

Motion

Calling for access to education, civic space and funding for young people and youth organisations in Türkiye

signed by: Youth Organizations Forum -
National Youth Council of Türkiye (GoFor)

co-signed by: German National
Committee for International Youth Work
(DNK)

The devastating 7.8-magnitude earthquake near the Türkiye-Syria border on 6 February 2023 was followed by another nearly as strong. The recent earthquakes that struck Türkiye and Syria caused one of the biggest disasters to impact the region. Tens of thousands of people have been killed, and many more have been injured. Thousands of buildings have collapsed, exposing countless people to unforgiving winter conditions. Schools and hospitals have been destroyed. 1.5 million people are homeless, and many more than millions need help. One-third of the members of Go-For Türkiye, the Youth Organisations Forum, has been affected, on a personal level, by the destruction of youth centres and the sudden halting of the programmes they were running.

Civic Space

Freedom of Expression and Online Civic Spaces

Shrinking civic space has been a significant issue, and restrictions on fundamental freedoms are increasing as the date of the national elections gets closer. On February 8, the government blocked Twitter, the primary social media tool people used to get organised for earthquake response and where survivors could raise their voices from under the rubble, which was crucial to saving more lives. More than 100 people, including journalists, have been detained, and TV channels have been fined and suspended for criticising the government regarding their response to the earthquakes. As young people, we are concerned about the increasing political pressure as the elections are approaching. The state of emergency in the affected regions could be misused to deny people their right to vote by setting up obstacles.

Protection of fundamental rights of socially discriminated groups

Although Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) were the first ones who arrived in earthquake zones, even before the primary responsible governmental institution on disaster management, they were blocked from providing aid and rescue efforts, the responsible public institution took over their warehouses and aid, and they have been criminalised. Already marginalised and stigmatised ethnic, religious and

other minority groups are disproportionately affected by the disaster but are structurally disadvantaged in distributing aid supplies and services. CSOs can be the bridge to reach out to all people.

Elections are set on the 14th of May, and due to inadequate response from the government on managing the disasters, they are losing significant support and risk losing votes. They even started to talk about proposing the removal of laws on the protection of women. This would be a worrying step further from a government which has already decided to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention Against Violence Against Women. Moreover, even before these alliances, the AKP government tried to change the constitution by changing the marriage law, stating that marriages can only be formed between men and women, which will prevent same-sex marriages, violating the rights of LGBTIQ+ people.

Involvement of (youth) CSOs in policy-making in general and in disaster relief policies in particular

Youth Organisations Forum (GoFor) met with member organisations in the affected cities aftermath of the earthquake. Representatives from 34 youth organisations representing up to 20 thousand young volunteers attended the online rapid assessment meeting. Attending organisations represented voices from informal youth groups to larger youth foundations in the affected areas to those involved in the Disaster Platform and other structures from across the country who showed solidarity with their peers.

Young people should be seen as right-holders rather than victims, and youth organisations should be seen as assets for effective and efficient disaster response. Particular attention should be paid to local youths and national and local youth organisations in pursuit of the localisation agenda in disaster response.

Recommendations

- The government should avoid discriminatory actions against especially young people, journalists, and civil society organisations due to their opinions, expressions or activities.

- The government should be transparent on the budget for rebuilding the cities and support survivors from different groups.
- The government should take necessary measures to protect the fundamental rights of all people and create an enabling environment for all people to enjoy their rights regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation or background. Intersectionality and gender equality should pervade all decisions and processes.
- The government should respect the International Conventions on Fundamental Freedoms and Human Rights as a signatory party.
- Young people and independent youth organisations should be involved in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies at all levels.

Access to Education and Adequate Housing

Following the earthquakes, the Turkish government relocated people to dormitories without considering potentially alternative sheltering means. This forced university students to vacate the dormitories and violated their privacy. The relocation of families to dormitories and students to their homes has created additional problems for those without sheltering options, for those who have experienced violence or abuse in their homes, and for LGBTIQ+ youth with problematic family relations. Given the rising food and shelter costs, this decision also poses a challenge for students who need to work while studying.

Universities play a crucial role as civic spaces where young people can advocate for their needs and demands- despite attempts to curtail such activities, as evidenced in the case of Boğaziçi University, which is one of the most prestigious and progressive Turkish Universities, where students and academicians have been detained by presidential decree after peaceful protests against the appointed rectorate.

Additionally, vacating dormitories resulted in changing the physical education system to online platforms. The transition to online education has exacerbated young people's challenges due to

economic inequality in accessing technological devices and the internet, limiting their ability to participate in online learning and socialise with peers.

Recommendations

- The government must provide adequate shelter for both victims of earthquakes and students.
- Autonomies of academic spaces and their enabling environments for university students as physical civic spaces should be protected.
- The government must provide accessible education for all individuals. This way, the well-being of citizens, particularly young people, can be ensured during these challenging times.

Core funding

Due to the earthquakes, funding for civil society has shifted to humanitarian aid. Youth organisations in not affected cities struggle to find sources to continue their work, while youth organisations in earthquake zones need help finding resources to rebuild their organisations and work. Even before the earthquake, funding was difficult to access, as it was mainly project-based. **Youth organisations need structural funding to sustain their activities and staff to empower other young people and play an active role in society in the long run.** As young people comprise 15% of the total population in Türkiye, **donors should consider the crucial role of youth organisations in the empowerment and well-being of young people.** This is crucial if donors are interested in preserving the vibrant and independent part of civic space that still exists in Türkiye today.

With support from the members of the European Youth Forum, we ask the Turkish government to fulfil its obligations towards its citizens determined by the constitution and the laws and strengthen democracy and democratic practices. We ask European and global institutions to consider the political and economic situation in Türkiye, including the risk of escalation due to the political polarisation, and support civil society and youth organisations to strengthen civic space and empower young people

Recommendations:

- The government should provide transparent and accessible structural funding to independent youth organizations.
- European and global institutions should ensure direct structural funding for independent youth organisations, especially in countries such as Türkiye, where the government does not support them.
- National and international donors should not reduce the already limited funding for civil society by directing them to humanitarian aid but provide sustainable support to enhance the capacity of youth organizations to operate in such challenging times.

Recommendations for International Stakeholders:

- **The Council of Europe** can monitor the implementation of agreements on fundamental freedoms and human rights and report violations of human rights, the rights of young people and youth organizations, and restrictions on civic space in Türkiye.
- **The Council of Europe** could provide funding and support for youth-led initiatives in Türkiye and work with local youth organizations to improve their capacity to advocate for their rights.
- **The United Nations**, as a global organization dedicated to promoting peace, security, and human rights, is an important stakeholder in promoting access to education, civic space, and funding for young people and youth organizations in Türkiye. The UN can adjust its policies and programs considering the difficulties in the civic space to create a more enabling environment for CSOs and youth organizations.
- **The European Union** could play a vital role in promoting the rights of young people and youth organizations in Türkiye. The EU could provide funding and support for independent youth-led initiatives working to improve civic space and democratic practices in Türkiye
- **Members of the European Youth Forum** can consider forming partnerships with member

organizations of the other members in the platform to strengthen cooperation and solidarity between countries and in the youth field.



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