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Armenia-Turkey: Youth Bank as a Space for Dialogue

Support to Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement
Project Funded by USAID,
Implemented by Eurasia Partnership Foundation
with Toplum Gönüllüleri Vakfı



www.youthbank.am
www.gencbank.org

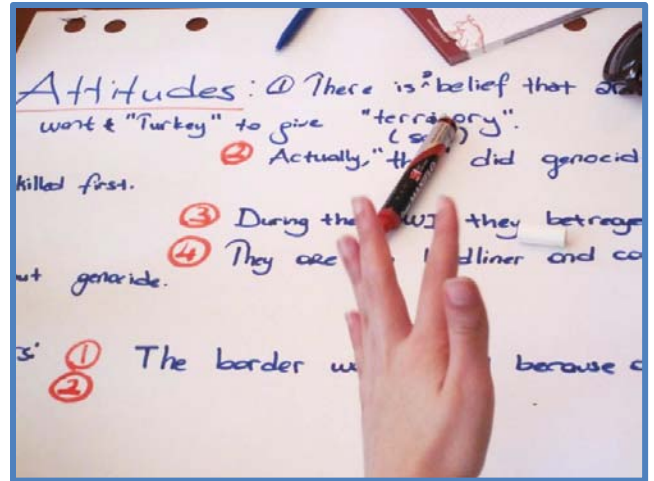


"...even one visit to a country towards which you have prejudices can change your attitude and those of others as well. ... when Ceran and I came from Samsun, many things changed in our opinions about Armenia, we have become more interested in Armenian culture and we are much more positive when we hear about Armenia in the local news... therefore such meetings are very important for us and others as well..." Erkan Kurt, a participant of the Armenia-Turkey youth bank exchange program, during his visit to Armenia in April 2012.

Young people in Armenia and Turkey have come of age during conflicts and their aftermath and have already lived through dramatic hardships. They live in an environment characterized by closed borders, frozen conflicts, and flourishing stereotypes. The absence of opportunities to interact effects negatively the perceptions that young people have about each other, making them more susceptible to messages of extremism, nationalism, and violence as a means to achieve results.

Eurasia Partnership Foundation recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to peace-building and developing cooperative relations between societies which share a long history of conflict. However, our experience in youth programs, tolerance building, and Track-2 Diplomacy efforts demonstrates that promoting closer ties and mutual awareness are an effective way to overcome misconceptions and build trust among young people.

This is one of the goals of EPF's cross-border initiatives – laying foundations today for lasting and sustainable peace tomorrow. Despite the political stalemate between Armenia and Turkey, in recent years public diplomacy initiatives between the two countries have intensified leading to a number of small and larger-scale bilateral projects being implemented since the collapse of the rapprochement process at the government level. One of the largest initiatives supporting the rapprochement – **Support to Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement Project (SATR)** – was launched in November 2010. The goal of the project is to support Armenia-Turkey rapprochement through the development of new business partnerships and regional professional networks, engagement of civil society in alliance-building to further contribute to Armenia-Turkey normalization, and establishment of a favorable environment for state-to-state dialogue and interaction. USAID and the Armenian Consortium Partners in cooperation with the Turkish Partners support Armenia-Turkey rapprochement by facilitating engagement between journalists, NGOs, youth, representatives of the culture and art sectors and other civil society groups as well as the establishment and development of business partnerships and regional professional networks, and enhanced understanding between the people, for peace and economic integration in the region.



Among many large-scale initiatives, a small but important initiative is being implemented between youth from Armenia and Turkey, as part of the SATR program. The Peace Youth Banks project is designed to set up a foundation for dialogue and mutual trust between youth from conflicting countries, using the Youth Bank approach.



In June 2007, EPF launched the Youth Bank program in the regions of Armenia, using the practical civic activism model from Northern Ireland. Each YB committee consists of five to seven individuals between the ages of 16 and 25. YB committees conduct an assessment of the needs of the local youth. Based on the results of this, the committees define criteria for grant making, announce a request for proposals from other young people, and select small projects for funding using a unique selection methodology. Each youth committee funds up to five small projects, each costing no more than \$500. Every year, about 45-50 small projects are implemented, with more than 200 young people initiating and making small but significant changes in their communities. Through

these activities and an additional series of training workshops, Youth Bank committee members develop an understanding of transparency and good governance and acquire practical skills that they can apply in the workplace or in the community. Hundreds of young people and youth groups who are their grantees are also given a chance to make a positive contribution to the life and development of their communities. Youth Bank members and their peers whose projects they fund make tangible improvements in remote, often neglected areas through direct action, combining volunteerism and grant making.

The Youth Bank project is successfully used to solve the problems of young people at the community level and to bring people from conflicting countries to interact around a common issue - local development processes.

A large-scale youth organization from Turkey, TOG - Community Volunteers Foundation (TOG), has been selected as a partner in the project. EPF has become a mentor for TOG, establishing the Youth Bank project in Turkey.



The Youth Bank program provides a 'common space' for youth to come together to meet, communicate and build cooperative relationships through joint projects, but most importantly, to change perspectives on existing stereotypes and problems. Therefore, this component in the large rapprochement project is exceptionally emotional in nature, as it produces a quick change in attitudes of people and builds trust, demonstrating that building open societies, communication and interaction should not be put on hold, waiting for the political situation to improve.

Activities

As with many other civil society organizations in Turkey, the cooperation with TOG - Community Volunteers Foundation has been smoothly transforming into a close partnership. EPF has helped TOG - Community Volunteers Foundation to establish three YB committees in Istanbul and in the provinces of Turkey, has shared the methodology of YB work and accumulated expertise for young people working at community level and funding peer-led small-scale projects.



Three exchange visits have been organized as part of the program, in which 10 youth from Turkey have visited Armenian regions to share their experiences with local Youth Bank committees. They implemented joint activities with Youth Bankers from Armenia – painting and beautification in local parks and schools, visiting social care centers, organizing joint cooking of Armenian and Turkish traditional dishes, giving speeches about their countries and problems of the youth. They get exposed to cultural experiences – music, dance, cooking, crafts and others. Around 250 youth from Armenia participated in meetings with Turkish youth during their visits to Sevan, Yeghegnadzor, Armavir, Ejmiatsin, Vanadzor, Nor Geghi and Yerevan.

These trips provide a unique chance for the groups to learn different perspectives on some events of the history the two nations share. The young generation in Turkey has not heard much about the existence of Armenians within Eastern Turkey. Youth from Turkey visited the Genocide Memorial in Armenia, which was not part of the planned agenda, but stemmed from a wish to learn a perspective they would not be able to learn otherwise.

Five youth from Armenia visited Turkey and developed a basic understanding of Turkish society, non-governmental organizations, system of education and culture. More exchanges and joint actions are planned to take place during the summer of 2012.

Benefits

The Peace Youth Bank project helps to understand how prejudices and stereotypes can color and shape what we see and hear; to explore how to make space for different perspectives and points of view in a group with diverse political and cultural backgrounds.

The cooperation around the YB program gives a chance also to talk about very sensitive topics – the events in the history of the two nations, which lived together for centuries on the same territory. And to be able to develop an

independent view on the reasons and the constraints of Armenia-Turkey relationship building, the hardships of politics and how distorted the truth is about a painful period in the history of the two neighboring countries.

Another great benefit, more important than originally thought, was to provide an opportunity for the young people from countries with no diplomatic relationships and with unresolved political conflicts to come together and to be able to understand and, more importantly, express freely each other's perspectives on the existing realities. This type of initiative is a great "fear-fighting" experience, a chance to bypass failed diplomacies and to establish relationships - surprisingly very warm relationships - between the people, with fun, dancing and singing, holding hands, talking about their fears and shared desires for a peaceful and prejudice-free co-existence.



It is extremely important for the Armenian and Turkish public to have an inspirational experience and understand the importance of building confidence - that whatever the political developments or the stagnations in the process, young people, not yet victimized heavily by hostile propaganda in both countries, have the freedom of choice. Through the project, young people get the freedom to make their own decisions about who is on the other side of the closed border, whether friendship is possible between the two nations and what they can do today to break the crystallized barriers.

The peace-building initiatives through youth exchanges equip participants with the skills necessary for constructive communication and working through conflicts, they allow the participants a joint reflection on the way each group views its own history, reconsidering the information that participants take for granted and facilitate an understanding of the context of the 'other' group. They also allow the participants to look beyond the positions and hopes of both societies. The youth become empowered through the demonstration of their *power* to affect the conflict as young leaders.

Conflict transformation is a long-term process and implies a deep transformation in the societies and in their relationship towards one another and towards the conflict. EPF's efforts are called to positively transform the relationship between the Turkish and Armenian societies through similar projects.



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