

In order to increase the number of young volunteers, the government and NGOs in Turkey need to provide for their participation in volunteering from childhood on. It is crucial to introduce primary and secondary school students to volunteering through extracurricular activities. Meanwhile, NGOs should organise activities and introduce volunteering in primary and secondary schools as well.

It is important to provide for the participation of youth in decision-making processes on volunteer programs conducted by NGOs and other institutions. According to Yurttagüler, apart from youth organisations, it is rare for young people to participate in the decision-making process of NGOs. While young people are responsible for operations, the administration is conducted by comparably older people. On the other hand, young people are sometimes instrumentalised by NGOs and cannot reach where they want. During the focus group meetings within the scope of Turkish Volunteering Research, young people stated that the "possibility to express themselves" is among the primary factors in choosing a field or institution to volunteer in (2020, p. 98).

There is a need to increase the volunteering opportunities at universities. Besides volunteering courses, it is important to prepare and implement volunteering programs. Taking into consideration that young people are primarily interested in volunteering with children, education, migrants, disaster relief, and humanitarian aid, youth volunteering has also potential to spread the idea among primary and secondary school pupils. Many volunteer projects can be conducted at universities in cooperation with both clubs and NGOs. However, volunteering activities at universities cannot be directly conducted by academicians. Various activities could take place via the establishment of university volunteer offices and the university-NGO cooperation could be strengthened.

Young people who pursue neither education nor career are among the most disadvantaged groups in terms of volunteering. Young people with free time who do not have any particular activity at the centre of their life, avoid also engaging in volunteering. Young people engaged neither in education nor in work dissociate themselves from society. It is crucial to develop small-scale strategies taking into consideration the local circumstances in order to encourage them to volunteer. We suggest that local administration and institutions of central government such as district and town governorships should play an active role in this process.

There will be an increased need for volunteers working with migrants and in disaster relief in Turkey. The importance of volunteering in these fields should be emphasised through awareness campaigns. Moreover, it is important to prepare volunteering programmes and educational materials on how to volunteer in them. We should incentivise youth volunteering of this kind.

Taking into consideration the credibility crisis experienced by NGOs, universities and local governments should play an increased role in volunteering. The development and implementation of volunteer programs directly by local administration and universities will provide for the popularisation of volunteering. At the same time, these institutions may contribute to increased trust in the sphere of civil society by developing cooperation and conducting common projects with NGOs.

In order to increase the awareness of volunteering, it is crucial to popularise the concept of volunteering and make volunteering projects more visible. A significant number of young

people does not know how they can participate in volunteering and see themselves as not good enough. It should be emphasised that pretty much everybody can become a volunteer through awareness campaigns via the motto/idea that everybody is good at at least one thing and needs support/help in at least one topic. We should conduct awareness campaigns showing the meaning and contribution of volunteering to society at large. The cooperation of various actors is of key importance to the success of awareness and implementation campaigns aiming at propagating volunteering. The development of cooperation between them will be one of the most important steps in this direction.

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