

THE STORY OF THE NATIONAL CHILD FORUM AND CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN TURKEY



This project is funded by the European Union



Government of Turkey





THE STORY OF THE NATIONAL CHILD FORUM AND CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN TURKEY



THE STORY OF THE NATIONAL CHILD FORUM AND CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN TURKEY

"If we wish to create a world fit
for children, we are obliged
to seek their opinions.
Only children can say what is
fit for them."

CONTENTS

Foreword by Orçun Doğan	5
Introduction	7
Chapter 1: Backing Children's Rights	8
Chapter 2: The Birth of the Child Forum	10
Chapter 3: A Voice for Children Ready for the Future - by Mehmet Yeşilyurt	13
Chapter 4: Working Together	16
Chapter 5: Children Training Children	18
Chapter 6: A Fresh Campaign	20
Chapter 7: What next?.....	23
Milestones	26

Towards Good Governance, Justice and Protection for Children in Turkey



FOREWORD

As a person who has been engaged in efforts for child rights since 1994, I have always held the right to participation a little bit above the other three main pillars of children's rights. For it seems to me that the road to survival, development and protection passes through ensuring participation in the fullest possible sense.

It is for this reason that the Child Rights Committees played such an important role in my life. I learned to stand up freely for my opinions and beliefs, and to discuss them even with people in very high office, without being afraid of anyone. Instead of saying "I can't; I'm only a child", I saw with my own eyes how conviction and working together brought us victory.

On the committees, and during the Child Forums, a lot of things changed for me and for many other children living in this country.

Some of us left the borders of their own provinces for the first time, saw the Grand Mausoleum, the presidential palace and parliament, and had the opportunity to meet the President and government ministers. We learned by experience how to influence public officials in our provinces, to state our demands and follow them up, and to voice our reaction if they were not met. For some of us, our lives took new directions.

Some were on the street, but completed their education and got a job.

Others had dropped out of school but returned with fresh enthusiasm.

Those who were silent at first became the most animated spokespersons.

My friends and I have witnessed at close hand the process of change and development in the field of child rights in Turkey. But we have been active participants and agents of change, not passive spectators.

On account of my age, I have now passed on the baton to new colleagues working on the committees. Even so, I am not just looking on from a distance.

Rather, I am trying to provide guidance, to support their participation in person, to encourage them and to make a contribution by serving as an example.

There is still much ground for us to cover in this process hand in hand.

If we wish to create a world fit for children, we are obliged to seek their opinions. Only children can say what is fit for them.

My dear friends on the child rights committees all over Turkey:

let us take good care of the Child Forums and the child committees. If we are to develop our country and live in a better environment, and if participatory democracy is to flourish, they are of vital importance. As for you, you are the foundation stones. Let us continue the struggle for a better Turkey...

Orçun DOĞAN

Child Rights Committees First National Coordinator (2000 - 2001)

If children do not have a say in their own affairs, it is unlikely that their rights to education, health and protection will ever be fully respected. But accustoming adults to this idea is not always easy.

INTRODUCTION

It is seven years since the National Children's Congress was held and the first child rights committees were established in Turkey's 81 provinces. Likewise, the Child Forum, made up of representatives of those committees, has been meeting annually for seven years. The first delegates and committee members have left their childhood behind and entered into working life, and younger faces have taken their place. The time has come to refresh fading memories, reflect on what has been achieved and consider what more might be done. This is the purpose of this booklet. The booklet traces the history of the activities carried out by children in Turkey on their own behalf. Beginning with Turkey's adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the first chapter recalls the events which led to the creation of the child rights committees and Child Forum. Subsequent chapters recount the history of the Forum and the work done by the committees, right up to the current national child rights campaign.

Chapter 7 looks at more ways in which children are making their voices heard. The booklet concludes with a handy chronology. Child participation is a key element of the rights guaranteed by the UN Convention. If children do not have a say in their own affairs, it is unlikely that their rights to education, health and protection will ever be fully respected. But accustoming adults to this idea is not always easy. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who have worked on the child rights committees and the Child Forum over the past seven years. The task of their successors is to ensure that all means are employed to ensure that children are aware, and make use, of their right to a say in the decisions which affect them.



BACKING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. The day of the Convention's adoption, November 20, later came to be commemorated as World Child Rights Day. The Turkish government became the 43rd government to sign the CRC in September the next year. In 1994, the Turkish Grand National Assembly (Parliament) completed Turkey's adoption of the Convention by formally ratifying it. The Social Services and Child Protection Agency (SHÇEK) was nominated by the government as the coordinator body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the CRC in Turkey. SHÇEK is a public agency with a history dating back to the early days of the Republic.

One of the most universally accepted human rights instruments in history, the CRC has been ratified by 191 countries, accounting for all but two of the UN member states.

Traditionally, it has been best known for its work in looking after orphans and other children who cannot be cared for by their parents. However, it is also the main provider of many other social services for both children and adults, including family support and counselling, fostering and adoption services, day nurseries, children's and youth centres, community centres, services and facilities for the handicapped and the elderly, women's shelters and various education programmes. SHÇEK's responsibilities as coordinator body include overseeing the preparation of the reports which Turkey makes to the United Nations Child Rights Committee concerning its progress towards implementing the CRC. One of the most universally accepted human rights instruments in history, the CRC has been ratified by 191 countries, accounting for all but two of the UN member states. It is based on the principles of the non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, survival and development, and participation. For all persons under eighteen, regardless of their sex, religion, place of birth, parentage or social origin, it upholds:

- the right to survival;
- the right to develop to the fullest;
- the right to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation, and
- the right to participate fully in family, cultural and social life.



In more detail, the CRC spells out the role and responsibilities of parents and governments, and the rights of children to a name and nationality, health and health services, education, social security; a decent standard of living, leisure, recreation and cultural activities and privacy. It states that children must be protected from drug abuse, sexual exploitation, economic exploitation, armed conflict, torture, deprivation of liberty, trafficking, sale and abduction. It mandates a fair juvenile justice system with special emphasis on rehabilitative care. The CRC emphasises the rights of refugee children, handicapped children, children of minorities or indigenous people, children without families and others with special needs.

In addition, it acknowledges children's freedom of expression, thought, conscience, religion and association, their right to obtain information and their right to have their opinions considered in all issues which concern them. Naturally, Turkey was already pursuing policies to improve the health and education of all its children and to care for those in special need of protection. The CRC has encouraged Turkish governments to take further, more comprehensive steps in these respects. But there was one area of the CRC in which almost nothing had previously been done: the area of child participation...



As part of this "Global Movement for Children", Turkey initiated its own Child Rights Promotion Campaign.

THE BIRTH OF THE CHILD FORUM

As the tenth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) drew near, a worldwide campaign got under way to remind governments everywhere of their promises to build a better world for children. As part of this "Global Movement for Children", Turkey initiated its own Child Rights Promotion Campaign. This was probably the first time that most of the Turkish public had ever heard the phrase "children's rights". It was also probably the first time that children themselves were asked for their opinions. Preparations began for a National Children's Congress, scheduled to take place on April 20-21, 2000. In each of the 81 provinces, not one but two child rights committees were set up. One of the committees was made up of adults; the other of children themselves. The adult committees were made up of officials from the provincial directorates of the ministries of National Education, Health and Labour and Social Security, the provincial police and gendarmerie departments, population offices, the Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation, social security institutions, chief prosecutor's offices and municipalities, together with representatives of universities and colleges, chambers of trade and industry, bar associations, the media and various non-government organisations. These committees were chaired by deputy provincial governors.

The children's committees were made up of children from a wide range of backgrounds. Disabled children, children living at home, children living in institutions, school children, working children, children engaged in street life, children in reform institutions - all were deliberately brought together to make the committees as representative as possible of the child populations of each province. With the coordination of SHCEK, the adult and child committees identified the priority issues which they felt that the National Congress should address, and set out their proposed solutions. The reports of the child committees reflected all the social issues of the day from violence in school and at home to the poor quality of buildings in earthquake zones, from lack of play spaces to the disinterest of adults and the media in children's well-being, from the rejection of the disabled by their peers to the portrayal of children living and working on the street as potential criminals, and from the absence of leisure time for working children to the discrepancies in the education service and the heavy burden of examinations. The National Congress went ahead with a total of 700 participants including a child from each of Turkey's 81 provinces, government officials, academics, NGOs, representatives of international organisations and journalists. As a result, two declarations-one penned by the child participants and another by the adults - were handed over to President Süleyman Demirel.



The two declarations contained long lists of recommendations for implementing the CRC and improving the lives of children in Turkey. The National Congress had another important outcome. The child participants requested that the gathering of children from all corners of the country should become a regular event. Specifically, they requested that a Forum should be held on November 20 as part of the World Child Rights Day activities each year.

SHCEK responded positively, and exactly seven months later, with support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the first National Child Forum took place...

"The portrayal of children living and working on the street as potential criminals, and from the absence of leisure time for working children to the discrepancies in the education service and the heavy burden of examinations."

by Mehmet Yeşilyurt
Former Turkey Child Rights Coordinator
Participant in UN Special Session on Children

Ready for the Future...

I have been involved in work on child rights for approximately the past seven years.

This work has been of great benefit to me in spiritual and social terms.

It made me so happy to be able to make my voice heard at the Child Forums.

My friends and I would talk about our problems as if we were grown up, and tried to find solutions to them. When we returned to our provinces, we would discuss with our colleagues on the provincial committees what we could do to resolve the issues in our provinces and regions, and carry out research to this end. During the Forums, I developed incredible confidence and satisfaction when I saw how I could get my views across. As a result I became much better at expressing myself. Gradually, I turned into a child who was able to speak up in society. Without a doubt, the best opportunity which I had during my child rights adventure was to take part in the United Nations Special Session on Children organised in 2002. At this meeting in New York, I realised just how important the efforts which we had been making for our country's children and their rights were. In many countries, work which we had come to regard as routine was simply not being done.

The experience of taking part in such a gathering at the age of just fourteen taught me a great deal both in terms of my self-confidence and in terms of being ready to shoulder my responsibilities.

When I came back to Turkey following the Special Session, I served as national child rights coordinator and later as child rights coordinator for Central Anatolia.

Now I am eighteen and have retired from these activities. They have not merely left me with pleasant memories. They have also made a big contribution to the life which Mehmet Yeşilyurt will live in the future. My main duty from now on, as a good individual and young person - and eventually, above all, as a father - will be to put all that I have learned into practice.



At the third National Child Forum in November 2002, delegates chose to discuss the themes "Quality education", "A healthy life", "Preventing violence and exploitation" and "Combating HIV/AIDS".

A VOICE FOR CHILDREN

Turkey entered the new millenium with a new institution:

the National Child Forum.

Before long, the Forum was to establish itself as an important channel of communications and expression for children from all over the country. The 81 delegates to the first Child Forum in 2000 appropriately identified its theme as the "right to participate". For two days, working groups pored over "the right to participate in education", "the right to participate within the family", "the right to participate in health", "the right to participate in legislation" and "the right to participate in the media". The result was a series of action plans which were then presented to President Süleyman Demirel. The second National Child Forum, held in 2001, focused on the ten points contained in the "Say Yes for Children" declaration. The declaration had been devised by the Global Movement for Children, and people all over the world were being asked to sign it. In Turkey, 16 millions signatures were collected - more than in any other country except Brazil. The ten points were:

- Put children first
- Eradicate poverty - invest in children
- Leave no child behind
- Care for every child
- Educate every child
- Protect children from harm and exploitation
- Protect children from war
- Combat HIV/AIDS
- Listen to children and ensure their participation
- Protect the Earth for children.

2002 was the year of the United Nations Special Session on Children, attended by governmental and non-governmental organisations and children from all corners of the globe. The Special Session reviewed the progress made towards implementing children's rights, and issued the declaration "A World Fit for Children". Turkey's delegation included Child Forum participants Simge Haznedaroğlu and Mehmet Yeşilyurt. At the third National Child Forum in November 2002, delegates chose to discuss the themes "Quality education", "A healthy life", "Preventing violence and exploitation" and "Combating HIV/AIDS". These were to be the main headings of the National Action Plan for Children which Turkey was preparing at the time, in line with the outcome of the United Nations Special Session. Thus the Forum set out its views and proposals for each section of the Action Plan The fourth National Child Forum of 2003 followed up on the issues raised a year earlier. The boys and girls taking part tackled the topical issues of girls' education, the immunisation of children, the "Hello 183" women, children and social service help-line, and the use of iodised salt, which is essential to prevent iodine deficiency disorders in growing children. The delegates also developed action plans to be implemented at the provincial level in order to raise awareness of these issues. The action plans included activities such as signature campaigns, the distribution of posters and leaflets, discussions in schools, drama performances, contacts with the local press and composition, poetry and painting contests.

VII. ÇOCUK FORUMU

18 - 21 Kasım 2006

Ankara



VII. Çocuk Forumu
18-21 Kasım 2006 Ankara

Although the members of the child rights committees have changed over the years, they retain the original mix of backgrounds which is one of their great strengths.

WORKING TOGETHER

The children's child rights committees which had been set up in each province in 1999-2000, in advance of the National Children's Congress, did not cease to exist once the Congress was over and the Child Forum had been established. On the contrary, the provincial committees and the national Forum remain closely inter-related.

The committees have the task of implementing the action plans determined by the Forum, and they are obliged to report back on their achievements. In this way, Turkey has acquired a countrywide organisation for children's participation. The committees renew their membership regularly by recruiting more boys and girls as their original members grow up. Increasing the number of committee members is one of the main priorities of each committee.

Participation is entirely voluntary, however, and varies from province to province. Although the members of the child rights committees have changed over the years, they retain the original mix of backgrounds which is one of their great strengths. Disabled children, working children, children living on the street and children living in institutions continue to be well represented in addition to schoolchildren and children who live with their parents.

This pattern is also reflected in the composition of the delegates who attend the Child Forum each year. Full use of democratic mechanisms was envisaged from the start. Under an official circular, the child rights committees are responsible for electing their own chairpersons and the delegates who are to represent them at the Child Forum.

The delegates in turn must elect the network coordinators, who also chair the Child Forum. So far, the elections have been hard-fought but friendly. For the first four years, each province was represented by one delegate, and the delegates elected a single coordinator. As of 2004, the provinces began to choose two delegates each - one boy and one girl.



Similarly, the delegates began to choose two coordinators, one of each boys/girls. This change has ensured equal representation for girls and boys, helping the Forum to represent the circumstances and concerns of the nation's children even more accurately. For the members of the child rights committees and the delegates to the Child Forum, it has been a great experience.

They have worked and made friends with other children whom they might otherwise never have met. They have learned to address large groups of people and negotiate with officials. A high proportion of them have reported gains in self-confidence. Reassured by their status as committee members or Forum delegates, these children have started to play a greater role in public life, whether by intervening to prevent acts of violence or by carrying out their own inspections of the salt sold in grocer's shops.

Many of the children have also benefited in their personal careers: working children have enrolled in school again and earned themselves high school diplomas; schoolchildren have gone on to posts in public service and public relations. The child rights committees and the Child Forum have not only encouraged children to work together. Curiously, they have also improved cooperation among adults.

The organisation of the Forum and the work of the committees have required intense cooperation between various government bodies at both the national level and the local level. The close involvement of the Ministry of the Interior has been a particularly important factor, given the critical importance of the provincial governors, appointed by the Ministry, in facilitating the work of child rights committees.

CHILDREN TRAINING CHILDREN

The fifth Child Forum, held in 2004, was not only the first to be attended by two delegates of different gender from each province. It was also the first Child Forum to focus primarily on child rights training. Two weeks before the Forum, some of the older child delegates (aged 14-17) from 16 provinces were trained as child rights trainers at a three-day workshop in Ankara, using a training module developed by SHÇEK and UNICEF. During the Forum itself, the members of this core group of trainers provided child rights training to all the other delegates. Armed with their own action plans, the boys and girls then returned to the four corners of the country to pass on what they had learned about child rights to the other members of their provincial committees and to other children in their schools and neighbourhoods. The workshop for the training of trainers was repeated in January 2005. As a result, one child from each province was now able to provide other children with child rights training. Child rights training was also at the heart of the extended sixth Child Forum of 2005. The child-to-child training sessions conducted with the delegates to this Forum raised the number of trained trainers to two-one boy and one girl-in each province.



By 2007, at least 600 children in Turkey had received child rights training thanks to the work of the Child Forums. Child rights training is concerned with both a knowledge of the rights of the child and with the skills which children need in order to claim their rights in their everyday lives. The training module contains elements of life skills based education that deal with communication skills, effective learning methods, expression of feelings, gender discrimination and conflict resolution. Feedback from children resulted in the addition of an element on protection from violence as of 2005. Child rights training has transformed the Child Forum. From a theatre of debate, at which children's issues are discussed and drawn to the attention of decision-makers and the general public, it has blossomed into an event at which children learn how to act on their own behalf. In the parlance of the organisers, it has become a "capacity-building" event as well as an "awareness-raising" exercise.

Child rights training was also at the heart of the extended sixth Child Forum of 2005



The child rights training sessions have undoubtedly contributed to the rise in the self-confidence of the participants which was mentioned in Chapter 4. At the seventh Child Forum, in 2006, delegates were to launch a campaign which would put their newly-acquired confidence and communications skills to the test...

"Child rights training is concerned with both a knowledge of the rights of the child and with the skills which children need in order to claim their rights in their everyday lives."

The child rights committees responsible for the campaign are being supported by a technical committee led by SHÇEK

A FRESH CAMPAIGN

The 2006 Child Forum included further child rights training sessions as well as workshops, drama groups and sporting and artistic activities. But the highlight was the launch of a new campaign, designed and run by children themselves, to promote and raise awareness about child rights, and to boost children's participation in decision-taking at all levels.

The "Rights of the Child Promotion Campaign" is to go ahead in twenty-five provinces across the country. It is to be managed entirely by children. The provinces taking part were chosen because they have active child rights committees and/or are candidates to become Child-Friendly Cities under a Ministry of Interior initiative (See Chapter 7).

The provinces are: Amasya, Ankara, Antalya, Balıkesir, Bursa, Çorum, Diyarbakır, Düzce, Erzincan, Gaziantep, Hakkari, İçel, İstanbul, Karaman, Kayseri, Kırşehir, Konya, Manisa, Ordu, Sivas, Tekirdağ, Trabzon, Uşak, Yalova and Van.



During the Forum, boys and girls from these provinces presented campaign action plans which they had drawn up after attending a campaign strategy workshop held in Istanbul earlier in the year. They revealed plans to print brochures, posters, T-shirts, hats, mugs and newspapers; to organise competitions, walks, exhibitions, theatrical performances, picnics, torchlight processions and regattas; to shoot films, visit officials, fly kites and plant trees. They aim to work with children in detention, disabled children, children on the streets, children

in institutions, children requiring special education and children out of school. Besides raising awareness - among children and adults alike - they expect to make an impact on rural health services, the quality of education, birth registration, substance abuse, family planning, earthquake readiness and traffic congestion. On November 20, 2006 - World Child Rights Day - some 300 children and public officials crowded into a meeting room inside the Grand National Assembly (Parliament) building in Ankara to mark the opening of the campaign.



The excited audience listened to a message from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and a speech from Mr. Nevzat Pakdil, the deputy speakers of Parliament. The children presented a list of 23 wide-ranging demands including safe, child-friendly schools, better pre-school and university provision, an end to forced child marriages, more social activities in children's homes, improved media coverage and clearer traffic signs. Topics as diverse as the rights of Palestinian children, passive smoking and child abuse were raised during the vigorous question-and-answer session which ensued. The event was attended by about 30 Members of Parliament, and led to the inauguration of a long term dialogue between children and MPs.

Once again, children have encouraged adults to work together. The child rights committees responsible for the campaign are being supported by a technical committee led by SHÇEK and including representatives of the Ministries of the Interior, Health, National Education, Labour and Justice, NGOs, municipalities, the gendarmerie, the State Planning Organisation, the Turkish Statistical Institute and the public institutions responsible for broadcasting and sports. The campaign is also being supported by UNICEF, the European Union and Unilever ice-cream manufacturer Algida. The committees are to be provided with basic office facilities and small cash grants. They took part in five regional follow-up meetings in the Spring of 2007.

Above all, provinces hoping to become Child Friendly Cities will have to demonstrate that boys and girls are systematically involved in local management and decision-making.

WHAT NEXT?

When the eighth Child Forum meets in November 2007, the delegates from the 25 child rights committees taking part in the child rights promotion campaign will have a wealth of campaign experience to share with the delegates from other provinces. Meanwhile, more people will have gained a deeper awareness of child rights and - more importantly - will have seen for themselves how children are capable of acting on their own behalf, communicating, negotiating and participating in decisions.

All this will constitute a significant achievement in a country where the mechanisms are not enough for effective child participation, where tradition often stands in the way of a close dialogue between parents and their own children, and where even in the major cities schools have been authoritarian and hierarchical, the principles a distant, unapproachable figure.

Times are changing. Until just a few years ago, nobody thought of inviting boys and girls under eighteen to meetings, workshops, conferences or similar events - even within organisations like SHÇEK and UNICEF.

Indeed, it was only in 2002 that the United Nations General Assembly was addressed by children for the first time. Today, children's participation is less unusual. Members of child rights committees have briefed teachers in schools on child rights, appeared on local TV and radio and made statements to the press.



Headteachers and provincial governors a like have started to open their doors. Much of the work done during the child rights promotion campaign of 1999-2000 involved teaching children about their rights. Today, adults are learning about children's rights from children.

Yet a nation's culture does not change overnight. Only a small proportion of Turkey's children are actively trying to participate in the decisions which affect themselves. This raises the question:

what next?

In this context, the Ministry of the Interior's Child Friendly Cities initiative, launched in 2006, may present a golden opportunity.



Under this initiative, individual provinces will seek to earn the right to use the title "Child Friendly City" by meeting a number of criteria related to child rights. Would-be Child Friendly Cities will have to ensure that children have a safe living environment and adequate access to health, education and protective services. They will have to collect data on child rights, adopt strategies based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, draw up their budgets with children in mind and monitor the effects of all their activities on children. They will also have to work to make child rights known among adults and children. Above all, provinces hoping to become Child Friendly Cities will have to demonstrate that boys and girls are systematically involved in local management and decision-making.

The work of the Child Forum and the provincial child rights committees, the Rights of the Child Promotion Campaign and the Child Friendly Cities initiative all give grounds for hope that children will be able to make more use of their right to participation - and hence of all their other rights - in future. But most of all, children themselves must continue to stand up for their own rights whenever and wherever they are denied them...



MILESTONES

- November 20, 1989 : Adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the UN General Assembly
- September 14, 1990 : Government of Turkey signs the Convention on the Rights of the Child
- December 9, 1994 : Turkish Parliament ratifies the Convention on the Rights of the Child
- November 20, 1999 : Child Rights Promotion Campaign launched in Turkey at the Presidential Palace
- April 20-21, 2000 : National Children's Congress
- November 20-21, 2000 : First National Child Forum discusses children's participation
- April 23, 2001 : Launch of the "Say Yes for Children" campaign in Turkey
- November 19-20, 2001 : Second National Child Forum discusses the "Say Yes for Children" imperatives
- May 8-10, 2002 : United Nations Special Session on Children
- November 19-20, 2002 : Third National Child Forum discusses National Action Plan for Children
- November 19-20, 2003 : Fourth National Child Forum and development of action plans on girls' education, immunisation, the women and children's help-line and iodised salt
- November 19-20, 2004 : Fifth National Child Forum with child rights training
- November 16-20, 2005 : Sixth National Child Forum with child rights training
- November 18-21, 2006 : Seventh National Child Forum and launch of children's own Rights of the Child Promotion Campaign



Faruk Yılmaz (14) and Havva Kaçar (12) were awarded to represent Turkey in the ceremony at Tate Gallery in London which was organized by UNILEVER-ALGIDA (March, 2007)





This project is implemented by the Government of Turkey with financial support from the European Union and technical support from UNICEF

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official views of the European Commission and UNICEF.