

Building Partnerships for Sustainable Development: 30 Years of Habitat Association

Haşim Akman





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Introduction

In nearly all dictionaries, heroism is defined with terms like upholding justice, facing danger, showing courage, battling great evils, and making personal sacrifices. And a hero is someone who takes on and fulfills great tasks, often in the face of overwhelming odds. The ideology of heroism, rooted in ancient times and still very much alive today, is continuously reproduced through what's known as the "hero's eternal journey," independent of the changes in societies.

Heroes are typically focused on striving for grand achievements, becoming the protagonists of the most glorious stories. Their lives revolve around a mindset of "all or nothing." But real life, in contrast, is built on nuance and relativity. Yet in real life, everything is relative; the true heroes are often those who strive to take care of the small things that are usually overlooked or ignored. Like the child who gently returns starfish to the sea, one by one, while adults pass by without a second glance.*

Though it may sound cliché to many, the beginnings of the Habitat Association were marked by an effort much like that of the child described above. The United Nations Habitat II Con-

* It's a familiar story, often called a cliché, but still worth repeating for those who haven't heard it: One morning, a man is walking along the beach, enjoying the sunrise, when he notices a child picking up starfish that have washed ashore and gently tossing them back into the ocean. He approaches and asks: "Why are you throwing them back?" "The sun is rising and the tide is going out," the child replies. "If I don't throw them in, they'll die."

"The shore stretches for miles, and there are thousands of starfish... What difference could it make?" asks the man.

The child pauses for a moment, then picks up another starfish and throws it into the water: "It made a difference to that one," the child says.

ference took place in a social and political atmosphere where coalition governments ruled the capital Ankara under the shadow of economic crisis, an atmosphere where political disputes bred instability, events followed one another in rapid succession, and the quiet murmur of those worried about what was happening and what lay ahead, “Something must be done”, barely found anyone willing to listen.

Starting from the late 1970s, Türkiye, struggling with the pains of bandwagoning into the global world through the European Union by liberalizing its economy, found itself hosting the United Nations Second Habitat Conference in June 1996. Although everything had been scheduled four years in advance, many tasks were left until the last minute. In the rush of approaching a point of no return, it suddenly became clear: there weren’t enough organizations capable of meaningfully representing civil society, one of the core pillars of this major international conference.

In those years, aside from the legally mandated professional chambers established in Türkiye, the number of civil society organizations, other than employers’ associations, labor and employer unions, and human rights associations, was almost negligible. This shortage threatened the viability of the “NGO Forum,” the civil society component of the Habitat Conference. Naturally, a country like Türkiye wouldn’t back down from the challenge. Just like in the well-known saying, “They said, ‘There’s no money,’ he said, ‘We’ll find it.’ They said, ‘There’s no army,’ he said, ‘We’ll build one’”, sleeves were rolled up and action was taken.* Various thematic working groups, referred to as “caucuses” were

* This is one of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s sayings that encapsulates the dire conditions of the War of Independence and his unwavering determination. It shows his power to mobilize a nation despite overwhelming scarcity.

formed, each guided by experts serving as facilitators. These included groups focused on health, women's rights, disability, children, and legal professionals. For youth who left without institutional support or representation, a Youth Caucus was created. It would soon become known as the Youth for Habitat. Sezai Hazır stepped forward to take on the role of "facilitator" for this group.

Sezai Hazır and his team, most of them high school students half his age, worked with determination and excitement, going at it like gangbusters, fueled by boundless energy and creativity. They built lasting relationships with other young people and youth organizations through their participation in United Nations meetings both in Türkiye and abroad. Their efforts played a key role in Türkiye's successful participation in the Habitat II Conference.

Once the conference tasks were completed and most returned to their everyday lives, the same team chose to keep going in the following year. They took on the leadership of Local Agenda 21, a local democracy initiative to which Türkiye was a party.

The youth initiative that began in 1995 was formalized in 1997 as the Youth Association for the Implementation of the Decisions of Habitat II and Agenda 21.

Guided by the motto, "To be a bridge between youth across the globe and youth across Türkiye," it has continuously renewed itself over time and now celebrates its 30th year.

This book tells the story of Habitat Association's 30-year journey, a civil society organization that operates with an unconventional structure and acts as a bridge between the public sector, private sector, and civil society through the lens of youth. Rooted entirely in the dynamism and dedication of its own youth, Habitat's story unfolds across four main parts.

Part I explores the emergence of civil society as a concept in Türkiye and its introduction into public discourse, sparking a civic movement and the formation of organizations, ultimately giving birth to Habitat Association.

Part II focuses on the youth movement that played an active role in the Habitat process, detailing how it built its identity through activating its international ties. It also highlights key initiatives carried out within the framework of the Local Agenda 21 Program including the establishment of Youth and Women's Assemblies within City Councils, the formation of the National Youth Parliament, and efforts to strengthen youth centers and local organizations in both the GAP (Southeastern Anatolia Project) region and the areas affected by the Marmara Earthquake.

Part III explores Habitat Association's shift toward development-oriented projects in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, while minimizing its collaboration with the public sector. It also delves into the organization's shift from a volunteer-based movement to a professional structure, and its efforts to make its growing network more effective. This includes forging stronger partnerships with the business world to promote entrepreneurship, culminating in the establishment of GEN Türkiye on an international level.

Part IV reflects on Habitat's evolution from the Youth for Habitat initiative to its present-day structure, highlighting the organization's contributions to the development of civil society in Türkiye.

The first step for the book, which was planned to be published on October 29, 2023, the 100th anniversary of the Republic, was taken in the final months of 2022. The content was

to be shaped through interviews with 127 individuals who had witnessed Habitat's journey from its earliest days, supported by Habitat's digitized archive and additional research materials. Interviews with Sezai Hazır and Emre Koyuncu had just been completed when the earthquake struck on February 6, 2023. As it did during the 1999 Marmara Earthquake, Habitat quickly mobilized all its resources and its presence on the ground to respond to the crisis. The book project was put on hold and could only resume in September 2023.

In our first interview, Sezai Hazır spoke firmly about stepping down from Habitat's leadership. Over time, other interviewees shared their own reflections on the relationship between Sezai Hazır and Habitat, his leadership, and his desire to step down from leadership. Our final interview was conducted on April 29, 2024. Just 13 days later, on May 12, we lost Sezai Hazır.

The main body of the book was composed of information compiled from various sources and supported by testimonies. While interviews were conducted with 127 individuals, it was not technically feasible to include every testimony within the core narrative.

To make the most of these diverse and valuable experiences, I chose to feature them as supplementary additions at the end of the relevant chapters. (As attentive readers may notice, with the exception of two, all interviews were conducted during Sezai Hazır's lifetime.)

As the interviews unfolded and I listened to extraordinary stories, I came to believe there truly is a "Habitat virus", something that imbues its people with youth, energy, and transformation, creating an entirely different kind of community. As Nâzım Hikmet once wrote:

They came from the four corners of the world,
We speak different languages, yet understand each other,
We are green branches from the world tree,
There is a nation called youth and we are part of it.

From the moment I began working on this book to the very last word, I had the chance to meet wonderful people, both in person and online, and learned so much from them. I hope we have created a meaningful work, and I wish you an enjoyable read.

Haşim Akman

PART ONE:

THE BEGINNING
OF EVERYTHING

Where did this ‘Habitat’ come from?

In almost every language, certain words expand in meaning over time. Habitat is one of them. The Latin-origin word has been used as a noun in the field of natural sciences in English since the mid-18th century, describing “the natural environment of an animal or plant.” In time, “human” was added to this definition and the meaning was expanded as “the natural environment that supports the survival of humans, animals, and other organisms.” In both senses, habitat became widely used in scientific literature. That is, until 1972.

The Stockholm Conference, officially known as the United Nations Conference on the Environment, held in Stockholm, Sweden in 1972, was the first United Nations (UN) conference to address environmental issues at the global level. Following the recommendation in the final declaration that “the United Nations should organize a conference on **human settlements (Habitat)**”, member states began preparations. A date and place were set for the first Habitat Conference: Vancouver (Canada), 1976. The secretariat of the Habitat Conference would be Dr. Üner Kirdar, our diplomat working at the UN.

For the Habitat Conference, each member country was asked to submit a report and a short promotional film. At the time, Türkiye’s Istanbul Master Plan Bureau was collaborating with the World Bank on an urban planning project. When the request from the Foreign Ministry was forwarded to the Bureau, they

asked for someone with “language and professional knowledge” to be assigned. Selman Ergüder, Türkiye’s most senior UN-Habitat employee, tells the story:

Türkiye’s contact with Habitat started even before the Habitat organization was established. For the 1976 Vancouver meeting, each country was asked to prepare a report and a short film. I was given the job of preparing the video. I was a young urban planner working at the Istanbul Master Plan Bureau at the time, and I was already involved in a project with the World Bank. I collaborated with Sami Şekeroğlu, the founder of Mimar Sinan University’s Cinema-TV Center, as it was then called and we produced a beautiful film. Thanks to my foreign language skills and professional knowledge, they honored me by including me in the delegation from Türkiye.

We attended the first United Nations Habitat meeting as a delegation of four: The late Nurettin Ok, Minister of Public Works and Settlement; one representative each from the Ministry and the State Planning Organization; and myself from the Istanbul Master Plan Bureau.

Mr. Üner Kırdar from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in New York also came to Vancouver. He was a much more senior diplomat than we were. With the help of the Turkish embassies, we did our best to succeed there.

At the end of the conference, a 64-point declaration (the Vancouver Declaration) and an Action Plan were adopted. It was decided that Habitat conferences would be held every 20



A scene from the meetings at the Habitat I Conference, held in Vancouver on June 10, 1976: From left to right: Habitat Secretary-General Enrique Penalosa, Conference Chair Barney Danson (Canada), Conference Secretary Üner Kirdar, and General Rapporteur Adolf Ciborowski. Source: United Nations / Yutaka Nagata.

years. Thus, Habitat became the name of a mechanism authorized by the United Nations General Assembly. This mechanism “aims to ensure coordination of human settlements activities at the United Nations, to provide information exchange on sustainable human settlements and resettlement programs, and to provide technical assistance and financial support to countries to solve urban problems.” The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS), now known as the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), began its work in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1978.

At the time, with two-thirds of the world’s population still living in rural areas, urbanization, and the challenges that came with it, were relatively limited. This led to UN-Habitat receiving only modest levels of support in its early years.

Vancouver to Istanbul

Following the first Habitat Conference, the UN continued to organize different conferences in different countries under the framework of the Vancouver Declaration. One of these was the Rio Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit, held from June 3 to 14, 1992.

Süleyman Demirel, the Prime Minister of the time, took part in the Rio Conference, which was pivotal in establishing an international understanding on environmental protection and sustainable development and an action plan called Agenda 21. Demirel was impressed by the large number of heads of state attending the conference and the atmosphere created, and proposed organizing a UN Conference in Türkiye.

Hosting a UN conference is a major source of international prestige that cannot be achieved in any other way. For this and similar reasons, countries with high expectations may compete with each other to host UN meetings. For example, while Türkiye was also mentioned as a possible host for the 1994 World Conference on Population and Development during the Rio Conference, Egypt moved quickly and secured the role through a well-organized campaign. However, an anecdote written years later reveals that Türkiye was taking its time. Selim Yenel, who served in the Turkish Delegation to the United Nations in New York between 1988 and 1992 during his career in foreign affairs, tells the story:



Group photo of world leaders attending the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, known as the Earth Summit. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 13, 1992. On the far right of the back row stands the Turkish delegation, led by then-President Süleyman Demirel, who proposed Istanbul as the host city for the Habitat II Summit during this event. Source: United Nations / Michos Tzovaras.

By the General Assembly in 1991, it was announced that a UN Summit on Population and Development would be organized. While the summit was scheduled for 1994, a host country had yet to be decided, no one had officially stepped forward. I thought that Türkiye could host the summit. However, before any response came from Ankara, Egypt submitted its candidacy and launched a strong campaign to bring the summit to Cairo. Expecting future opportunities, I decided not to push further.*

Though Selim Yenel felt discouraged, he had no choice but to wait for another opportunity. A year later, however, he would later ease his quiet resentment caused by Ankara's inaction into a small act of his own, this time turning the tables with a subtle *fait accompli*.

During my last year in New York, it was announced that Habitat II would be organized in 1996. This time, I was not going to let the chance slip through my fingers. As

* Açık Telgraf (Open Telegram), p. 174.

soon as I found out, I consulted my Ambassador Mustafa Akşin and, with his support, we told Ankara about the benefits of hosting this summit. Before receiving formal instructions, we let it be known that Türkiye was a candidate. Eventually, in Article 47/180 of the General Assembly resolution of December 22, 1992, it was announced that this meeting would be held in Türkiye. Little did I know that what I considered my one clear achievement in those four years would later present serious complications in terms of the venue and organizational logistics.*

Selim Yenel admits that at the time he acted on a reckless whim, not considering Türkiye's capacity to host an international conference. In Ankara, however, the situation resonated positively as it coincided with the wishes of Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel.

Fikret Toksöz, who served as the Secretary General of the Union of Marmara Municipalities between 1992 and 2002, says: "It was then Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel who suggested that Habitat be held in Türkiye and who succeeded in securing its approval." He describes the Prime Minister's excitement in the following words:

At the Rio Conference on Environment and Development in June 1992, the hosting of Habitat II was in principle left to Türkiye. When Demirel returned to Türkiye from Rio, he said at a press conference in Istanbul: "From now on, we will consult civil society on everything. We will act together with civil society." Although this vision

* a. g. e., p. 174.

was never realized in practice, he wanted to convey the spirit of Habitat, that governments alone could no longer solve the environmental issue and that civil society, local governments, the private sector and the public sector should work together.

With Resolution 47/180 adopted at the United Nations General Assembly in December 1992, it was officially confirmed that the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) would be held in Istanbul from June 3 to 14, 1996. The government in Ankara had its hands full.

Amid many troubles

Following the 1987 referendum, Demirel, whom the military had tried to erase from the political scene with the September 12 coup d'état, returned to politics with great determination. Although the True Path Party, which he led, came first in the 1991 general elections, the number of deputies was not enough to form a government, so he formed a coalition with the Social Democrat Populist Party, and was reinstated as prime minister, after having been removed by force of arms, by the will of the electorate.

His words at the press conference held upon his return from Rio, *“From now on, we will consult civil society on everything. We will act together with civil society”* marked the beginning of a new political discourse, not just for Demirel, but for Turkish politics as a whole. Because the Western world, which we had oriented ourselves toward since the Tanzimat era, was rapidly advancing toward globalization. Demirel, having signed the January 24 economic reform package (24 January Decisions) in 1980, had already set the country on a path toward liberalization. 12 years later, it was time to liberalize the political and social spheres. In the 1990s, the world was changing and Demirel had seen this well in advance.

The fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) signaled the beginning of a dynamic and turbulent era in international politics in the following years. With the dissolution of the NATO–Warsaw Pact divide, a wave of democratization began across Eastern European

countries as they turned toward market economies.

The European Economic Community (1957), which set out with the aim of economic integration of its members, took a major step toward becoming the European Union with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which introduced European citizenship and laid the groundwork for a common currency, the Euro. In addition, the European Union also moved to integrate Eastern European nations politically and economically.

In the same period, technological progress, which accelerated at a dizzying pace with the widespread use of computers and the internet, played a transformative role in information sharing, communication and trade, and had a profound impact on international relations and politics.

In the meantime, Türkiye was searching for a way out of the three main problems (secularist-religious, Alevi-Sunni and Turkish-Kurdish), which were considered the country's "social and political fault lines" due to their long-standing potential for conflict.

The assassinations of Prof. Dr. Muammer Aksoy, the founding president of the Atatürkist Thought Association and a jurist; Turan Dursun, a religious scholar, former *imam and müftü* who distinguished himself with his thoughts and books critical of Islam; and Prof. Dr. Bahriye Üçok, Türkiye's first female theologian, in successive assassinations since the beginning of 1990, were troubling signs for a nation attempting to preserve political and economic stability.

During the "Gulf War", which began with the US bombing of Baghdad in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, northern Iraqi Kurds who were able to escape the chemical weapons used by the Baghdad administration took refuge in Türkiye (1991), which mobilized the southern border of the country.

The crisis, which started due to the remarks made during the oath ceremony by Kurdish deputies elected from Social Democrat Populist Party lists in the general elections during the swearing-in ceremony of Kurdish deputies, has gradually deepened. The relative superiority of the PKK, which had increased its armed strength during the *de facto* situation in Iraq, in armed conflicts with the Turkish Armed Forces in the Southeast and across the border, fueled increasing public backlash at home. The government enacted the Anti-Terror Law (1991), which also extended to rights-based organizations and media outlets.

The assassination of journalist Uğur Mumcu (January 1993) caused by a bomb placed in his car, followed by the crash of a military plane the next month that killed General Eşref Bitlis, then Commander of the Gendarmerie, during an official flight raised many questions. On May 24, 1993, 33 unarmed privates were shot dead by the PKK after being taken off the passenger bus they were riding on the Bingöl highway, causing deep outrage in the society. Immediately afterwards, on July 2, 1993, a radical Islamist group burned down the Madımak Hotel during the Pir Sultan Abdal Festivities in Sivas, killing 33 mostly Alevi writers, poets and thinkers; three days later, a large group of PKK militants raided the village of Başbağlar in Erzincan, killing 33 villagers and burning the village, paving the way for the state to act “as circumstances required,” and outside “routine procedures” under the pretext of fighting terrorism. Indeed, the following year (1994), the Democracy Party (DEP) was shut down and several of its members were imprisoned. Meanwhile, a number of figures linked to drug trafficking were accused of “financing terrorism” and would later appear in files related to a wave of “unsolved murders.”

“Push forward, figure it out later”

In Türkiye during those years, when every day brought its own anxieties, the decision by the UN General Assembly to hold Habitat II in Istanbul became official. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs passed the responsibility to the Prime Ministry, which in turn delegated it to the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement, since the conference concerned “human settlements.” From December 22, 1992 to April 1994, the responsibility for the preparations shifted back and forth between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement.

In the meantime, President Turgut Özal had died (April 17, 1993), Süleyman Demirel was elected to the presidency (May 16, 1993) and Tansu Çiller, the chairman of the True Path Party and Istanbul MP, was appointed Prime Minister (June 25, 1993).

The 50th government, led by Prime Minister Tansu Çiller, remained in power for 13 months; the 51st lasted less than a month; and the 52nd just six and a half months. Within less than two years, the country had seen five ministers of public works and six ministers of foreign affairs.

While there were internal uncertainties in Türkiye, the UN bodies continued to hold regular meetings to advance the Habitat II preparation process. One of these meetings was the 14th meeting of the UN Commission on Human Settlements held in Nairobi between April 25-May 5, 1993, where “views and proposals on the content of the Habitat II Conference were developed.”

The Habitat II Preparatory Committee Organization Meeting two months ago was attended entirely by a delegation from the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had withdrawn from the conference process.

Gencay Şaylan, who attended the meeting as an advisor to the minister without being fully briefed on the matter, was quick to grasp the gravity of the situation. As soon as he returned to Türkiye, he told Onur Kumbaracıbaşı, the Minister of Public Works and Settlement, “*We can not manage this. We should transfer responsibility to the Foreign Ministry.*” The reasoning behind Şaylan’s stance would later be explained by Prof. Dr. Gürel Tüzün, who was appointed as the head of the Habitat II Project Planning and Coordination Unit (HPCU) the following year, in his “Habitat Diary”:

When I met Gencay Şaylan in Istanbul after his return, he told me that it was only later that he realized why the delegates kept thanking Türkiye. It turned out that a UN conference (Habitat II) was to be held in Türkiye in 1996, and that the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement had been assigned to carry out the preparations for this meeting. However, no one informed Gencay, who was to attend the preparatory meeting, about this. Nor did anyone have any idea of the dimensions and difficulties involved. Upon his return, he spoke with Minister Kumbaracıbaşı, advising that the ministry would not be able to manage it and recommending that responsibility be transferred back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the original custodian.*

* “Habitat Güncesi” (Habitat Diary), p. 4.

In the aftermath of the Nairobi meeting, the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement indeed handed the responsibility back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which it regarded as the "rightful owner" of the process. Even though Habitat II was not allocated a share in its annual budget, the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement was the investor ministry, so it was possible to reallocate funds from other sources. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had no such means and this transfer of responsibility took place on June 25, 1993, the very day the first Çiller government was formed.

The Ministry of Public Works and Settlement wrote to the Prime Ministry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stating that it would be beneficial in terms of coordination and consistency to establish a separate unit for the organization of Habitat II and to have a senior official in charge of this unit attend all meetings abroad related to Habitat II, including the Preparatory Committee meetings, as the head of the Turkish delegation.

In the meantime, time was running out for Türkiye and discussions had even begun in certain circles about the possibility of relocating the conference to another country. According to the memoirs of Üner Kirdar, a diplomat working at the UN Secretariat, the UN stepped in at this stage:

History often has its curious twists. For example, when I was an international officer at the UN Secretariat, I was the secretary of the remarkable Habitat I Conference in Vancouver, Canada in 1976. Twenty years later, Habitat II was set to take place in my own country. Perhaps in recognition of that earlier experience, then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali appointed me as his special representative to help ensure the success of the conference.

I immediately visited Ankara for this purpose.

Mr. President, the late Süleyman Demirel, placed great importance on this conference. However, the government in Ankara did not share the same enthusiasm or interest. In fact, they were dragging their feet on signing the necessary agreement with the UN. This led to a negative atmosphere against us in New York, especially among international non-governmental organizations, and even to attempts to have the conference relocated to Geneva. During my visit to Mr. President, I presented this situation to him and he showed all positive interest and gave the necessary instructions.*

It took Türkiye almost nine months to determine which ministry would handle the organization of Habitat II, until Üner Kirdar visited Ankara as the “special representative of UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali.” Üner Kirdar says that this attitude, which he calls “Push forward, figure it out later”, is not new:

Türkiye was willing and honored to host the United Nations’ latest and most comprehensive international conference of the 20th century, scheduled for June 1996. However, the situation was reminiscent of the 1949 European Wrestling Championships. Neither the country nor the city had a venue suitable for such a large-scale international conference. Once again, we were faced with the “Push forward, sort the rest later” syndrome! Both the coffers of the Istanbul Municipality and the state were empty. In this respect, Mr. Demirel made a wise decision and entrusted

* Açık Telgraf (Open Telegram), p. 116.



In the second issue of *Platform*, a magazine published by Youth for Habitat in 1997, Üner Kırdar shares the significance of the Habitat II experience for Türkiye in an interview with Emre Koyuncu titled "Participation Begins at Home."

Source: Habitat Association Archive.

the hosting of the conference to the Housing Development Administration established by the late Özal.*

On April 7, 1994, acting on the instructions of President Süleyman Demirel, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested that the Prime Ministry assign responsibility for the conference preparations to the Housing Development Administration (TOKİ). Everything moved rapidly and Türkiye participated in the First Meeting of the Habitat II Preparatory Committee held in Geneva between April 11-22, 1994 with a delegation headed by TOKİ President Yiğit Güloksüz, accompanied by İlhan Tekeli and Necat Erder.

Türkiye, having volunteered to host Habitat II, wasted two valuable years instead of preparing comfortably and, as a result,

* Açık Telgraf (Open Telegram), p. 115-116.

found itself rushing to break free from the “push forward, figure it out later” mindset. Following TOKİ President Yiğit Gülöksüz’s return from the Geneva meeting, preparations were accelerated. The task of “carrying out Habitat II preparation and implementation activities, securing the necessary financial resources, and managing related expenditures” was made official in September. Prof. Dr. Gürel Tüzün, appointed in June, officially assumed leadership of the Habitat II Planning and Coordination Unit (HPCU) in October.

Habitat II and Türkiye

The first Habitat Conference in the 1970s focused on increasing urbanization, accompanying social and environmental problems. It recognized housing as a fundamental human right and emphasized the improvement of human settlements globally. At the time, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were not yet influential enough to play a significant role in these processes, although many were raising awareness around human rights and environmental concerns. Therefore, the conference, which was formed by governments and official delegations, resolved to encourage international cooperation. In the following years, as urbanization accelerated on a global scale, urban poverty increased, housing problems deepened, and problems of infrastructure, environmental sustainability and social inequality grew. In parallel with these developments, NGOs worldwide had gained significant influence over decision-making processes. At the Rio Summit in 1992, the decision to hold the NGO meeting 50 kilometers from the main venue drew criticism. However, addressing issues related to human settlements required the effective participation not only of the state, but also of all relevant actors such as local governments, the private sector, professional associations, and non-governmental organizations.

For this reason, the UN decided at Habitat II that the conference should include NGOs and local governments, not just governments. Participation, enabling strategy and governance

were identified as the means to achieve the fundamental objectives. Throughout both the preparatory phase and the conference itself, it was emphasized that efforts should focus on fostering a new governance approach that redefined the relationship between the governing and the governed.

According to the new arrangements, the Habitat II Conference introduced a second committee in addition to the General Assembly and the Main Committee. This new “Partnership Committee” would include representatives of groups considered “partners” of states in human settlements, such as local governments, NGOs, academics, housing and human settlement professionals, labor unions and the private sector. Local government representatives on the “Partnership Committee” were to be determined by international local government associations such as the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) and the United Towns Organization (UTO), in consultation with national local government associations.

Each constituent unit of the “Partnership” was expected to present and discuss the views, assessments, and proposals that emerged from its own forum with state representatives during each session of the committee. The resulting report would then be submitted to the General Assembly and included in the official documents of the Conference. Thus, the views of these organizations would, for the first time, be “taken into account” at a United Nations conference.

This structure made Habitat II the most democratic platform in the history of UN conferences, but was also groundbreaking for the urban governance system.

Türkiye, as a member of the Bureau of the Preparatory Committee, played a key role in shaping these decisions. The techni-

cal work, such as the construction and reorganization of the venues for the conference, were progressing in one way or another, the issue of selecting NGOs for the "Partnership Committee" was more complex, because there was no clear counterpart in Türkiye.

The HPCU delegation participated in the UN Summit on Social Development held in Copenhagen between March 6-12, 1995 and met with the Habitat II Secretariat and UN officials. During the Summit, the delegation observed and examined the activities of non-governmental organizations. They also met with Jan Birket Smith, the organizer of the NGO Forum.

The issue of non-governmental organizations was raised again at the second meeting of the Habitat II Preparatory Committee in Nairobi from 24 April to 5 May 1995.

A boycott looms

From the moment it was confirmed that Türkiye would host Habitat II, some international NGOs had launched a campaign for the summit to be held in Geneva rather than Istanbul, citing human rights violations such as burning of villages and forced migration, which were part of the public order problem at the time. The Habitat International Coalition (HIC)*, which was responsible for coordinating preparations for the NGO Forum at the Habitat II Conference, shared this concern. Enrique Ortiz, Executive Secretary of HIC, first wrote to Dr. N'Dow, Secretary General of Habitat II, and then to UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali.

In a letter to the Habitat Secretariat, Barry Pinsky**, the president of the Canadian organization Rooftops, which had been assigned by HIC to carry out preparatory work for Habitat II, stated that HIC's participation in Habitat II would be minimal

* The Habitat International Coalition (HIC) is an independent, non-profit network that has been active in the field of housing and human settlements for over 30 years. It comprises hundreds of organizations and individuals, including social movements, community-based organizations, support groups, and academics. For more information, visit: [Wikipedia.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habitat_International_Coalition)

** Barry Pinsky is the founding Executive Director of Rooftops Canada—Abri International, an organization that has been developing affordable housing worldwide for decades. Through partnerships in more than 30 countries, Pinsky has led social housing and microfinance programs that have provided safe, affordable homes to tens of thousands of vulnerable people.

<https://www.government.canada.ca/en/honours/recipients/136-52890>

unless there were positive developments regarding human rights in Türkiye.

The Nairobi meeting of the Preparatory Committee marked a turning point for Habitat II. Gürel Tüzün explains how they overcame this problem:

Representatives of the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) were present at the second meeting of the preparatory committee organized by the UN in Nairobi. Among them was Barry Pinsky, head of the Canadian organization Rooftops Canada, who had been tasked by HIC with overseeing the civil society dimension of Habitat II. We had serious discussions with them there. We listened to their objections and said, “We understand you. We agree with you in many respects, but it would be much more valuable to express your views in Istanbul. Instead of not participating, come and share your perspectives there. Come and engage directly with the NGOs in Türkiye through us.” We eventually persuaded them to drop the boycott idea against Türkiye. After that, they actively supported us in shaping the NGO Forum.

HIC, and therefore Barry Pinsky, had conditionally shelved its boycott plans and even promised to help and assist. But there was no connection between them and the NGOs in Türkiye. Moreover, only a few organizations in Türkiye, like the Chamber of Architects and the History Foundation, showed significant interest in the issue. Following Nairobi, at the NGO meeting in San Francisco (June 21-25, 1995), it was decided to establish an International Facilitating Group for the upcoming NGO Forum in Istanbul, along with a Host Committee in Türkiye that would

serve as its local counterpart and help coordinate preparations among Turkish NGOs. The rest is told by Gürel Tüzün:

Barry Pinsky said, “Civil society organizations in Türkiye should form a **Host Committee (HC)**. And let Jan Birket Smith help you.” We had met Jan Birket Smith at the UN Summit on Social Development in Denmark (March 6-12, 1995), where we had attended as observers a month earlier. There he was organizing the NGO Forum. Immediately after Nairobi, there was a series of meetings in San Francisco on June 21-24, 1995. There were going to be some discussions about Habitat there too. The representative of the “Host Committee” was to attend the San Francisco meeting. But since they did not yet have an interlocutor in Türkiye, I also went to that meeting. Therefore, from time to time I was asked, “Are you representing the Turkish state or non-governmental organizations here?” I said, “Don’t worry, they will organize as well” and the matter was closed. On August 4th, the “Host Committee” was established. With its endorsement, Jan Birket Smith started working with our non-governmental organizations and it was really helpful.

After returning from San Francisco, about 60 NGOs participated in the 3rd National Preparatory Meeting in Istanbul on August 4, 1995, forming the first core of the Host Committee. Although the number of participating NGOs fluctuated over time and each of them had financial and structural problems, the Host Committee worked tirelessly. Over time, it reached out to many more NGOs and endeavored to bring them on board. The relatively disorganized and weak structure of NGOs in Tür-

kiye, their limited capacity to represent civil society, their lack of experience in international engagement and the intense rivalries among them posed significant challenges. Nevertheless, the Host Committee fulfilled its responsibility to the best of its ability.

From its establishment until 31 May-11 June 1996, when the NGO Forum took place, the Host Committee was always involved in promotional efforts through venues, timelines and means. The activities centered in Istanbul were expanded to include Ankara, Bursa and Adana. Visits were made to numerous universities and high schools, and active participation in civil society events was ensured. At these events, speakers introduced Habitat II, underscored the vital role of civil society, and called on more civil society representatives to take ownership of the process.

In addition to the Host Committee, individual NGOs and support groups called “caucuses”, composed of various NGOs addressing the same issue from different perspectives, were actively involved in the process. These caucuses and NGOs worked to establish a horizontal structure among themselves, at times collaborating and at times acting independently. Among these were Fatih Municipality, the Women’s Library and Information Center, the women’s branches of ANAP and DYP, Çukurova University, the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TM-MOB), the Youth Caucus, the Children’s Summit, the Olympic House, the Children’s Caucus, the Legal Framework Caucus, the Istanbul Bar Association, Pimapen Culture House, Lions Clubs, Rotarians, and many other caucus meetings.

For information and promotion, the Newsletter and Pre-Registration Form were also sent to the listservs (in English and Turkish) of NGLS (Non-Governmental Liaison Services) in Ge-

neva, Rooftops Canada and, as available, the History Foundation NGO Information Center. In this way, approximately 10,000 international NGOs were reached.

As part of the effort to “enable” civil society representatives, alongside state and governmental bodies, to contribute to solving issues related to human settlements, a core concept of Habitat II, various NGOs and their caucuses in Türkiye received support in the form of information, organizational assistance, and funding.

The third and final meeting of the Habitat II Preparatory Committee, held in New York on 31 January and 1 February 1996, was attended by representatives of 20 civil society organizations from Türkiye, some supported by the Habitat II Coordination Unit and others funded by the United Nations.

Habitat II and promotion

Alongside its international outreach, Habitat II Planning and Coordination Unit (HPCU) also intensified its activities at home. The work was structured around three main areas: Organization, Promotion, and the NGO Forum.

The organizational work was managed by task forces responsible for everything from preparing the conference infrastructure and drafting the country report to managing external and internal relations and securing suppliers, as well as in-kind and financial supporters.

Publicity played a crucial role, not just in raising awareness about the aims, scope, and participants of the Habitat II Conference and highlighting its importance, but also because it would remain relevant after the conference.

The selected organizations prepared a comprehensive, three-phase promotional strategy for Habitat II in Türkiye.

The first campaign, launched in November 1995, focused on explaining the conference's significance and informing the public about its purpose, scope, and participants. The target audience had embraced the name Habitat and the slogan "6 Billion Earthlings to Arrive in Istanbul" had generated considerable buzz, but the subject and purpose of the conference were not fully grasped.

The second campaign, rolled out in March 1996, highlighted the importance of urban awareness with themes like "Claiming Your City," "Partnership in the Solution," and



At Maçka Art Park, adjacent to the Lütfi Kırdar International Convention and Exhibition Center, which hosted the Habitat II Conference, the Secretary-General of the Conference, Wally N'Dow, together with then-Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz and then-Mayor of Şişli, Gülay Atıg, inaugurated the conference's Youth Day event on June 9, 1996. A wall within the park was painted based on sketches inspired by the concepts outlined in the "Youth Declaration" written by the young people who attended the conference. This mural, which included the symbol that later became the Habitat Association's logo, remained a familiar sight to park-goers for many years. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

"Active Participation." It underscored that solving settlement issues required the involvement of all city residents; not just central governments, but also the broader society and civil society organizations, encouraging them to participate in relevant decision-making processes.

The third campaign, between May 11-25, 1996, announced that preparations were complete and that Türkiye was fully prepared to host the Habitat II Conference and welcome its participants. The campaign was implemented in partnership with advertising agencies and supported by major newspapers and

television channels. The scale and reach of the campaign naturally raised questions among various groups about the scope of its spending. Yet Türkiye's role as host of an international event of this scale for the first time in its history sparked a wave of volunteerism among media outlets. Special reports by renowned journalists were featured in newspapers and on television. Numerous ads, promotional materials, and radio spots were broadcast, and inserts were distributed in newspapers and magazines. Much of this was provided at no cost.

Gürel Tüzün, Head of the Habitat II Planning and Coordination Unit (HPCU), addressed this criticism during one of the meetings held as part of the project's activities with the following explanation:

People were talking about billions in advertising spending, which raised questions among many. But I think this is the first time such a thing has happened in Türkiye. All television channels, including TRT and private ones, provided three hours of free airtime for Habitat promotion. All newspapers, especially the best-selling ones, gave us ten full-page color ads for free. Radio stations contributed approximately ten hours of free airtime as well. So, apart from production costs, we didn't pay newspapers or TV stations for advertising at all.*

* "Habitat Güncesi" (Habitat Diary), p. 73-74.

Türkiye's debate on civil society

Every effort was made to ensure that Habitat II ran smoothly. In other words, the government was fulfilling its responsibilities. One of these tasks was ensuring the involvement of the “partners” in the conference.

Habitat II’s “partners” included local governments, the private sector, foundations, academies of sciences, professional researchers, parliamentarians, trade unions and civil society organizations.

In a statement released by the relevant task force, it was noted that “Every partner has a specific role and form of participation during the preparatory phase and the parallel events at the Conference in June 1996.” The call went on to define “partners” as follows:

The Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, also known as Habitat II, is designed as a “partners” conference. Who are the partners? Partners include all actors involved in human settlements, from the smallest villages to the largest megacities. In other words, all levels of government, from local to central; the private sector, academics, researchers, housing and settlement professionals; civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs); non-profit foundations; trade unions; and parliamentarians.*

* <https://ilhantekelivakfi.org.tr/habitat/>

The call, which included all contact information, was sent to domestic and international participants. Domestically, the call was sent to a total of 150 institutions and organizations, including ministries, parliamentary commissions, public institutions and organizations, higher education institutions, local government organizations, chambers and professional organizations, trade unions, central supreme unions of housing cooperatives, organizations and CSOs related to the housing and construction sector.

Among the partners, civil society organizations (CSOs) posed the most challenges, as there were few organizations that met the established criteria. First of all, there was no agreed-upon definition of what constituted a representative organization in the civic sphere. It was a new issue for everyone involved. Gürel Tüzün explains:

At that time, the term “civil society organization” hadn’t yet become established in Türkiye. In the initial documents we prepared at the Habitat II Project Planning and Coordination Unit (HPCU), we borrowed the term “non-governmental organizations,” which, of course, was a literal translation from the English term “NGO.”

Until Habitat II in Türkiye, voluntary rights-based advocacy associations with no ties to interest groups were generally classified under the label of “democratic mass organizations.” From the early 1990s onward, the increasing presence of associations, foundations, and similar organizations outside of political parties and the collaborations with international foundations and institutions brought the term “NGOs” as commonly used in everyday language, into our lives. At the same time, the concepts of CSO and the “Third Sector” were also being used.

Following the First Meeting of the Preparatory Commission for Habitat II in Geneva, the issue of “non-governmental organizations” in Türkiye was discussed in a series of symposiums.*

At the first symposiums, held on December 16-17, 1994, broader issues were discussed, including the historical development of civil society organizations, their relations with the government, local authorities, and the private sector, and challenges related to democracy and participation. The event also explored the challenges civil society organizations faced in coming together and establishing communication among themselves.

At the second symposium, held on June 23-24, 1995, under the title “Growing Civil Society in Our Shrinking World,” the focus was on the international relations of civil society organizations.

In the last symposium entitled “Communication Problems and Solutions among Civil Society Organizations” held on 7-8-9 December 1995, a seminar on “Project Preparation, Implementation and Project Management” was organized.

The first symposium was particularly instructive, as it highlighted how early Türkiye still was in addressing this issue. During the second session, Prof. Dr. Ioanna Kuçuradi objected to the use of the term “non-governmental organizations”:

There are a variety of opinions on what the equivalent of the English or French term “non-governmental” should be in Turkish. Some of us called them civil society organizations (this was preferred in our meeting), some call them voluntary organizations, some call them third sector organizations, or even “non-governmental” (translated as “hükümet dışı” in Turkish) organizations, as a literal

* Üç Sempozyum/Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları (Three Symposiums/Civil Society Organizations), Tarih Vakfı, İstanbul 1998.

And finally: A calm, quiet two weeks

Like rivers composed of streams large and small flowing into the sea, the implementation and monitoring efforts for Habitat II moved forward on multiple fronts, ultimately achieving their goal. The conference was attended by 3,638 delegates from 171 countries, 211 parliamentarians, 627 local government representatives, 83 representatives of UN agencies, 144 representatives of intergovernmental organizations and 2,523 representatives from 1,500 accredited civil society organizations. Additionally, 3,893 local and international journalists covered the event. Throughout the conference, 318 UN staff members and 4,341 local staff members were on duty. Thus, the total number of registered participants reached 15,778.

Just a few days before the Habitat Summit, the NGO Forum kicked off, featuring at least 100 meetings per day. It was attended by representatives from a total of 2,598 organizations (634 from Türkiye and 1,956 from other countries) with 2,565 participants from within Türkiye and 5,985 from abroad, making a total of 8,550 attendees. Additionally, 23,478 people attended daily sessions throughout the event. During the conference, a trade fair was also held, featuring 850 companies and attracting 25,000 visitors.

The conference officially opened on June 3, 1996, with speeches by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Turkish President Süleyman Demirel, who also served as the conference chair. Twelve hours before the opening, on the evening of Sunday,

June 2, 1996, an opening show titled “Lyrical History” was held at the Open Air Theater with the participation of around 500 artists. The performance showcased Türkiye’s cultural mosaic through music and dance, which was greatly appreciated by the audience. The show was prepared by Yekta Kara, General Art Director of the Istanbul State Opera and Ballet, along with Ali Taygun.

On Sunday night, June 2, Habitat II began with an artistic event and ended on Friday night, June 14, with sound, light and fireworks displays on the Bosphorus, at sea and on the Bosphorus Bridge. At that very moment, Türkiye also announced Istanbul’s bid to host the 2004 Olympic Games.

Sociologist Ayşe Öncü,* known for her research on “the intricate relationships between culture, space, and power” drew attention to the following points in her reflections of Habitat II**, which she wrote from a different perspective:

Throughout these two weeks, Istanbul experienced no bombings, police violence, prison hunger strikes, or street protests by Kurdish nationalists. To everyone’s amazement, the feverish renovation work in the city’s 19th-century center, designated as the main venue for the conference, was completed in time for the opening ceremonies. As sidewalks were repaved, streets were covered with asphalt, buildings freshly painted and flowers planted, Istanbul residents who had long suffered among piles of rubble rediscovered the beauty of their city along with their international guests. As a result, any complaints about the inconvenience and costs were soon forgotten.

* Prof. Dr. Ayşe Öncü, who was a faculty member at Boğaziçi University at that time, is currently at Sabancı University. See: <https://ayseoncu.com/en/>

** “Habitat II in Istanbul: Dispatch from the U.N. Summit”, The Journal of the International Institute, v. 4, issue 1, Fall 1996; <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0004.110>

Outcomes of Habitat II

No matter how it all began, by the time the conference came to an end, everyone who had worked tirelessly to bring Habitat II to fruition was filled with joy and satisfaction. Yet, those who had acted differently from day one due to political, ideological or other concerns were quick to share in the success.

Hosting an international meeting of this scale for the first time, Türkiye demonstrated its capacity to handle other large international events.

The Habitat II conference and summit produced countless beneficial outcomes, including increasing Türkiye's visibility and recognition in the eyes of the UN Secretary-General, visiting heads of state and government, and countless other participants at various levels. Diplomatically, politically, culturally, and in terms of tourism, Türkiye's profile was significantly raised. The topic was discussed and analyzed extensively in the media of the time.

Habitat II had two main outcomes, both of which form the basis of this book. One is its impact on Turkish civil society, which is briefly discussed below. The other is the commitment to implementing these decisions locally.

Habitat II was the last of the United Nations' thematic meetings aimed at assessing the key problems facing our world at the turn of the 21st century and seeking solutions. In nearly every one of these meetings, the UN brought together heads of state and government to encourage them to adopt the goal of making

human settlements healthy, safe, just, and livable. By including civil society elements at a “partnership” level in this final meeting, the UN demonstrated that civil society would be the driving force of the future.

Indeed, the “Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements” reinforced the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which announced the beginning of a new global partnership for sustainable development called Agenda 21, and emphasized the role of civil society, both individually and organizationally, in implementing the decisions through local-level partnerships.

The series of CSO symposiums, launched in 1994, marked the first time that CSOs with very different political and cultural orientations came together under one roof. This process also provided an opportunity for CSOs in Türkiye to reflect on their own situation and challenges. CSOs participated in the national committee established for Habitat II preparations and worked alongside other stakeholders to draft Türkiye’s National Report and Action Plan for the conference.

Habitat II was first and foremost an opportunity for the development of the civil society movement in Türkiye. Existing CSOs were joined by new ones, albeit in small numbers, during the preparatory process. Existing CSOs had the chance to get to know one another and connect with the broader international civil society network. As they gained experience participating in an international conference, they also had the opportunity to meet, mingle, and collaborate with foreign organizations at the NGO Forum.

The caucuses established within the Host Committee in areas such as women’s, youth, children’s and human rights, based on the conference agenda, carried out activities not only in Istanbul

and a few major cities but also in various communities throughout Anatolia. These efforts raised awareness of Habitat values among local communities.

The outcomes of Habitat II invited UN member states to adopt a global commitment and action plan, frequently referencing the outcomes of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Agenda 21) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The conference emphasized that Habitat II's outcomes both adopted and complemented this earlier document. These two outputs called for partnership-based action, beginning at the local level, to effectively address the challenges of human settlements and their natural environment. Therefore, to better understand the outcomes of Habitat II, it is necessary to look at Agenda 21.

Beginning with the statement “Humanity is at a critical turning point,” Agenda 21 drew attention to inequalities between and within nations, rising poverty, hunger, disease and illiteracy, and the deterioration of ecosystems. It emphasized that solutions lay in meeting basic needs, improving living conditions and better protecting ecosystems, and that this could only be possible through “global partnership”.

Agenda 21 was the most comprehensive action plan adopted by governments, defining the activities that national governments, local authorities and all independent sectors should undertake in all areas affecting environment and development in the 21st century.

In this context, the traditional forms of governance all over the world had to be replaced by a new model of “governance”, which is responsive to citizen demands, involves them in decision-making as stakeholders, is transparent and open to democratic control, and rooted in grassroots. It recognized that the

stakeholders of central governments and the international community should be local governments, civil society organizations and other local actors.

The core approach of Agenda 21 was based on priorities such as the identification of financing policies for all program areas, the generation of new resources, the creation of effective technical and economic instruments, strengthening the relationship between central and local governments with a view toward devolving more authority to the latter, fostering collaboration between government and non-governmental organizations, and ensuring the effective participation of the public.* Since most of the problems and solutions addressed were based on activities at the local level, the participation and cooperation of local governments were crucial for success. This is where the concept of "Local Agenda 21" emerged.

Initially, central governments resisted including Local Agenda 21 within the broader Agenda 21 framework. It was finally agreed that local governments in each country should initiate a participatory process with their local communities and develop a consensus-based Local Agenda 21 for their settlements by 1996. Clearly, the success of Agenda 21 depended on localizing its goals and implementing them with the participation of all "partners". In Türkiye, Local Agenda 21 partnership mechanisms were to be established through a project** launched in 1997, bringing together local stakeholders, primarily under the umbrella of City Councils. These City Councils would be supported by working groups focusing on specific areas of interest such as Women's and Youth Assemblies, and platforms for Children, People with Dis-

* Sadun Emrealt (ed.), *Türkiye Yerel Gündem 21 Programı...* (Türkiye's Local Agenda 21 Program...)

abilities, and the Elderly. After the Habitat II Conference, the concept of Local Agenda 21 aligned closely with the idea of a local habitat.

Immediately after Habitat II, even before it was formalized, local governments and CSOs in several Turkish cities and towns had informally initiated joint efforts to develop local action plans. The first and most successful of these was the Bodrum Habitat Conference. Held from October 7-21, 1996, and jointly organized by the Mediterranean Countries Academy Foundation*** and Bodrum Municipality, the conference brought together representatives from the central government, local authorities, professional organizations, and CSOs. This first local Habitat Conference in Türkiye developed a work program through the efforts of 20 different caucuses. In addition to the “Bodrum Work Program”, which is a local action plan for the Bodrum Peninsula, the commitment to the principles and objectives of the Istanbul Conference was emphasized and the “Bodrum Declaration”, in which local problems and solutions were expressed, was adopted.

It was certainly no coincidence that the Bodrum Habitat Conference became the most successful example. The robust collaboration between local government and civil society, particularly the Mediterranean Countries Academy Foundation, played a key role in its success.

** In Türkiye, Local Agenda 21 initiatives began at the end of 1997 with a decision by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Türkiye, supported by the United Nations Development Programme, and coordinated by the International Union of Local Authorities Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East Regional Organization. This was implemented through the “Promotion and Development of Local Agenda 21s in Türkiye” project. After this two-year project concluded, follow-up projects were carried out, and support activities continued for many years under the name “Türkiye Local Agenda 21 Program.”

*** <https://academia.org.tr>

Although not as organized as Bodrum, local habitat initiatives had also begun in more than ten other cities and towns, including İstanbul, Ankara, Bursa, Eskişehir, Çanakkale, and İzmir's Aliağa and Urla districts. The initiatives in İstanbul's districts, particularly in Kadıköy and Esenyurt, was based on the cooperation of local governments and CSOs, while in Ankara, a partnership between central and local authorities and CSOs emerged. Fikret Toksöz, Secretary General of the Union of Marmara Municipalities at the time, tells the story:

Before Local Agenda 21 was officially launched in Türkiye, I supported collaborations between civil society and the public sector in several municipalities under various names, including Local Agenda and Council. The municipalities of Antalya and Bursa are two municipalities that informally pioneered this partnership almost simultaneously.

The emphasis on democratic local governance after the Habitat Conference had created a sense of responsibility in Türkiye as the host country, especially on the part of local governments and civil society. The caucuses established under the Host Committee during Habitat II preparations could not extend beyond İstanbul due to organizational weaknesses, limited capacity, and financial constraints among Turkish CSOs. However, the Youth Caucus took the initiative by doing justice to both the energy of young people and the "Habitat spirit" and extended its reach into Anatolia. As a result, youth were recognized as the "most active segment" of Habitat II in Türkiye:

Youth is the most active segment among the "partners" in Türkiye. The Turkish chapter of Youth for Habitat has

been conducting a widespread and intensive nationwide campaign to raise youth awareness about human settlements and solutions to their challenges, as well as the Habitat II Conference itself. In addition, in line with the decision taken at the UN World Youth Forum in Vienna in November 1996, Youth for Habitat will host an international follow-up meeting on the Rio and Istanbul Conferences in Türkiye in September 1997. Preparatory meetings at the national level for this meeting, which will be attended by youth representatives from all over the world, are already underway.*

As attentive readers may notice: The subject of the first of the two sentences preceding the above quote, is “the Youth Caucus,” while the second is “youth.” Throughout the quote, the emphasis and praise are consistently placed on “youth,” which is that transitional phase of life between childhood and old age. After Habitat II ended, the Youth Caucus had also dissolved, as the caucuses were no longer needed. Therefore, all CSOs returned to their previous roles. However, “youth,” which initially had no recognized place or position, essentially existing only as a “caucus”, continued its efforts. As mentioned above, they carried on as the Turkish Chapter of “Youth for Habitat.” Over time, the name ‘Habitat’ in Türkiye became synonymous with the initiatives led by these young people, rather than just a summit or UN program.**

So it’s time to look at the formation of the “caucus”, what happened within it and what came out of it.

* “Rapor: Habitat II İzleme ve Uygulama Çalışmaları” See: <https://ilhantekecli-vakfi.org.tr/habitat-kutuphanesi/>

** In the rest of the book, whenever people recounting their experiences from those days mention the name “Habitat,” they are referring to the association.

PART TWO:

FROM CAUCUS
TO ORGANIZATION

Youth Caucus

At the Habitat II Conference, various social groups identified as “partners” were represented by CSOs including professional associations, chambers, cooperatives, unions, foundations, and more. Since critical issues such as the representational authority and competence of existing CSOs could not be fully resolved, and in order to broaden participation, the approach of having CSOs work as caucuses was adopted. Thus, for example, multiple associations and/or individuals interested in environmental issues would come together under the “Environment Caucus” and share their views, ideas, and recommendations through a designated “facilitator.” Similarly, caucuses were formed around topics such as women, children, disability, health, and sports. Their mission was to engage people and communities in their areas of focus, explain the significance of Habitat II and the NGO Forum, and foster broad-based participation.

The youth, which constituted one of the broadest segments of society at that time, lacked representation in the field of civil society, apart from organizations that embraced an extremely narrow segment of society, such as the Leo and Rotaract Clubs, AIESEC,* and the Turkish Scouting Federation. At that point,

* AIESEC (Association Internationale des Étudiants en Sciences Économiques et Commerciales) was founded in 1948 by seven young people from seven different countries with the aim of promoting cross-cultural exchange. It began its activities in Türkiye in 1954.

HABITAT

**GENÇLİK
KOZAŞI**

Gençlik kozası hazırlık çalışmaları

HABITAT II kapsamında, etkinliklerini gerçekleştirecek olan Gençlik Kozası, çalışmalarına Kasım 1995'te başlıdı. Kaşım ayında beri hızla ve yoğun bir tempolla çalışan Gençlik Kozası'nın başkanlığını Sezai Hazır yürütüyor. Uluslararası Gençlik Baharı'nı ve Youth for HABITAT II'nin de Türkiye temsilciliğini yürüten Sezai Hazır, hazırlık aşamasını söyle özetledi: "1994-1996 arasında, Youth for HABITAT II için Genova, Nairobi ve New York olmak üzere üç yerde hazırlık toplantıları yapıldı ve 5 kıtada organizasyon sağlanıldı. (New York, Nairobi, İtalya, Türkiye, Doğu Bloku Ülkeleri). Biz 1995'de örgütel bir çalışma baş-



Gençlik Kozası Başkanı Sezai Hazır
lattıktı. 18 ilde toplantılar gerçekleştirildik. Çalışmalarımıza, Belediye Başkanları, Vali'liler destek verdiler. Mart ve Mayıs aylarında 2 sempozyum düzenledik. Bu sempozy-

yumda, gençliğin sorunları, bekleyenleri ve çözüm önerilerini tartıktı. Hazırladığımız rapor da 6. Ulusal Kongrede sunduk.

HABITAT II sonrasında, tüm bu çıkan sonuçların, yapılan çalışmaların Türkçe ve İngilizce broşür ve video kaset haline getirerek eğitim amaçlı olarak kullanılmaması istiyoruz."

Yaklaşık 80 kuruluşun yer aldığı Gençlik Kozası'nda, AISEC, ELSA, Boğaziçi Üniversitesi İşletme Klubü, Marmara Üniversitesi Management Club'ının yanı sıra, bir çok lise ve üniversitede gönüllü olarak faaliyet te bulunuyor.

Yesim Akyük

A newspaper clipping in which Sezai Hazır talks about the work of Youth Caucus, June 1996. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

however, there was little else to do but to establish a "Youth Caucus." Şengül Akçar, who attended the conference on behalf of the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (KEDV), which she had founded, describes the process as follows:

In 1996, during the preparatory work for the Habitat II Conference, we, as civil society organizations in Türkiye, took the initiative to come together and formed a Host Committee for the NGO Forum. Nearly all civil society organizations joined this effort. That's where I first met Sezai. The Foundation for the Support of Women's Work was in its tenth year, and we were serving on the national committee. To ensure broad and inclusive participation, we were working to establish thematic working groups among civil society organizations, including groups focused on women, youth, and children, amplifying their voices. We called these working groups "caucuses." Sezai

was the facilitator of the Youth Caucus. He joined the Host Committee not on behalf of any organization, but as an individual and as the facilitator of the Youth Caucus.

The facilitator of the Youth Caucus was Sezai Hazır, the youngest individual member of the Host Committee at 37. He had already prepared himself to be of service in the field of civil society.

While studying at Eastern Mediterranean University, Furuzan Güyer came to Istanbul in 1995 to work at a human resources development foundation and soon found herself in the Host Committee, which held meetings at Bilsak*. “At first, I didn’t really know what was going on, but I learned,” she recalls:

I was the coordinator of an EU-funded project on AIDS at the time. Together with a doctor friend, we founded the “Health Caucus” within the Host Committee. Our caucus included 18 organizations or individual representatives ranging from groups focused on narcotics and alcohol addiction to the Heart Foundation and the municipality. During that time, I met a ton of people. One of them was Sezai Hazır, who is still a dear friend of mine and was in the process of establishing the Youth Caucus. In addition to Health, there was also the Environment Caucus and a few others involving architects, but most weren’t very active. Ours was strong, and so was the Women’s Caucus, led by Şengül Akçar. I used to attend their meetings as well. But the most active of all was Sezai’s Youth Caucus.

* Bilsak (Science, Art and Culture Institution) is a center founded in 1984 in a five-story building in Cihangir, Istanbul, by a group of artists and scientists.

The Sezai Hazır factor

Those born in the second half of the 1950s were introduced to concepts like organization, organized movement, and organized struggle either during their high school years or became “organized” later at university, shaped by the country’s social, economic, and political conditions. In that period, when politics was starkly divided between left and right as a reflection of the bipolar world order, it took great skill to be on the side that “did not want to seize power”, in other words, to remain neutral. Sezai Hazır navigated this climate with a different awareness, maintaining a libertarian stance and staying outside of definitions that limit human beings:

During my university years, there were neither universities spread across Türkiye as there are today, nor were there any youth organizations we could truly call civil society organizations, apart from AIESEC. In any case, only engineering and business students who had some knowledge of a foreign language and were financially well-off could join AIESEC, as it was an international organization. Most youth organizations at the time were polarized along right-wing and left-wing lines, so were the schools. It was nearly impossible to speak of a civil society organization that wasn’t affiliated with a political ideology. At Yıldız Technical University, where I studied, leftist views

were dominant. I considered myself a libertarian, but I never confined myself to any particular mold at that time. I believed in the importance of engaging with everyone on a human level. At the time, we were living in an atmosphere imposed by a bipolar world order, and my thoughts had not yet fully taken shape. In the leftist discourse of the 1970s, which revolved around “China, Russia, or Albania?” there was little room to talk about human rights, environmental issues, or women’s rights. I was certain that the formalism and rigid rules of that period did not suit my spirit. The ability to think freely, embrace different perspectives, and approach issues with common sense has always been deeply important to me.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, as the bipolar world became a thing of the past, the space for civil society outside the direct control of the state began to expand. The role of the individual grew and new actors emerged. Organizations and other voluntary initiatives formed by individuals, either independently or on their own initiative, began to gain value. CSOs, which gave voice to different segments of society and enabled public participation in political processes, played an active role in the transparent, accountable, participatory, and effective formulation and implementation of public policies. It became clear that advocating for rights was possible even without seizing power.

Issues once overshadowed by ideological conflicts, such as climate change and environmental problems, gender discrimination, over-exploitation of natural resources, problems of animals, disadvantaged groups, gained momentum. Worn out by shallow political debates that pointed to an uncertain future, people had

begun searching for new paths. Sezai Hazır reflects on this shift, saying, “I’ve always been excited by the idea of doing something that can genuinely make a difference in people’s lives.” He continues as follows:

I am someone with a highly developed social awareness. When I see someone living in poverty on the street or witness environmental destruction, I’m affected. The same goes for animal rights. I was never drawn to politics but the idea of engaging with these kinds of issues without getting involved in politics was very exciting for me. The Özal years were more liberal than the period before, but even then, the practices of that time didn’t inspire me. I graduated in 1986 and started working at an engineering firm, but sitting at a desk doing engineering work didn’t make me happy. The thought “This job isn’t for me” kept running through my mind. I was closely following cinema, theater, cultural events, and what was happening around the world. That continued until 1995 when the opportunity I’d been waiting for finally landed in my lap. A few years earlier, the United Nations had held a major summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Although access to information wasn’t as easy as it is today, I followed international developments through the press and friends who traveled abroad. I had already been very sensitive to environmental and nature-related issues. At the Rio Summit, it was decided that Habitat II would be held in Türkiye, and this caused quite a stir here. At the time, Türkiye was going through one of its most turbulent periods, particularly with the Kurdish issue at the forefront. There was talk of

the danger of civil war, and human rights violations could not be curbed. On these grounds, there were intense protests against the UN's decision, demanding that "It should not be held in Türkiye."

As mentioned in the previous section, at that time in Türkiye, the number of organizations focused on rights advocacy and issue-based work could barely be counted on two hands. The number of associations capable of turning their protests into public demonstrations was even smaller. The international solidarity that had long existed among rights advocacy associations came into play when Habitat II became official. Sezai Hazır, closely following the steps being taken as a curious individual, recalls: "In 1995, Canadians came to Türkiye and invited civil society organizations." He continues as follows:

The Canadians shared how they prepared for such conferences, what they did, and their overall experience. That was the meeting that excited me the most and led me to get involved. I attended as a young person with no affiliation to any organization, coming completely from the outside, simply driven by my sensitivity to and enthusiasm for these issues. At the time, the meetings were organized entirely on a voluntary basis, sometimes held in a bar in Taksim, sometimes in a hotel. Some of the Canadians who visited us had built their careers in civil society organizations. But back then, the concept of civil society was still very new in Türkiye. Youth organizations established under association status in Türkiye were, for the most part, political entities aligned with either the left or the right.

Through those meetings, we came to understand just how well-organized rights-based and issue-focused civil society organizations were around the world.

Canadian professionals were in charge of preparing existing associations and organizations in Türkiye for the NGO Forum within the UN Habitat organization. However, the meetings were frequently stalled by unproductive debates among the participating associations, and the overall outlook was far from encouraging. Sezai Hazır expressed his frustration with the situation at a conference he attended. Sadun Emrealp, one of the speakers at that conference, recounts:

During Habitat II, we were organizing an initiative similar to the World Assembly of Local Governments, and I was serving as its secretariat in Türkiye. At one of the conferences we organized, while I was speaking about the importance of collaborating with civil society organizations and how crucial their participation was, someone took the floor and introduced himself as Sezai Hazır. He said, “Sir, you say that, but civil society organizations aren’t ready for this.” I couldn’t keep quiet and said, “Mr. Hazır, it’s ironic that with a last name like yours (which means ‘ready’ in Turkish), you claim you’re part of civil society yet say you’re not ready. That can’t be right. We are ready to cooperate, and the conditions are favorable.”

The great poet Kemal Özer writes in one of his poems, “we were warned and / then we organized.” Responding to Sadun Emrealp’s call to “step up and take responsibility,” Sezai Hazır joined the Host Committee:

Within the Host Committee, which had been formed to prepare for the Habitat meetings, there were various caucuses such as women, youth, environment, and others, organized around specific areas of interest. Since I was the youngest among the members, I was given the role of “facilitator of youth work.” I liked the word “facilitator” much more than “director” as it was softer, carried no hierarchy, and implied no one was dictating anything to anyone.

Alone, for the love of the pir*

At that very time, Dilara Sezgin was a young student studying Persian Language and Literature at the Faculty of Language, History, and Geography at Ankara University. “Before the Habitat Summit, Sezai and I were just two people attending NGO meetings, saying, ‘Let’s start an initiative too,’” and goes on to share the excitement she felt about making Istanbul part of her journey:

We didn’t really know what we were going to do or how we would contribute. We simply believed that there would be a government-led summit on one side and a civil society summit on the other and that we could add our ideas to the conversation and make our voices heard. We didn’t have many expectations. What excited us was the possibility that the documents would reflect the views of people from different segments of society, and that a social dialogue could take place. We were happy in those days.

We were coming together in meetings and trying to shape a shared vision. There was no precedent to guide us. It was very exciting for a 16-year-old girl to discuss issues

* Pir is a term from the Sufi tradition referring to a spiritual guide, sheikh, or mentor. It is also used metaphorically to mean “a venerable person” or “a master of a craft.” In this context, the phrase “for the love of the pir” evokes a sense of devotion to a profound passion or a higher calling.

such as how youth can be more participatory in society and present their own ideas in policy-making, especially in the context of an international summit.

If the UN were to hold a summit in Türkiye today, it wouldn't be met with the same level of inexperience as back then. At that time, there were CSOs in Türkiye, albeit small, but they did not have the international network that they have today. Moreover, at that time, CSOs were not viewed favorably due to certain political fears. We had no money for the work we were doing. If we had a single bagel, we would share it. Attending the meetings we were invited to at the UN building in New York, funded partly by support we received from UN agencies, partly from various other sources, and partly with contributions from our families, greatly broadened our horizons.

We wanted to share this experience with young people in Türkiye. The events and seminars we organized reached university students and broader audiences. Suddenly, our numbers grew and we found ourselves working alongside students from different cities across the country. We never strayed from our principle: to remain outside of politics and work for the public good.

In addition to certain CSOs working on Habitat-related efforts, caucuses formed in specific areas also received varying levels of support from the HPCU. This support included the transfer of information, organizational assistance, and financial contributions, depending on the needs at hand. While some cash support was available, only associations or foundations could benefit from it. By law, HPCU could not provide direct funding to unions, caucuses, or other entities without legal status. However, it was



A scene from the Youth for Habitat reception held on June 9, 1996, on Galatasaray Island, the date designated as Youth Day of the Habitat II Conference.

Source: Habitat Association Archive.

trying to meet their in-kind needs such as providing meeting spaces, stationery, and other logistical support within its means. In the Youth Caucus, Sezai Hazır was all alone and penniless, but what did it matter?:

The head of the Habitat organization was Yiğit Güloksüz, then President of TOKİ (Housing Development Administration of the Republic of Türkiye), and he had assembled a team from METU (Middle East Technical University). When the Host Committee was formed, they explained issues related to civil society and UN meetings. The official meetings of heads of state and government delegations were to be held at Lütfi Kırdar, while the NGO Forum was set to take place at Istanbul Technical University Taşkışla.

I was incredibly excited to be the facilitator of the Youth Caucus. Who was there in Türkiye at the time? Leos, Rotaracts, AIESEC, scouts... And political organizations. I had taken an initiative with zero prior knowledge. Behind me was the momentum of the slogan “6 Billion Earthlings to Arrive in Istanbul,” and it thrilled me. Also, at a meeting in Denmark, we joined the international Youth for Habitat network as the Youth Caucus. Since I saw myself as the host, I felt the real responsibility and the real challenge was mine. I was going to handle the entire organization. We were going to bring the world to our doorstep, but we had no office, no money, not even a fax machine.

As the Youth Caucus, we were calling on governments: “Bring more young people here!” and sending faxes to youth organizations around the world. Friends from Canada gave us tremendous support. At the head of the UN Habitat Office in Kenya, by coincidence, was a Turk, Selman Ergüder, who also helped us a great deal.

Core team

The initial activities of the Youth Caucus focused on visiting schools and informing students about the upcoming summit. The momentum created by the advertising and promotional campaigns carried out by professional agencies had really stirred things up. School administrators and teachers, from both private colleges and public schools in Istanbul, who had been following the developments closely, warmly welcomed the “Habitat officials” who approached them for informational meetings. Galatasaray, Üsküdar American, Robert College, and all the French high schools were competing to be involved. Information was being shared, and contacts were being made with those who would volunteer in preparing the youth forum.

The wind of Habitat II, carried into high schools by the Youth Caucus, changed the routine atmosphere of the schools and felt like just what the doctor ordered for those students searching for a way to make their existence meaningful. Emre Koyuncu was one of them:

I took my first step toward Habitat in November or December of 1995. I was 16 at the time, a sophomore at Kadıköy Anatolian High School. A friend said to me, “There’s going to be a Habitat meeting. I don’t want to go alone. Why don’t you come with me?” He had heard about it from one of our English teachers. By June 1996,

we were hearing that a major summit called the Habitat Conference was going to be held in Istanbul.

In 1995-96, there were frequent changes in government on the one hand, terrorist incidents, assassinations on the other... Türkiye's agenda was in turmoil all while Habitat's "6 Billion Earthlings to Arrive in Istanbul" ads were running.

After the 1980 coup, there were civil society organizations in Türkiye in the fields of the women's movement, environmental organizations, and, of course, human rights. The focus of human rights work was especially centered on the developments in the southeast. Istanbul was the heart of civil society, and with Habitat II on the horizon, the global winds of democracy that had begun blowing after the collapse of the Soviet Union were expected to reach here as well. In the 1990s, the United Nations had revived the series of major thematic summits it had organized in the 1970s, on social development in Copenhagen, on women in Beijing, and finally, Habitat II in Istanbul. Unlike its predecessors, Habitat II welcomed not only country delegations but also civil society organizations. This was a major opportunity not only for the civil society movement but also for Türkiye, which was poised for transformation. Back in high school, I had an interest in politics, but I wasn't actively involved. Once a person reaches a certain level of awareness, the idea of "I can do something too" begins to take shape. Moreover, the atmosphere itself was saying, "We're going to do something together, come join us." It was that inclusive. The Habitat slogan "6 Billion Earthlings to Arrive in Istanbul" still

rings in my ears today. I wasn't even a very social person, but that message was so compelling, I wanted to be part of it. At the first meeting I attended, there were students from various high schools and universities. Everyone was inviting each other to join in. Sezai would explain what would happen and what needed to be done at the meetings, but he never acted like an absolute authority. His role, in line with one of the buzzwords of the time, was that of a facilitator. In any case, everyone spoke and shared their ideas.

In 1995, Pamir Yörük was a 16-year-old sophomore at Üsküdar American High School. At the time, he had no idea what a civil society organization was or what it actually did. "I wondered if I could do something for Habitat, so I started attending the Youth Caucus meetings," he recalls:

The Youth Caucus formed in preparation for Habitat was entirely informal, a series of meetings that people joined whenever they had some time and energy. It had no legal or official identity as an association or any other entity. It was simply a large group that met somewhere each week. Today, the United Nations might not command the same level of attention, but back then, it really mattered. Maybe we had idealized it a little in our minds and we were constantly thinking about how to raise awareness and contribute. We were trying to figure out how to connect with the young people coming to the conference, assuming that most of them had limited funds and couldn't stay in hotels, and we were searching for ways to solve their accommodation problems. We kept this going all the way

through to June 1996. We were all high school students in Istanbul, roughly the same age. Only Mr. Sezai was older, but his spirit was younger than any of us. We all became one team.

Taksim and its surroundings were the closest areas to where Habitat would be held and the most central location accessible to everyone. The team met regularly at least once a week under the name “Habitat II Host Committee Youth Caucus High School Youth Initiative.” Meetings took place wherever space was available, sometimes in a café, an CSO office, a studio, or even a marriage registry office. As Habitat gained more recognition, school administrations began offering their halls to host the meetings.

Zeynep Aydemir Koyuncu recalls her experience from a meeting she attended in 1996 with these words:

I was a student at İşık High School (Ayazağa) when I first got involved with Habitat in 1996. I had a wide circle of friends at school and a strong network. I was always interested in things like decision-making processes and representation. When school alone no longer felt fulfilling, I started looking into what I could do outside of it. The Habitat Conference’s slogan, “6 Billion Earthlings to Arrive in Istanbul” had caught my attention. A friend told me about the Youth Caucus. I learned that they were gathering at a different place every week. The first meeting I attended was held in the evening at Notre Dame de Sion High School. Some of the people we would later work closely with were at that meeting, but I especially remember Sezai and Emre from that day. At the time, they were discussing questions like “How can we create fund-

ing?" and "How can we reach more people?" In the beginning, the goal was to foster cooperation, connections, and friendships among high schools so that those who participated could share information with those who did not. High school students were also getting together at various social events. I said, "Give me 10 tickets, I'll sell them to my friends." While the parties continued for a while, the nature of the meetings gradually began to shift.

At Youth Caucus, we were just getting acquainted with issues such as "What can be done for human settlements, participation mechanisms, what is our role?" Suddenly, we found ourselves involved in organizing all kinds of activities, welcoming and hosting the young people coming to the conference, coordinating collaborative activities and art events, or organizing a concert.

One of my favorite aspects of Sezai was that he tried to involve families. After all, we were minors at that age, and our families were curious about where we went and who we hung out with. Sezai was well aware of this. We used to organize joint dinners with our families. He also established such an atmosphere of trust. I think Sezai's oratory, the words he chose, and even his body language played a very important role in the impact of the movement that spread all over Türkiye.

The Youth Caucus's efforts to boost participation in Habitat were carried out on two fronts: domestic and international. The center of domestic activity was naturally Istanbul, but the influence of CSOs in major cities like Izmir, Ankara, and Adana also proved valuable. Sezai Hazır reflects, "I was a grown man with



At the Habitat Association office on the 12th floor of the Şişli Municipality building, Zeynep (Aydemir), Emre (Özdemir), and Zeynel are busy preparing for an international meeting to be held in Eskişehir a few months later. Selman Ergüder from UNCHS is also contributing to the work at the office. April 1997. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

zero knowledge in these matters, surrounded by a team of 15–20 people, all of them passionate about the cause and mostly just high school sophomores” and he goes on to say:

Since Habitat would include the demands of young people, we wanted to travel across Anatolia, hold regional meetings, and present the youth perspective to the Habitat Summit. Once we had the incredible momentum of Habitat behind us, some municipalities stepped in to support us with venues. We held five regional meetings, primarily in Kocaeli and Çanakkale. Erdem Saker, then Mayor of the Bursa Metropolitan Municipality, wrapped a bus with Habitat branding and allocated it to us. We were on the road... and there was this incredible energy around us. We were so excited and happy that, as we traveled through

Anatolia, everyone saw us as the ones in charge of Habitat and that gave us an unbelievable boost of motivation.

International efforts were carried out from a single center. Operating out of the Tür Promotion Agency office, owned by Ender Merter, the Youth Caucus sent out fax invitations to youth organizations within the Youth for Habitat network, calling on them to participate in the Habitat II Conference. All the work for Habitat II was discussed in the meetings of the Preparatory Committee, which met regularly and functioned according to a certain hierarchy, but as the conference date approached, it became increasingly difficult to address every issue in full detail.

As more and more youth organizations sent faxes saying they would “respond to the invitation”, a serious problem that no one had thought of until then began to appear on the horizon. At this point, let’s briefly pause to mark the Youth for Habitat initiative, which has been mentioned twice already, and return to the flow of the narrative.

This initiative, launched entirely by the Youth Caucus on its own, also brought with it a “housing problem” for the guest participants. Emre Koyuncu says, “This problem gave birth to a ‘hosting initiative’” and explains how they solved it:

We said, “Young people from all over the world will be coming for the conference, there may be a need for accommodation.” No official request was made to any government institution for this effort. Everything unfolded entirely through the participants’ own initiative and one-on-one relationships. For instance, we arranged to use the dormitory of Galatasaray High School in Ortaköy. It was the kind of environment where a high school sophomore

could walk up to the school principal, explain the situation, and get a positive response. We also encouraged students to host guests in their own homes, much like the tradition of the International April 23rd Children's Festival. We shared the needs within our own networks, and the support spread like waves. Some families even opened their homes; records were kept, hosts were matched with guests...

In addition to the conferences and forums held throughout Habitat, there was also a series of "parallel events." These events, focused on culture and the arts, aimed to showcase Türkiye's cultural, artistic, and touristic richness to international guests. They were professionally organized by a task unit established specifically for this purpose within the official structure.

In this context, the Youth Caucus "took the initiative upon itself" and extended its efforts into the realm of culture and the arts. "We started discussing what we could do with friends from our own and other high schools," Emre Koyuncu recalls. Together, they developed a project: a series of concert events featuring high school music groups. The idea was certainly good, but they had no allocated budget nor access to basic stage equipment like sound systems or lighting, all essential for a concert. The one-day concerts were planned to be held at Dolmabahçe Küçükçiftlik Park, the area with street basketball courts in Bostancı, Ortaköy Square, and also at the now-defunct Tatilya, which had offered its space saying, "We want to contribute to Habitat as well."

We were looking for bands to perform at the concert, so we went through the demo recordings submitted to Milliyet newspaper's High School Music Contest. A friend of ours, who played guitar in a band and had some musi-

cal knowledge, listened to the recordings and helped select the best ones. One of the groups we selected that day was a band no one had heard of yet, fresh out of the German High School that year, which would later become known as Mor ve Ötesi.

There were seven or eight bands in total, all made up of high school students. It took a great deal of effort to reach them, invite them, prepare introductory texts, and promote the event. A friend and I went to Küçükçiftlik Park and presented our project to the director. We had reached out to the Fine Arts High School to help us set up a stage there. There was a massive stage at Küçükçiftlik Park, installed by the concert organizer Ahmet San. I ended up having a long phone call with him, someone I only knew from television, and it was incredibly exciting for me. The cell phone I used belonged to my cousin, who was a doctor. A few friends involved in coordination had also borrowed phones from friends and acquaintances. Friends with radio connections continuously arranged advertisements. Our walkie-talkies during the concert came from our sponsor Aselsan, and the T-shirts we wore throughout the event were provided by Tür Promotion Agency and Marshall.

After months of effort on the high school platform events, the only one we managed to hold was in Ortaköy. The bands showed up at Küçükçiftlik Park, but the venue was located right at the entrance to the Habitat Conference Valley; it was out of the way and hard to access. On top of that, the police had closed the area off for security reasons. In Kadıköy, the municipality allocated a space, but the event couldn't be held because they didn't set up an adequate

sound system. Since Habitat had become widely known, we made use of that popularity. We organized a fantastic reception on Galatasaray Island. In the park now known as Şişli Maçka Art Park, hundreds of participants painted a large mural based on content developed during a workshop. We carried out all our activities with the spirit of partnership, as emphasized in the Habitat Conference outcomes, and on a zero budget. If partners tried to give us money, we didn't even have a bank account to receive it. They trusted us. At the time, I was under so much pressure as the "Activities Coordinator" that the stress was overwhelming.

The Youth Caucus, entirely composed of high school students and, even at its most crowded, no more than 15 to 20 people, carried out its work with the smallest of means but with truly tireless, wholehearted dedication. Their efforts culminated in a success that surprised everyone: 300 youth organizations from 130 countries came and took part in the Habitat II Conference. The guests were accommodated in school dormitories and the houses of team members and their neighbors. Many were hosted by families who responded to the Sister Family Campaign, opening their doors to support the initiative. This penniless Youth Caucus earned widespread praise for successfully pulling off an organization far beyond its means. On June 9, designated as Youth Day, Galatasaray Sports Club hosted a reception on Galatasaray Island on behalf of Youth for Habitat.

The reception, attended by CSOs, youth delegates, and many representatives from official delegations around the world, served, in many ways, as the final gathering of the Youth Caucus after months of breathless effort.

Youth For Habitat

Bringing 300 youth organizations from 130 countries to a country with a limited civil society landscape, facing scarcity and hardship, and without even holding legal status was a truly extraordinary achievement. The name behind this success was Youth for Habitat.

In the quote above, where Youth for Habitat is first mentioned, Sezai Hazır refers to joining “the international Youth for Habitat network as the Youth Caucus” at a meeting in Denmark. The phrasing gives the impression that Youth for Habitat was an existing organization under UN Habitat, and that the Youth Caucus simply joined it. But in reality, no such formal organization existed at the time. However, the Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen between March 6-12, 1995, was of great significance in highlighting the important role that NGOs, especially youth organizations, would play in Habitat II.

So, what happened at the Copenhagen Summit?

Dr. Wally N'Dow, Secretary General of Habitat II, reached out to youth organizations at the Summit and offered suggestions on how to make youth participation in UN conferences more effective and visible. He pledged his support for youth involvement in the Habitat II process, their activities leading up to the conference, and committed to including Youth Day (June 9, 1996) in the official agenda of Habitat II.

In this inspiring atmosphere, Sezai Hazır did not remain idle.



A photo from the declaration ceremony of the “Youth for Habitat” manifesto, prepared by youth delegates from around the world during the Habitat II Conference (June 9, 1996). Source: Habitat Association Archive.

As he engaged with representatives of youth organizations, many of whom he was meeting for the first time in his life, he also came to a decision about his own future:

We were a team that had never taken part in an international meeting abroad before. At that time, we learned that numerous international meetings were being held around the world, and that civil society organizations were actively and strongly participating in the United Nations economic and social council. These kinds of gatherings were taking place all over the globe. What we were hearing was beyond anything we had imagined until then. Still, some of the explanations left me with questions. I didn't fully grasp certain issues. But when I attended the Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen and met so many people there, all the gray areas in my mind suddenly became clear.

Suddenly, we found ourselves becoming friends with young people from all over the world and that completely changed my career path. Pakistan, India, Costa Rica, the USA, Türkiye, Portugal, Kenya... we created a network among ourselves called **Youth for Habitat II**, with the aim of enabling more young people from around the world to participate in the 1996 summit in Türkiye. As someone who had never attended an international meeting before, I suddenly found myself working alongside like-minded peers from entirely different countries, many of whom were far more experienced than I was. And just like that, I found myself involved in something like this.

At the time, I was working at an engineering firm. When I returned from the summit, my boss did me a favor. He said, "Your mind's no longer here. I'm giving you a year of paid leave but after that, let's not see each other again." I had no idea what I was going to do next, but I didn't hesitate. I accepted it and I was thrilled.

Sezai Hazır, as it can be understood, mingles with hundreds of like-minded NGO representatives from different countries and exchanges business cards, to use an old-fashioned term. At this summit, where the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) was dissuaded from boycotting Türkiye, he pioneered the establishment of an international communication network called Youth for Habitat II. This effort gained functionality and continuity at the second meeting of the Habitat II Preparatory Committee in Nairobi on May 4-5, 1995 and in San Francisco on June 21-25, 1995. With the establishment of the Host Committee in August, Youth Caucus began to make full use of this network.

Selman Ergüder, who worked at UN Habitat from 1984 until 2007 when he retired, explains how Youth for Habitat was “born out of nothing”:

UN Habitat was a small organization, with only about 90 professionals. It simply wasn’t possible for one person to oversee everything, so in certain areas, someone would be assigned to take charge and organize things as best they could. In 1996, I was the Head of the Housing Policy Branch at Habitat’s headquarters in Nairobi, and I was also the facilitator for civil society organizations working in the areas of aging, youth, human rights, and disabilities.

When our team from Türkiye arrived as hosts, they took on most of the responsibility. Mr. Sezai was an incredibly hard working individual. Under the name Youth for Habitat, he not only mobilized young people but operated almost like an international NGO. There had been no such organization called Youth for Habitat before and it was born out of nothing during this conference. At the time, quite a few NGOs based in Kenya got involved in Youth for Habitat, and they built very close ties with Türkiye. As the Habitat Bureau, we didn’t do much work ourselves; we mainly supported them with documentation and helped facilitate travel for some participants. We didn’t have much of a budget ourselves. We were operating on donations from member states. The young people worked incredibly hard. They accomplished impressive results and were more dynamic than many of the older participants. Their capacity for action was outstanding.

As you can see, there was no organization called Youth for Habitat. The fact that it was “born out of nothing” was entirely the result of Sezai Hazir’s foresight and organizing skills. He convinced some 300 youth organizations from nearly 100 countries, many of which were probably part of the HIC, to come together under the umbrella of Youth for Habitat. The initiative he laid the foundation for at the Copenhagen Summit was in a way finalized at the second preparatory meeting of Habitat II in Nairobi. The UN Habitat Office accepted it as it was, as young people were really pulling their weight. Moreover, it continued its support after Habitat II ended.

Stop or keep going?

After the conclusion of the Habitat II Conference, everyone and everything in Türkiye returned to “business as usual.” Some of the local governments primarily responsible for implementing Agenda 21 were mobilized. In some provinces and districts, youth and women’s assemblies started to take shape, albeit haltingly. The “youth as the driving force” for coordinating, accelerating, and scaling up the program had not yet come into play.

During the entire Habitat II Preparation process, the Youth Caucus, which had organized countless conferences, meetings and events, creating a “youth storm” wherever it could reach, entered a kind of waiting period after the conference ended. By June 1996, most of the team had entered their final year of high school and were suddenly confronted with the weight of heavy coursework and the looming reality of university entrance exams.

“I ran around for a year,” Emre Koyuncu says and continues as follows:

I was a successful student before Habitat, my grades were good. That year I started to struggle, I was getting grades I had never received before. Two responsibilities weighed heavily on me and I buried myself in my studies during my junior year. Pamir was at Üsküdar American High School. He had already been accepted to Princeton University in the US so he was much more at ease during

that time. So he and Sezai were running around together intensely after Habitat.

This was an interim period that left Sezai Hazır in a dilemma of “Stop or keep going?” just as Pamir Yörük pointed out:

Since our goal had been centered around the conference, once the Habitat Summit and related events ended, things began to disperse. People went on vacation, schools closed. There was nothing left to discuss, and the excitement had faded. That summer and into the following year, we tried to keep the momentum going with a smaller team. Even then, I stayed connected and continued to go back and forth regularly.

Realistically, the situation was not bright at all. Sezai Hazır had quit his job to work for civil society and had come this far with the solidarity of friends and relatives during the Habitat process. With no job, no obligations, and no Habitat anymore, a small opportunity emerged to keep the young people around him together.

Nilüfer Devecigil, who now works as a psychologist and has kept in touch with Sezai Hazır since she met him, wanted to contribute to society through her work. So she started asking around and eventually found exactly the person she was looking for:

Sezai and I met in the early days of Habitat Association. He had opened a modest place in Mecidiyeköy, which could hardly be called an office, and his team consisted of only a few people. I was working as an overseas education consultant at the time and I was deeply moved by Sezai’s

passion for working with young people. His goal of making a meaningful impact on young people's lives resonated with my own work in education. When we discovered this common language in our long conversations together, we decided to develop various projects with young people.

First, we arranged for volunteer students to take part in education fairs abroad and the budget allocated to them was donated to Habitat. In this way, young people gained experience and funds were created for some of Habitat's projects. Later, we collaborated on a variety of initiatives from sending high school students abroad to organizing summer school programs with host families. I also had the opportunity to support Sezai's projects internationally.

Over time, I realized that Habitat was not only a transformation space for young people, but also for me. Although Sezai valued the projects we did together, the real contribution was that Habitat transformed me. In my journey from educational counselor to psychologist, Habitat's understanding of being useful to people inspired me. I realized that helping isn't a one-way process and these experiences shape and change people deeply. Working with Habitat has made me realize how I myself develop while helping others. This mutual transformation has become a great achievement for me.

The first step towards organization

The anticipated signal did not take long to arrive. After each summit, the United Nations supported the establishment of a civic organization to commemorate the event. Habitat II's most successful and visible field of work was, as everyone agreed, youth engagement, hence Youth for Habitat. Thus, the first step was taken to formalize the relations. Sezai Hazır explains how the process unfolded:

Following the suggestion to institutionalize youth organizing, we came together and laid the groundwork for the Youth for Habitat network. In a regional structure, I was elected as the European representative alongside a Portuguese friend. Initially, the Americans assumed the role of secretariat. Mesut Yılmaz, who was Prime Minister at the time, stipulated that a portion of Türkiye's UN membership dues be allocated to support our youth work. Shortly after, Gülay Atığ (Çokay), the mayor of Şişli, offered us space on the 12th floor of the Şişli Municipality building. And just like that, we had our first office. We still didn't have legal status, nor money yet everyone was opening doors for us. Someone covered our bus tickets, someone else provided accommodation. We were moving forward in a spirit of collective effort.



As part of the United Nations World Youth Forum held in Vienna in November 1996, the outcomes of the Human Settlements Working Group are displayed on the wall of the meeting room. On the paper titled "Meeting in Türkiye," the ink is barely dry on the decision regarding the international summit to be held in Eskişehir ten months later. The "New Partnership for Action" meeting mentioned on the sheet to the left would later be organized by Youth for Habitat Italy in Turin in 1999. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

It was at that point that they received an invitation to attend the World Youth Forum. The second World Youth Forum, organized by the UN every two years, was to be held in Vienna on November 25-29, 1996. Preparations began immediately. As it had done before, THY would again cover the airfare to Vienna. "We were excited about the meeting on the way to Vienna," Sezai Hazır says and continues as follows:

I took one person from AIESEC, Pamir from our group, and others from various organizations to create a diverse delegation. We had no money. A friend of mine from university was living in Vienna. Seven of us stayed at

his place. But we had our posters ready. When we walked into the meeting, people greeted us with amazement, saying, “Where did you appear from? Where have you been until now?” It turned out that in the absence of a strong civil society, ministers or bureaucrats had been attending UN NGO events in our place.

At that time, a decision was to be made about organizing an “international follow-up meeting” to monitor the outcomes of Habitat II. Of course, we had no funding, no legal association, no official status but I stood up and said, “We want this meeting to be held in Türkiye.” The friends who were with me, each of them representing NGOs in their respective fields, tried to stop me. None of them had to attend, yet in the end, at that United Nations meeting, we succeeded in getting the decision passed: the Interna-



A photo from the United Nations World Youth Forum held in Vienna in November 1996. In the front row from left to right: Pamir Yörük, Yavuz Zeydaoglu (second), Dilara Sezgin (fourth), and Sezai Hazir (fifth).

Source: Habitat Association Archive.

tional Youth Follow-up Meeting would be held in Türkiye in September.

Sezai Hazır's bold move mirrored Selim Yenel's *fait accompli* in 1992, when he pushed to host Habitat II in Türkiye driven by the motivation to do a good job. This time, however, even though it was a UN meeting, the decision did not bind states or governments, as it concerned civil society. Sezai Hazır knew this, of course, and as soon as he returned to Türkiye he went straight to the Foreign Ministry:

Ours was really the courage of ignorance. We had no official title other than being civil society activists. At that time, I don't know if he passed away, an ambassador scolded me, saying, "Are you crazy? How can you make such a decision on your own?" I said, "Well, such a decision has already been taken. We have no legal status in Türkiye, but we are a network. We are an organization recognized and accepted by the United Nations Habitat Office as Youth for Habitat. What should we do now?" He replied, "Let's have this meeting, but you need to have a legal entity before you can make it happen."

By necessity, an association

At the meeting, attended by Ambassador Uğurtan Akıncı and Envoy Şule Soysal from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Directorate General of Promotion, UNDP Resident Coordinator Paul Wan Hanswijk De Jonge, UN-Habitat Office Representative Selman Ergüder, Youth for Habitat Türkiye Representative Sezai Hazır, Ender Merter on behalf of Tür Tanıtım and Marshall, the private sector's biggest supporters of youth initiatives from the very beginning, and Habitat II Project Coordinator Gürel Tüzün, the situation was evaluated. It was decided that the International Youth Follow-up Meeting would be held in Eskişehir and that Youth for Habitat Türkiye would be entrusted with the tasks of monitoring the Habitat Agenda and localizing the Agenda 21 Program. However, Youth for Habitat needed to have a legal entity in order to carry out these activities.

Becoming a legal entity meant becoming an association and that, in turn, meant adopting a hierarchy. But up until that point, the team driving the youth work had made decisions collectively. This "requirement" wasn't something they had anticipated at all. What's more, most of the team members who had worked tirelessly and fully deserved to be founding members were under 18, in other words legally minors and therefore ineligible to officially found the association. Even the name of the association reflected the rushed nature of the process and the kind of formality that didn't quite align with the spirit of civil society. But at that point,

the most reasonable course of action was to accept the situation.

Since Agenda 21 or Local Agenda 21 directly concerned the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry's Legal Advisory Department drafted an extremely strict charter to eliminate any possibility of external infiltration or takeover of the association.

Ender Merter, the owner of Tür Tanıtım and an early supporter of youth work; Feridun Uzun, CEO of Marshall Boya, for whom Merter had done advertising work; Furuzan Güyer, a former contributor to the Habitat Host Committee; Pınar Yörük, sister of "high schooler" Pamir Yörük; Mehmet Can Tarhan from the European Law Students Association, a handful of structured youth organizations involved in Youth Caucus efforts during the Habitat Conference; Zeynep Özbil from the Boğaziçi Business Club; and others joined Sezai Hazır in officially founding the association. Thus, the youth initiative, which had been active under the name Youth for Habitat Türkiye until then, gained legal status as the **Youth Association for the Implementation of the Decisions of Habitat II** and Agenda 21 on April 1, 1997. The association received \$100,000 in financial support from the UN's Assistance to the Habitat Process Project.*

Emre Koyuncu recalls those days by saying, "It was the period when I closed myself off to studying for the university exams" and continues as follows:

I had learned that Sezai had decided to continue. I was mostly at home, buried in my studies for hours, but I stayed in touch with my friends. Every now and then, I'd stop by the office on the 12th floor of Şişli Municipality.

During Habitat II, the youth organization, which had

* Habitat Güncesi (Habitat Diary).



Sezai Hazır at the Habitat Association office on the 12th floor of the Şişli Municipality building in the early months of 1997. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

emerged only for the organization of some summit-oriented activities, successfully fulfilled its responsibilities and completed its function. While it was expected to be disbanded, Sezai Hazır decided to continue so that the national and international network and the experience gained during the process would not be wasted.

Sezai's power to persuade the bureaucracy, which is what he does best, was also effective. He also used the United Nations resolutions as leverage. Had he not said, "Look, this is an international responsibility, it's the responsibility of states, we need to keep it going," no one would have cared. No one would have said, "We need such an organization." But democratization efforts were widespread at that time. As the host country of Habitat II and the country that issued the Istanbul Declaration,

TOKİ, the coordinating organization of the Habitat Conference, stood behind such an international organization for Türkiye.

Of course, the association was established in a hurry. We didn't even pay attention to the name. Can you imagine such a name? I was born on March 31st and the association was founded on April 1st, 1997. I couldn't be a founding member because I was under 18 at the time. Many of us who should have been founding members were in the same situation.

That summer, I was accepted to Galatasaray University. Since I would be doing a prep year, I felt more at ease. I started working again.

Eskişehir International Youth Follow-up Meeting

From the beginning, youth work in the Habitat II process was based on strengthening international relations. Born at the 1995 Copenhagen Summit, the idea of Youth for Habitat was a product of this approach and remained alive as long as conditions permitted. However, even though the young people who returned home after the Habitat Conference continued to work in their own regions, communication among them eventually broke down. At the World Youth Forum in Vienna (November 25-29, 1996), Youth for Habitat Türkiye brought up this lack of communication and proposed a “follow-up meeting” in Eskişehir in September 1997 in order to strengthen connections, and the proposal was accepted. The reason for suggesting Eskişehir as the venue for the meeting was simple. First of all, Youth for Habitat was well organized in the city that is home to Eskişehir Anadolu University and Osmangazi University attended by tens of thousands of students.

Moreover, Orhan Soydaş, the Mayor of the Eskişehir Metropolitan Municipality at the time, had expressed to young people he met during the Habitat process that they were “ready to provide all kinds of support.” Since returning from Vienna (November 30, 1996), Youth for Habitat had focused its efforts on preparing for the International Follow-up Meeting in Eskişehir.

After Youth for Habitat gained legal status as the “Youth Association for the Implementation of the Decisions of Habitat II and



At the association's office on the 12th floor of the municipality building, volunteer teams are preparing invitation envelopes to be sent to youth organizations around the world and to heads of delegations attending the Habitat II Conference.

Source: Habitat Association Archive.

Agenda 21," it defined a work strategy aligned with a three-year project in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Housing Development Administration of the Republic of Türkiye (TOKİ). Although not rigidly divided, this strategy encompassed both domestic and international activities.

Domestically, the primary task was to prepare a National Report and Action Plan within the framework of implementing Habitat and Agenda 21 decisions. These documents were to be discussed at the International Youth Follow-up Meeting and later presented at the 1998 World Youth Forum and the following year's UN Human Settlements Commission Meeting.

The Eskişehir meeting was scheduled for September 14–21, as decided during a national gathering in Bursa on March 1–2,

1997 prior to the official establishment of the association and this date was shared with all organizations in the Youth for Habitat network.

Until the Eskişehir meeting, the team had six months of intense work ahead of them. The association's establishment on April 1 brought one major change: they now had a budget to manage. Still, Sezai Hazır continued to advise his team, "Let's act like we don't have any money." Emre Koyuncu describes this state of "scarcity in abundance" as follows:

The international conference was another stress and responsibility. At that point, we had funds, but we acted as if we didn't, treating the budget we had received like "rainy day money." Sezai is still running the affairs of the association as if we have no money. We were still pursuing sponsorships and making efforts to persuade potential supporters, while at the same time managing to secure some sponsors. For example, my father had a friend who was a factory owner, I convinced him, he briskly counted out and handed me two thousand dollars. My university entrance exam went well. With the results set to be announced in a month or two, I packed my bags and joined a group heading to Eskişehir. The Odunpazarı Municipality provided us with an office; we moved into a guesthouse and got to work.

On one front, the team initiated regional preparatory meetings across the country. Five regional meetings were held in provinces and districts including Bursa, Çanakkale, Sivas, Kocaeli, Çeşme, İzmir, and Eskişehir, five focusing on youth participation in local governance and two on youth participation in universi-

ty administration. The central topic of the meetings was “Local Agenda 21,” or in broader terms, “Implementing Habitat decisions.” For many Anatolian cities unfamiliar with these concepts, this was a challenging endeavor. Emre Koyuncu’s words affirm this observation:

When you say “implementing the Habitat decisions”, it may sound abstract, but under that heading, many topics were discussed and declarations were prepared, from unemployment to social centers where young people could come together, from opportunities to improve our skills to simply saying, “We exist and want to be recognized.” After five regional meetings, inspired by the Habitat II process, we created a National Report and Action Plan specifically for youth. We wanted to show attendees that the network remained active after Habitat.

In parallel with the national preparatory meetings, Youth for Habitat maintained international engagement. The Youth for Habitat delegation was present at the Habitat Partners Meeting in Geneva (January 31, 1997), the SDC* 5 Meeting in New York (April 6-21, 1997), the 16th Meeting of the UN-Habitat Commission in Nairobi (April 27-May 7, 1997), the Global Youth Forum in Seoul (June 3-8, 1997) and the Earth Summit +5 in New York (June 21-27, 1997).

* The Sustainable Development Council (SDC) is a non-profit international organization that aims to promote and facilitate the establishment of a global network. It is a partner of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Nairobi Work Programme (NWP) and holds special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The meeting in question refers to Rio 1992+5, held in New York on June 21-27, 1997.

Habitat Association's *Platform* magazine was also published in English with international content. The first issue featured on its cover a slogan that had emerged in the Habitat II youth declaration: "We are not only the leaders of tomorrow, but also the partners of today."

Source: Habitat Association Archive.



In the meantime, the association, which also runs the international secretariat of Youth for Habitat, also started to publish an international newsletter in accordance with the decision taken in Vienna. The bulletin was a 1-2 page English-language news brief, published every 15 days or as needed, and sent to around 900 youth organizations within Youth for Habitat's communication network. Another noteworthy component of the publication efforts was Platform magazine, which began to be published quarterly. Designed and produced by Tür Tanıtım, the first issue was released in Summer 1997 with the cover slogan: "We are not the leaders of tomorrow, but the partners of today." The magazine's masthead was organized as follows:

The bulletin was prepared for the Youth Association for the Implementation of the Decisions of Habitat II and Agenda 21 with the support of TOKİ and UNDP Ankara.

Project Coordinator: Sezai Hazır

Editor: Emre Koyuncu

Editorial Advisors: Ender Merter, Mehmet Can Tarhan, Pamir Yörük, Zeynep Aydemir, Emre Özdemir

As the editor of the magazine, Emre Koyuncu, in his introductory article titled “Hello”, not only introduced *Platform* but also described the broader publication efforts undertaken by the association.

We are happy to be with you in our first issue.

We have dreamed of this newsletter since the very first day when the idea of Youth for Habitat was formed. Our efforts have yielded results and today YFH which began with the mission of connecting youth worldwide has built a wide communication network.

As YFH-Türkiye, we have undertaken the coordination of the worldwide communication network. Since June, we have been working on both international and national newsletters under a three-year project with UNDP and TOKİ. The first issue of our international newsletter was published in August. The newsletter is sent to 900 youth organizations around the world that we are in contact with. Our national bulletin, *Platform*, is published quarterly and sent to civil society organizations we are in contact with across the country, as well as to other partners (including the government, TOKİ, UNDP, and local administrations.) In addition to these bulletins, we publish the YFH announcement bulletin, the first issue of which was published on July 24th. The announcement bulletin is a 1-2 page fax that will be published every 15 days with short activity news of the organizations.

A total of 812 people from 42 cities participated in the meetings and a National Action Plan was prepared in English and Turkish under the sponsorship of Bursa Metropolitan Municipality to be



Regional coordinators of the Youth for Habitat International Communication Network, appointed during the Habitat and Agenda 21 International Youth Follow-up Meeting held in Eskişehir between September 14–21. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

distributed to all participants.

Prior to the meeting, 80 selected volunteers received a one-month training to ensure the event would run smoothly. The Eskişehir International Youth Follow-up Meeting began on September 14, 1997, and concluded on September 21.

The Eskişehir International Youth Follow-up Meeting was significant in several ways:

- For the first time after a UN summit, youth organizations insisted on tracking their responsibilities in implementing the decisions made and demonstrated that an international meeting could be held collaboratively, without major financial assistance from the UN or governments.
- For Türkiye, the most significant point was that youth organizations, which had not been represented at UN

meetings just two years earlier, had now reached the level of hosting an international gathering.

- Compared to “the Global Youth Forum organized by the United Nations Environment Programme in Seoul, which saw 100 participants”, the attendance was far beyond expectations. The meeting, which hosted 430 youth representatives from 42 countries, also saw participation from representatives of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) Ministry of Environment, the State Planning Organization, the Housing Development Administration (TOKI), municipalities, the private sector, and civil society organizations, serving as a fine example of the partnership that developed and became continuous after the Habitat II Summit. The attendance of representatives from UN-Habitat, UNDP, and other programs was one of the concrete indicators of the high-level development of the partnership with the United Nations.
- During the meeting, nearly 100 workshops and 10 panels were organized on human rights, substance abuse, art, human settlements and environment.
- To define the international policy and working model of the Youth for Habitat International Network, the topics of “Communication-Fundraising, Education, and Networking” were addressed. The reports prepared on these themes were adopted as a general report.
- At the meeting, where youth representatives from Türkiye were very active, the name Youth for Habitat International was changed to Youth for Habitat International Network by adding the phrase “International Network” after the group work.



The media team of the Habitat and Agenda 21 International Youth Follow-up Meeting, held in Eskişehir from September 14 to 21. By publishing a daily bulletin, the team helped participants stay informed about the various events taking place simultaneously during the conference. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

- To ensure international communication between youth groups and maintain contact with UN Habitat, the role of international secretariat was entrusted for two years to the Youth Association for the Implementation of the Decisions of Habitat II and Agenda 21, the institutional successor of Youth for Habitat International Network-Türkiye.

Sezai Hazır says that the Eskişehir International Youth Follow-up Meeting was a “milestone” for them:

The meeting was very well attended. The Americans, who had been following our work from the beginning, said, “You have taken the lead in this work, and you have done it successfully. We are now handing over the role of Youth for Habitat’s world secretariat to you.” In this way, the secretariat of the international network we had already built was passed to us. The youth of Türkiye,



One of the activities at the Habitat and Agenda 21 International Youth Follow-up Meeting, held in Eskişehir from September 14 to 21, was a wall-painting event, just like the one held a year earlier during the Habitat Conference. A concept aligned with the conference theme was brought to life through a collaborative mural created by the participants. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

who until two years ago had to make intensive efforts to access international information, now had direct access to it. From this perspective, the meeting was very successful in terms of establishing and sustaining international partnerships, institutionalizing joint work with the United Nations and gaining experience. At the same time, as young people, we set an example for delegates from other countries by showing that we were actively following up on the decisions made at the Habitat II Urban Summit held in our own country.

When we went to New York for the “Earth Summit +5” (June 21–27, 1997), many countries were already evaluating the outcomes of the 1992 Rio Summit, whereas Türkiye had yet to take any steps in that direction.* The government took action to implement the decisions taken in Rio by launching the Local Agenda 21 Program in

1997. They said to us, “Be a partner in this program and coordinate youth work.” We started working as a partner of a program in Türkiye for the first time, which was also a milestone for our growth and momentum.

* The meeting referred to here is the 5th SDC Meeting, held in New York between April 6–21, 1997 (see previous footnote). Youth Association for the Implementation of the Decisions of Habitat II and Agenda 21 became the first youth group from Türkiye to attend these annual April sessions following the 1992 Rio Summit, which required ECOSOC accreditation. Their participation was only made possible through the support of the Pan-African Movement.

Towards the National Youth Parliament

The International Youth Follow-up Meeting to Implement Habitat II and Agenda 21 Resolutions organized by the Association in Eskişehir was successfully completed. The youth organizations, which came together at the end of an intensive work of about six months, not only evaluated the implementation process of the Habitat resolutions, but also adopted the following resolutions:

- To raise public awareness of the Habitat II and Agenda 21 decisions, and to develop youth perspectives at the global, regional, national, and local levels for their implementation.
- To encourage relevant institutions to take action at the local level in areas where no initiatives exist to implement the Habitat II and Agenda 21 resolutions.
- To bring the global dimension to life within ongoing local activities related to Habitat II and Agenda 21.
- To facilitate the exchange of information among international and national CSOs/Civil Initiatives (CIs), national youth assemblies, regional youth assemblies, other youth organizations and umbrella networks.
- To ensure information sharing within the Youth for Habitat International Network in areas such as training, fundraising, communication, and networking.
- To organize and facilitate international follow-up activities

such as conferences, seminars and workshops that primarily address youth issues and their contributions to community life in relation to Habitat II and Agenda 21 decisions.

- To establish links with relevant UN offices, CSOs, CPs and other partners to achieve these objectives.

The Eskişehir meeting with its preparation phase, the organization itself, high participation, workshops, trainings, and other activities during the event, was, in a sense, a testament that the association had proven its maturity. As a matter of fact, two months later, in November 1997, the Youth Association for the Implementation of the Decisions of Habitat II and Agenda 21 became an official partner in the “Project for the Promotion and Development of Local Agenda 21s in Türkiye,” conducted through a protocol signed by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Cities and Local Governments Middle East and West Asia Section (UCLG-MEWA). “As an association, we became part of the Local Agenda 21 Program through a protocol, with the aim of establishing ‘Youth Assemblies’” says Emre Koyuncu and continues as follows:

The Local Agenda 21 Project provided us with leverage for us both financially and in terms of maintaining the network, and has ensured the sustainability of the association.

The Local Agenda 21 Program was, in essence, a “bottom-up democratization” initiative. Its main objective was to ensure that local civic actors in the City Councils participate in decision-making processes and interact in solving all kinds of problems.

Covering 73 cities over time, the program adopted a decentralized and empowering approach that emphasized equal partnership between government, local authorities, and civil society. The primary decision-making and implementation mechanisms of the program at the local level were essentially the local stakeholders organized under the umbrella of the City Council. The City Councils were supported by mechanisms aimed at special interest groups such as Women's and Youth Assemblies, Working Groups, and Platforms for Children, Persons with Disabilities, and the Elderly.

The fact that civil society in Türkiye was not sufficiently organized and the existing ones were weak and located in a few large cities was the biggest obstacle to the implementation of Local Agenda 21 decisions. As its name suggests, the Youth Association for the Implementation of the Decisions of Habitat II and Agenda 21 took on the role of enabling youth, the most dynamic group among local stakeholders, to take ownership of the program.

The local Youth Assemblies, the main partners of the City Councils, were inclusive structures that brought together all organized and unorganized youth in the city such as CSOs, university student unions and clubs, high school representatives, neighborhood representatives, youth representatives from public and private institutions, and members of working groups and conveyed their needs and expectations into local decision-making processes.

Youth Assemblies in different cities would come together regularly through various regional and national meetings and events to form the umbrella organization, the National Youth Parliament (NYP), which would eventually evolve into the National Youth Assembly.

Horizontal organization

Before the Local Agenda 21 Program was officially launched, some municipalities had already, albeit tentatively, established structures where urban problems were discussed and debated, under names such as councils, assemblies and senates. Emre Koyuncu says, “While we were working on youth issues, the work that had been done in local governments up to that point was not without merit” and continues as follows:

Local governments were involved in the Habitat preparation process for Habitat. Some had already developed participatory mechanisms. For example, the City Council in Bursa and the City Assembly in İzmit were established before Habitat, while in Antalya they were established right after Habitat. These structures brought together municipalities, civil society organizations, and working groups. The concept of the City Council, essentially a democratic project, emerged during this process.

While working for the Youth Assembly, we soon found ourselves also explaining the City Council. We invited anyone we could find who was involved with youth to the meetings, but we never had the attitude of trying to win them over or make them one of us. Our position was very clear: We were saying, “We are not trying to create a

hierarchical structure, we are trying to mobilize you. We're here to be a bridge for what you want to achieve." Our dream was to create spaces where youth from Diyarbakır and Izmir could connect.

There were national youth assemblies in many countries in Europe, we would go and see them. Action had also been taken in Türkiye, but we raised objections. National youth assemblies were meant to be built from the bottom up. In our country, however, there was no local organization or movement, and the attempt was to establish them from the top down. Our opposition was met with disapproval by CSOs in Istanbul, but the strength we gained from working in the field across Türkiye allowed us to stand firm and be effective.

Istanbul, as in many other matters, tends to see itself as Türkiye as a whole and acts accordingly when it comes to civil society work too. However, at that time, we were all over Türkiye, gathering people together, bringing new information and taking action. We were not popular, but we were well known.

In Türkiye, any organization that grows within society without relying on local, national, international or any other power structure, and that reaches a certain size and attracts attention, inevitably ends up on the radar of the state and political power centers.

In the general assembly held in 1998, the association shortened its name to "**Habitat and Agenda 21 Youth Association.**" By that time, it had already begun to face the consequences of becoming an enticing center of attraction. It was participating in

international meetings around the world on equal footing with official state delegations; domestically, there was hardly a high school or university it hadn't reached; and it was in contact with youth groups from across the political spectrum. This visibility and influence inevitably drew attention. Regardless of political ideology, the method employed by the opposing side was always the same intertwined, familiar, and unvarying: "Try to co-opt. If that fails, take control. If that doesn't work, discredit and eliminate."

Sezai Hazır recounts his testimonies from the student council meetings he attended at different universities during the campaigns to lower the voting age as part of the Youth Parliament activities:

We need to have a meeting with the student councils of universities. I talked to the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and they said, "Our universities are very political." I said, "Let's see." We brought the students together and that's when I saw the full picture. In some universities, Dicle, Boğaziçi, METU... they stood up and said "Down with fascism" and so on and left the hall. I said, "Nothing has changed since 1980." The others, mustaches hanging low, wearing coats... At that time, the nationalist students (ülkücüler) prepared a report among themselves to send to their headquarters, saying, "Habitat is an institution that needs to be taken over." Leftist students got hold of the report and started spreading it around the cafeteria at Boğaziçi, saying "Habitat is collaborating with the nationalists." But we had nothing to do with either group. Habitat was always seen as an organization that had to be taken over.

Through numerous local, regional and national youth meetings organized under the Local Agenda 21 Program, City Council Youth Assemblies had the opportunity to get to know each other and work together towards shared goals. By 2001, a national communication network had been established among Youth Assemblies across different cities. This unity was transformed into the National Youth Parliament (NYP) on May 19, 2004 with the participation of 306 youth delegates from 77 cities at a ceremony held in the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM) ceremony hall. Aiming to develop a holistic youth policy in Türkiye, the NYP defined its mission as follows:

- Ensuring effective youth participation in local and national decision-making mechanisms and social life
- Protecting and promoting youth rights
- Supporting youth personal development
- Improving communication and cooperation among City Council Youth Assemblies
- Using information and communication technologies effectively

NYP has carried out projects and campaigns on issues such as human rights, sustainable development and raising awareness on sustainable environment, and contributed to the Local Government Law reform process and supported the inclusion of City Councils as a legally recognized structure within the Municipal Law. Its contributions to the Regulation on City Councils formed the basis for the establishment of the Youth and Women Assemblies ensuring their representatives became ex officio members of City Council executive boards.

In addition to pioneering efforts to lower the voting age, NYP also participated in the Common Mind Platform for Youth, an initiative led by the State Ministry responsible for Youth and Sports, which laid the foundation for the establishment of the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

With all these efforts, NYP shaped the public perception of youth in our country and became the most important youth communication network in Türkiye by advancing its institutional development. As a result, in addition to its participation-based initiatives, NYP also took part in the implementation of numerous development-focused projects in partnership with Habitat.

August 17 Marmara Earthquake

While the work of Local Agenda 21 and Youth Assemblies continued, the earthquake that occurred on August 17, 1999 shifted the national agenda across Türkiye. The earthquake had a devastating impact, leading to severe loss of life and property. What was even more dire, however, was the clear exposure of the state's lack of preparedness for both the immediate aftermath and the long-term consequences of such a large-scale disaster. The delayed response of state authorities, repeated failures in delivering aid to the earthquake zone, and negative incidents reported in the media damaged the confidence of many benefactors and created doubts about the use of financial aid.

Habitat and Agenda 21 Youth Association, which runs its program through local networks, shifted its focus to the earthquake-affected region. "We also took on responsibility during the '99 earthquake" says Sezai Hazır and continues as follows:

We asked the organizations in our Youth for Habitat International Network what we could do. An American organization said, "In the US, we match poor young people in Brooklyn with rich people in Manhattan and support their education by running a family campaign." We immediately announced that we were going to launch a Foster Family Campaign. Many artists, including Türkan Şoray, joined the initiative, along with strong support



A scene from the launch panel of the Foster Family Campaign, initiated by the Habitat Association in collaboration with Şişli Municipality, which brought together young people affected by the earthquake and the families who supported them. The session, moderated by then-Mayor Mustafa Sarigül, featured UNDP representative Seyhan Aydinligil, one of the campaign's first volunteers and later its coordinator İsmir Özyönüm, as well as artists Rutkay Aziz, Nur Sürer, and Mehmet Gülcü. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

from the Lions Club, bolstered by the trust inspired by the Habitat name. We found families for 130 children. The families deposited money directly into accounts opened in the name of the children. Since the money never entered our account, we were never under any suspicion. We occasionally brought the families and children together.

The Foster Family Campaign, organized by Habitat and Agenda 21 Youth Association, aimed to provide respite for high school and university students who had lost access to education following the earthquake. The campaign specifically targeted young people from low-income families such as those of workers

and retirees whose situations had become even more dire after losing one or both parents in the disaster. Under the campaign, each foster family committed to contributing at least 60 million TL per month for one year toward the student's education. The financial aid was deposited directly into a bank account opened in the student's name. The campaign successfully matched 130 earthquake-affected students with foster families. Over the course of its 12-month duration, the campaign raised a total of 93.6 billion TL.

Another project aimed at helping to heal the wounds of this period was the establishment of "Youth Centers" in the cities affected by the earthquake.

The Youth Centers project, established through a partnership protocol signed with Mercy Corps (a non-profit global humanitarian aid organization) and Provincial Directorates of Youth and

Onların artık bir çocuğu var

Habitat ve Gündem 21
Derneği'nin Şişli
Belediyesi'nin desteğiyle
depremzede öğrencilere
burs verilmesi için
başlattığı kampanyada şu
anda 44 aile var. Aileler
geçen haftasonu bir
araya gelerek
deneyimlerini paylaştılar.
İşte anıtlıkları...

Nilüfer Kan (Reklamcı):



Hürriyet'te göerek bu kampanyaya katıldım. Önce öğrencilerle ilgili bilgileri faklılardılar. Alper Tabakçioğlu adlı bir öğrenciyile tanıştım. Avcılar'da oturuyorlar, depremde babalarını ve evlerini kaybetmişler. Şu anda Florya'da belediyeinin otelinde kalıyorlar. Beşiktaş Ziya Kalkavan Meslek Lisesi son sınıf öğrencisi, 17 yaşında. Çok sakin, temiz, akıllı bir çocuk. Düzenli görüşüyoruz. Ben de Beşiktaş'ta oturuyorum. Bu yıl üç gün staja, iki gün de okulu devam edecek. Alper'in iki gün Florya'ya gideceğine ben de kabuleceğini söyledim annesine.

Fotoğraflar: Yusuf UÇAK

Gürsel Kadim (Emekli):



Kampanyaya katılıp bir kızımızın eğitim harcamalarını üstlendim. Bizzat kızımız Kürtüha'da okuyor, şimdi onun harcamalarını Kürtüha'da oturan bir ailenin üstlenmesi isteniyor, bu durumda biz de yeni bir öğrenci alacağız. Deprem sırasında Izmit'teydi kızımız, evini kaybetmiş, ailesinden de kayıplar var maalesef. Ben kampanyayı TRT'de duyдум ve Şişli Belediyesi'ni aradım. Sonra dermekten bizi aradılar ve böylece ilişkimiz başlamış oldu.

Sabri Dizmen

An article by Sabri Dizmen published in Hürriyet newspaper on October 4, 1999, featuring families who participated in the Habitat Association's Foster Family Campaign. Source: Habitat Association Archive.



Timuçin (17), ortaokul mezunu, bir kardeşi var. Kardeşinin eğitim masraflarını ve ailesinin geçimini simit satarak sağlıyor. Hergün simitlerini sattıktan sonra Gençlik Evi'ne gelerek bilgisayar eğitimi alıyor.

Platform magazine featured Timuçin in a story highlighting the relief efforts in the earthquake zone. Timuçin, who supported his family and covered his brother's education expenses by selling simit, was a regular at the Sakarya Youth House, one of the youth centers established by the Habitat Association in collaboration with the Provincial Directorate of Youth and Sports in the earthquake-affected region. Shortly after, the Youth Houses initiative would expand to nine provinces in the GAP Region through a joint project with the GAP Regional Development Administration, becoming one of the first models for youth centers that are now operated across Türkiye by central and local governments. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

Sports, saw participation from numerous domestic NGOs, private sector organizations, and individual volunteers. International contributions also came from organizations within Youth for Habitat's network.

The association fulfilled its mission after successfully spearheading the establishment of four Youth Centers in the earthquake-affected cities, eventually handing over the facilities to the Ministry of State. These Youth Centers played a vital role in helping young people affected by the earthquake maintain their daily lives and recover.

Time passed, Habitat had returned to its routine work and started working with the GAP Administration when in 2002 the Associations Desk, then operating under the Police Department, knocked on their door. They requested the association's official documents. While the necessary documents were in place, the team had been so immersed in their work that regular updates and entries had fallen behind. The inspector's arrival was a surprise for everyone. They agreed to hand them in the next day.

Anyone determined to find fault in such matters would always find something and so they did. The inspectors found many flaws. The situation became serious. During the investigation, it was revealed that a formal complaint had been filed against them. A lawsuit was filed against the executives of the association. Sezai Hazır recounts:

We were taken to court because we did not specify in our charter that we would carry out activities during the earthquake. During the crisis, we made decisions as a board and, naturally, documented the outcomes in our activity report. The Associations Desk examined them and said, “There’s no such clause in your charter. This is an activity outside your mandate.” At the time, we hadn’t foreseen a disaster like the earthquake, and did not pay attention to the charter while trying to look ahead. Still, we’ve always taken legal frameworks into account when taking action. In fact, under normal circumstances, one would expect to be held accountable for doing nothing in the face of a disaster as a citizen or as a civil society organization. Yet here we were, being prosecuted for taking action. We were acquitted in the end, but this was a lesson for us. Then we revised our charter to be more inclusive.

A few good people

Anyone or any organization that manages to stand on their own feet without being a burden to anyone and especially without relying on state resources and what's more, also achieving success, may not often be appreciated, but they certainly draw attention.

It is a familiar human tendency: People often envy qualities they themselves lack. When this feeling goes one step beyond, it turns into jealousy and envy. Especially, if envy is not kept in check, it breeds suspicion and spreads to others. Individuals also shape the behavior of the institutions and organizations they are part of.

It was of course remarkable that a group of young people came together spontaneously and participated in international meetings with their own means since the Habitat process and accomplished far more than what might have been expected of them. It would hardly have been surprising if someone within the state had begun to ask, "Who are they, and what are they trying to do?"

Kayhan Kavas, a retired governor, had been appointed as the Head of Department at the General Directorate of Local Administrations in Ankara from Ortaca District Governor in Muğla. He met Sezai Hazır at one of the meetings he attended as part of his duties. Since the Ministry of Interior was one of the main partners of the Local Agenda 21 Program, he was in close contact with the association. Since Kayhan Kavas personally valued

concepts such as participation, stakeholder engagement, and governance, he gradually became known as a “Habitat-friendly” bureaucrat within the Ministry of Interior. He did not hesitate to attend various events organized by the association, sometimes geared toward adults, but more often focused on youth.

Retired after 40 years of civil service, Kayhan Kavas says, “I have a share in what Habitat is today.” His experiences during that period are valuable not only for understanding Habitat’s journey, but also for shedding light on the nature of state-civil society relations in Türkiye:

When I look back, I see this: If you ask any ministry bureaucrat, they will say, ‘It’s a good thing,’ but I think the relationship and engagement with civil society depends more on individual attitudes than on institutional frameworks. In other words, if the head administrator is open to collaboration, willing to work together, and committed to running joint programs, things move forward more smoothly. Otherwise, it only seems like things are working. It is necessary to believe in the work, to put your heart into it and to be eager to do it. Otherwise, nothing meaningful comes out of the mindset of “We talked, we got their opinions, now let’s move on.”

In our country, citizens do not trust the state and the state does not trust citizens; there is always a question mark. Therefore, relations with civil society organizations are also risky for administrators; you never know what you might uncover.

At a time when we were interested in Local Agenda 21s, I was a commission member in a project supported by the UN. The Prime Minister’s Office has an official letter

stating that it sees this project positively, so we participate in this commission. One day, while I was sitting in my office, I received a letter from the highest security organization of the state. The letter said, "There are some activities called Local Agenda 21 in various parts of our country, there are some separatist and discriminatory movements within these activities, and you attend the meetings related to them..."

As soon as I read this, I shuddered, it struck me deeply. I had also worked on Local Agenda 21 and I knew that it was not at all what it was said to be. I prepared for the meeting very seriously; I went with two suitcases full of documents.

There were officials from the Police, Gendarmerie and General Staff at the meeting. While everyone else had a pen and paper in front of them, the files I had brought were lined up like fortresses. I knew I had to impress them right from the start.

The person leading the meeting started his presentation. Sezai's photo appeared on the screen as the person who had organized these meetings, the one supposedly behind all of it. According to the prevailing perception in the room, Sezai was seen as a leader and executor of a movement considered separatist, divisive and problematic in similar ways. I probably saw Sezai's photo ten times during the presentation, either in meetings or separately. Everyone was attentively watching what was being said. Then the colonel leading the meeting turned to me and said, "Mr. General Manager, I understand that you came prepared. Let's hear from you first." So I took the floor and delivered

a 45-minute presentation. I explained in detail what Local Agenda was, its origins, what Habitat Association stood for, who Sezai was, and how all of this was connected to the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Environment. As I spoke, I could see the expressions in the room begin to change.

“We thought it was something else,” they said. “The reason I’m making such an effort is precisely because I realized you had the wrong idea. But without this organization, without these young people doing what they’re doing, without these initiatives, where would these issues even be discussed? There may be some inappropriate speakers. What should we do? At least let’s talk about it in public, not behind closed doors in secret. If we don’t create spaces for open dialogue, people will go off and form ‘people’s committees’ and speak there. There is a representative of the governor’s office in the City Councils, everyone is there.” They were all surprised, but I was drenched in sweat. I asked for permission, loosened my tie and leaned back.

“We had something very different in mind and had come here to make very different decisions,” said the ranking officer who organized the meeting. I felt that if I had not been present at that meeting that day, other undesirable decisions might have been taken, not only in terms of Local Agenda 21 and participation, but also with regard to those who were working on this issue.

The meeting lasted for about three hours, they asked questions, I gave answers. “You should attend the meetings in civilian clothes, listen, voice your opinion; everyone

should speak, let's talk. Local Agenda 21 is primarily about local problems. Let's talk about our local problems. This has nothing to do with politics, but politics is about life. Naturally, some things will overlap, it's only to be expected." They said, "If we have any concerns, we'll ask you." And that was the end of the matter that day, but it was there that I realized how serious this was. Everyone had come with firm convictions. Because the files had been distributed to everyone in advance, and what they had done, what they were doing, especially Sezai, was presented from a different angle, from a different point of view.

I was quite frightened when I saw the mood at that meeting. I had made my point at the meeting that day, but it was not clear what would happen next. I took it upon myself to explain Local Agenda 21 and the concept of participation. At the ministry back then, we held meetings every Friday under the chairmanship of the undersecretary, where we discussed a different topic each time. One day I submitted a request to present on Local Agenda 21. The senior officials of the central ministry, the general directors and top administrators, gathered for the session. I took the stage and began to speak. Everyone was looking at me with surprise. One high-ranking official said, "When you mentioned Local Agenda 21, I thought, "What's Diyarbakır doing here?" I replied, "21 doesn't refer to Diyarbakır's license plate, it stands for the 21st century."

Youth and Culture Houses for GAP

The devastating earthquakes that struck Gölcük on August 17, 1999, and Düzce-Kaynaşlı on November 12, 1999, claiming tens of thousands of lives. These disasters came on the heels of the capture and sentencing to death (on June 29, 1999) of Abdullah Öcalan, the founding leader of the separatist armed organization PKK, widely seen as mainly responsible for a major problem Türkiye had been struggling with for decades.

Between Öcalan's arrest in Nairobi, Kenya, and the delivery of his verdict, public outrage especially among victims of PKK attacks and their families intensified Turkish-Kurdish polarization. At the same time, acts of violence carried out by the Islamist Kurdish organization Hizbullah, founded around the same time as the PKK and often seen as a rival, also escalated. By the year 2000, in many cities across Eastern and Southeastern Türkiye, people were on the verge of being unable to walk the streets without facing identity checks.

Beginning in 1987, eight cities in Eastern Anatolia (Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Hakkâri, Mardin, Siirt, Tunceli, and Van) were governed under the jurisdiction of the State of Emergency Regional Governor as part of "counterterrorism" efforts. Later, Adıyaman, Bitlis, and Muş were added as "adjacent cities," and the establishment of Batman and Şırnak as provinces in 1990 brought the total to 13. As terrorism gradually declined, Elazığ, Mardin, Muş, Bingöl, Batman, Bitlis, Siirt, and Van were eventu-

ally excluded from this classification.

At the same time, the cities of Adiyaman, Batman, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Kilis, Mardin, Siirt, Şanlıurfa, and Şırnak were included within the framework of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP). Due to its work on Local Agenda 21, Habitat and Agenda 21 Youth Association was directly involved in the realities of these provinces, with the aim of “bridging the East and the West.” Sezai Hazır says, “We kept asking ourselves, ‘What more can we do?’ There was absolutely nothing for young people there, and if something wasn’t done, people were going to disconnect and drift away” and explains how the Southeastern Anatolia Youth Houses Project began:

The atmosphere was incredibly politicized. We told UNDP, “We need to launch a youth-focused initiative in the region under the name ‘Youth Houses Project.’” We met with Mr. Olcay, then head of the GAP Administration, a truly high-caliber person. We also visited Gökhan Aydiner, the State of Emergency Regional Governor [1999–2002], whose approval was essential; without his permission, you couldn’t even take a step outside. We would hold meetings, there were civilians and we, coming from Istanbul, thought everything was easy. Wherever I went, I later learned that my photo had been taken at every step. One day, Governor Gökhan said to me, “Son, what are you doing here?” and showed me those photos. That was the atmosphere at the time. Initially, he told me, “Son, such things don’t happen here.” I replied, “With all due respect, Governor, we have to do this. Just come to one meeting, at least open a door to dialogue with people.” He came and supported us greatly.



A photo from the activities of the Diyarbakır Youth and Culture House, one of the youth centers established in 2001 across nine cities in the GAP Region as part of a project launched in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme and the GAP Regional Development Administration. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

What later became known as “GAP Youth and Culture Houses” was the product of this determination under these conditions.

The Southeastern Anatolia Social Development Program for Youth aimed to create breathing space, however modest, for young people in the region, those facing inadequate schooling, limited vocational and educational opportunities, high unemployment rates, and a lack of social and cultural activities and venues for leisure.

In the first of the project’s three phases, Habitat for Youth Association acted as the implementer, while the GAP Administration took on the executive role. Funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the first phase (May 2001-August 2006) was carried out in cooperation with provincial governors. Fully equipped Youth and Culture Houses were established in nine provinces, and activities were conducted in line with the program’s goals.

Sociologist Aygül Fazlıoğlu, who currently serves as an advisor at the Ministry of Family and Social Services, worked at the GAP Administration in the early 2000s. She recalls, “We got to know Sezai Hazır and Habitat and Agenda 21 Youth Association through the Social Development Program for Youth in the GAP Region” and continues as follows:

Within the framework of the project, we developed and implemented programs in the nine cities covered by the GAP Region. These programs focused on bringing young people together, identifying their problems collaboratively, developing solution proposals, and building the capacity of youth to solve these issues. We also worked to create partnerships and new areas of cooperation between public institutions, local governments, and civil society organizations. Our work became a strong example of public-civil society dialogue. Creating this environment of dialogue also helped foster youth participation, increase local and institutional capacity, and raise awareness among our team, myself included as the project lead, on issues like participatory governance, youth work, volunteerism, and knowledge sharing. Habitat’s contribution as a civil society organization in this process was undeniable.

Initially, the goal was to register 400 members at each youth center over three years, reaching a total of 9,000 youth through various activities. In five years, however, the program exceeded expectations, reaching over 50,000 young people. Additionally, during this period, more than 100 young people representing the Youth and Culture Centers had the opportunity to share their

work in Türkiye with their peers across Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East.

Working in the GAP region was unlike working in any other part of Türkiye culturally, politically, sociologically, geographically, historically and in every way imaginable. The prevailing climate of fear and the state's security-focused policies of the time only added fuel to the fire, making things even harder for those who set out with good intentions. Sezai Hazır explains:

It was incredibly difficult at first to attract young people to the Youth and Culture Houses. We would even visit them at home. The situation was extremely tense. Because the GAP Administration was involved, young people didn't trust us. They thought we were "government agents." On the government side, there were people saying, "These are all PKK members, and you're supporting them." One time, I went to Ağrı, and from the moment I got off the plane until I reached the exit, a camera filmed me the entire way. At the end, I said, "Could I have a copy too?" We were that naive. With that sense of excitement, we established nine centers. Nine governors supported us a lot. I always told the kids, "Through these connections, you might even go abroad." Once, after I left a meeting in Mardin, someone said, "Even politicians didn't go that far. We've never even left Mardin, and this guy sent us abroad." Two months later, there was a meeting in Greece, and I sent one of them. Their worlds changed at that moment. Our motto back then was: "Building a communication bridge between a young person in one corner of the world and a young person in one corner of Türkiye." Looking back now, after those houses were established, many exchange

programs with various countries were conducted there, festivals were organized, many young people went abroad, and many young people came here from abroad.

One of the first centers to open was the Adiyaman GAP Youth House. Yeşim Çelik Süzer, who started working in the city as a temporary teacher in 1999, heard from a friend that Sezai Hazır was looking for someone to work at the GAP Youth House. Though she recalls thinking, “Doing such work in the region in those years was hardly a rational idea,” she accepted the offer after their meeting. Yeşim Çelik Süzer then recounts her 20-year journey that began under the wings of Habitat:

After my training, I signed the contract and Mr. Sezai told me, “It’s all yours now, Yeşim. Find a place and furnish your office.” He had said a center would be opened, I’d be in charge, and I’d be working with young people. My job description also included establishing local collaborations and meeting with governorates. But there was no space, no infrastructure. I was alone. They gave me a temporary room in the GAP Administration office, and I was frantically searching for a proper location, but there were none. Even the governor’s office told me to wait. Habitat helped me rent a place, but furnishing the rooms for youth training was entirely my responsibility. I knocked on every door including local sponsors, government institutions like Turkish Petroleum (TPAO). I was so inexperienced and driven by a volunteer spirit that I’d go to stationery shops and ask, “We have a center like this. Please support us with stationery.” It got to the point where I’d ask for

anything I saw, almost as if they were obligated to donate. Eventually, we stopped paying for anything. Thankfully, no one turned me away and I'd always choose the best items. Governor İbrahim Halil İşik was a true gentleman and very supportive. I didn't face too many obstacles because Mr. Sezai had already explained everything in our first meeting. The Police Chief was also very supportive. It was a tense time. While the fight against terrorism continued in the region, we were trying to establish a Youth House on our own, gathering young people around us to help them develop. Of course, there were those who didn't embrace our efforts, and it was exhausting and draining to constantly explain "Who are you, what do you represent, what's your purpose?" to families and organizations we wanted to collaborate with. But over time, people got used to us, and the youth started to come. At first, all the students were boys. I was the only woman in the center. I said, "Invite your sisters, the girls around you, let them come too." As our activities diversified, girls slowly began to join. Though we were based in the GAP region, Habitat also led national initiatives like City Councils, Youth Assemblies, and the National Youth Parliament. This led to collaborations with all 81 cities. We proudly and enthusiastically represented Adiyaman in the National Youth Parliament as well.

Muhtesim Öger from Bingöl is one of the young people whose life took on new dimensions through the GAP Youth Development Project. His path crossed with Habitat in 2003 while he was studying in the Health Officer Department at Dicle Univer-

sity. As he was looking for ways to make use of his free time, he learned from a friend that there was a volunteer training program at the Diyarbakır Youth and Culture House and decided to join. Though initially skeptical, he changed his perspective and shifted from being a “recipient” to a “contributor”:

The activities at the youth centers in the GAP Administration provinces were tailored to each city’s needs. Our center, located in Diyarbakır, was in an area heavily impacted by rural-to-urban migration, with a high youth population susceptible to crime and isolated from social activities and the more developed parts of society. The crime rate was high. We offered literacy classes, computer and university preparatory courses for those lacking access, and cultural programs like bağlama, guitar, local folk dancing, theater, and diction. We connected university students with those who hadn’t had a chance to study. Both volunteers and participants were young people, fostering a remarkable synergy where young people learned directly from each other. We reached 1,500-2,000 young people annually and saw real impact, making a profound impact on their development.

There were also young people in the region struggling with substance addiction, disconnected from society and feeling lost. One time, we went for a picnic by Lake Hazar. On that trip, there was a young man who had self-harmed, with serious damage and cuts on his body; he was standing by the side. When asked why he wasn’t going into the water, he said, “I have cuts on my body, and I’m ashamed for my friends to see them.” We saved many of our young people this way.

In the next phase, the young people started writing projects. We wrote about seven or eight projects in Diyarbakır during that period. We developed significant projects and began writing EU projects. Under the State Planning Organization and the National Agency* young people translated their own problems into project proposals. One focused on preventing substance addiction. Another, titled “Diyarbakır Girls Want to Be Examples, Not Problems in Education,” aimed to encourage young girls to pursue education. Through the exchange programs we organized, we brought 25 young people from five different countries to Diyarbakır. Over the course of ten days filled with various activities, they shared their cultures with us, and we shared ours with them.

While the GAP Youth Houses established in Mardin and Adiyaman in 2001 were still active, we turned to Şırnak in 2004. A space was set up and the search for a local coordinator began. The initial challenges faced in other cities were present in Şırnak too, perhaps even more so. Because of this, an advertisement was placed in a local newspaper to find the “braveheart” for the Şırnak Youth House. Coincidentally, Nazlı Altürk was working as a public relations officer at that same newspaper. The advertisers were Habitat and Agenda 21 Youth Association, and they were looking for a coordinator for the Şırnak Youth House. After a moment of hesitation, Nazlı Altürk made a life-changing decision, thinking, “Why not?” This decision would also mark the beginning of the Şırnak Youth House’s story:

* Turkish National Agency: The public institution responsible for implementing the EU Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programs in Türkiye.



A photo from the activities of the Şırnak Youth and Culture House (2003), one of the youth centers established in nine provinces across the GAP Region as part of a project launched in 2001 in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme and the GAP Regional Development Administration. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

Back then, we really wanted to do things in Şırnak, but we were also very hesitant. As Sezai Abi* used to say, “Even two people getting together is a problem”; the police would immediately show up asking what was going on. I applied for the ad. After the security checks, I went directly to an interview with the governor. “From our side there’s no issue,” they told me, “but Habitat and Mr. Sezai will make the final decision, so you need to meet with them too.” I was nervous. Would they hire me? Could I do this job? When Sezai asked, “Can you do this job?” I said, “I believe in myself, and if you think I’m fit, I’m in.” He said, “Okay, you can do this,” and that’s how my Habitat journey began.

* Abi (lit. “older brother” in Turkish): A colloquial term of respect and affection used for an older male, not necessarily a relative. It conveys familiarity, warmth, and acknowledgment of seniority, often used among friends, colleagues, or within community settings.

People didn't come to the Youth Center as soon as it opened. It took us a full year to gain acceptance at the local level. Because I explained things by appealing to their emotions, the young people accepted us and wanted to join the activities, but their families weren't so quick to embrace it. They would visit the center, sometimes walk through the workshops and classrooms unannounced, inspecting everything. Older men would silently observe with hands clasped behind their backs. We would invite them for tea, explain what we were doing. Families were skeptical, wondering, "Are they getting the children used to something, or trying to impose something on them by gathering them?"

For example, when a young person would initially come to a course, they'd be hesitant, then later wouldn't show up, saying, "My family won't allow it." We'd talk to the families again; people were scared. Because of this, kids wouldn't go straight home after school, instead they'd sneak off and come to our center. Some learned to play guitar this way, and their families wouldn't find out until two or three years later.

That's how we spread in Şırnak. Sezai Abi was a visionary. Everyone Habitat touched in Türkiye had their life changed and those young people found themselves.

The Youth Houses established under the Southeastern Anatolia Social Development Program for Youth have reached hundreds of thousands of young people and are now operated under the authority of provincial governors. Even after handing over

the management of the GAP Youth Houses to the GAP Administration, Habitat never left the field. Today, it continues to work with local CSOs, many of which are composed of “Habitat volunteers,” through various projects focused on developing knowledge, skills, and capacity.*

* For more information, see
<http://www.gap.gov.tr/genclik-ve-kultur-evleri-proje-si-sayfa-76.html>

NYP campaigns

At the 1st Ordinary General Assembly of the National Youth Parliament (NYP) held in Ankara from May 16-20, 2005, a decision was made to demand that the minimum age for parliamentary candidacy be lowered from 30 to 25. The issue resurfaced at the NYP's 4th Summer School, where delegates agreed to launch a campaign titled "**I Want to Be Elected.**" Subsequently, signature collection began at stands set up by the City Council Youth Assemblies involved in the NYP process.

Thousands of collected signatures were then sent via email and fax to the respective members of parliament in those cities. This lobbying effort was bolstered by collaboration with the press. As a result, on October 8, 2006, the Parliament passed a constitutional amendment lowering the candidacy age from 30 to 25. However, since the law had not yet come into effect, the 2007 General Elections were held according to the previous legislation. The amendment was implemented in the following elections.

The success achieved with the "I Want to Be Elected" campaign didn't take long to show results. During its 4th Ordinary General Assembly, NYP adopted the slogan "**A Youth Representative in Every Assembly**" and decided to support young candidates in local elections. A new campaign was launched on January 14, 2009, with simultaneous signature stands set up in 73 cities and 92 towns, aiming to promote young people's active participation in decision-making processes.



As part of the “A Youth Representative in Every Assembly: I Want to Be Elected” Campaign, Bora Caldu and Burcu Kılınç from Habitat Association are collecting signatures in Beşiktaş together with the Beşiktaş Municipality Youth Assembly (2009). Source: Habitat Association Archive.

In the first phase of the campaign, the aim was to exert pressure on political parties to nominate young people from electable positions for municipal and Provincial General Assembly memberships. This was to be achieved through activities carried out at the local level by Youth Assemblies, including signature stands, meetings with provincial and district party leaders and their youth branches, meetings with members of parliament, press conferences, and similar events.

The second phase involved organizing panels with confirmed mayoral candidates, allowing young people to express their expectations from the new administrations and influence future urban policies.

In the final phase, the plan was to establish a monitoring mechanism at the local level to ensure that pre-election promises were fulfilled and to promote the work carried out by City Council Youth Assemblies through a series of meetings.

By the end of the campaign, 85,527 signatures had been collected nationwide. In many cities, Youth Assemblies also engaged with provincial branches of political parties to advocate for the nomination of young candidates in electable positions, while also highlighting the contributions of Youth Assemblies to local governance.

For the general elections held on June 12, 2011, candidate selections were supposed to be made based on the 25-year-old eligibility. To support the implementation of this right, the “**Not Late, Just Young!**” campaign was launched in 2010 in partnership with Habitat, the Community Volunteers Foundation (TOG), and the National Youth Parliament. The campaign manifesto also demanded that young people aged 25–30 be nominated from electable positions and that no fees be charged for their candidacy applications.

The slogan was clear: “**No Vote for Those Who Don’t Include Youth!**”

The campaign, which included promotional films featuring well-known young cinema and stage artists as volunteers and shared on social media, concluded with great enthusiasm. Following the June 12, 2011 general elections, five young candidates between the ages of 25 and 30 were elected to Parliament. Consequently, the average age in Parliament dropped from 54 to 51. The number of MPs under the age of 40 also rose from 54 in the previous term (2002–2007) to 75 after the 2011 elections.

To further promote political participation at both local and national levels, Youth Assemblies developed partnerships with Women's Assemblies and supported increased representation of women in decision-making mechanisms. These efforts culminated in a 100% increase in the number of female members of parliament in the June 12, 2011 general elections.

“Best practice”

The core function of City Councils was governance, meaning partnership in power established with certain balances at the local level. This stood in stark contrast to Türkiye’s traditional patriarchal understanding of administration. What’s more, young men and women were at the forefront of this practice. Even though the directive supporting facilitators came “from above,” namely the Ministry of Interior, progressing in the field despite local resistance was far from easy. One of the witnesses of this process, Fikret Toksöz who at the time was both the Secretary General of the Union of Municipalities of Marmara and a project advisor for Türkiye’s Local Agenda 21 Program says, “They didn’t like using the term ‘governance,’ or rather, they didn’t embrace the idea behind it, which led to many difficulties” and continues as follows:

Habitat played a vital role in establishing Youth Assemblies. I was a project advisor at the time, but things didn’t always go smoothly. For instance, in one district of Bursa, the police raided a youth meeting claiming it was illegal and beat the young people. We intervened immediately. In Antalya, some women were taken into custody. We wanted to establish Youth Assemblies in Kars too. The mayor was eager, but the governor resisted. We took advantage of then-President Ahmet Necdet Sezer’s

visit to Kars. Showing *the Official Gazette*, we told the governor, “This is an agreement signed by the Republic of Türkiye. Look, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer’s signature is also here.” That convinced him, and activities in Kars began.

Gülgönül Bozoğlu, now a faculty member at Yalova University’s Department of Business Administration, was involved in various volunteer efforts from her early student years. Eventually, she became the **Facilitator of the Yalova Youth Assembly**. At the time, the local government had appointed her to Habitat’s Local Agenda 21 Program. After receiving training from Habitat and getting involved in organizing Youth Assemblies and working with the National Youth Parliament, she also took on the role of regional facilitator for the Marmara-Eastern Marmara Region within NYP alongside local organizing efforts. What Gülgönül Bozoğlu experienced also illustrates how the allergy to the concept of “governance” manifests across different segments of society:

I was in Yalova during the establishment of City Councils as part of the Local Agenda 21 Program initiated in Türkiye by United Cities and Local Governments to promote the Sustainable Development Goals. As part of this process, I played an active role in efforts to establish Youth Assemblies at the local level. With the facilitation of Habitat Association, we first met with representatives from public institutions and civil society organizations involved in youth organizing from the initial Local Agenda 21 program cities, and then from other cities where the program hadn’t yet been implemented. Together, we

held meetings to discuss young people’s shared problems, needs, and the demands of the century. Driven by the enthusiasm of the youth and the belief that we could transform our shared ideas into tangible outcomes, we founded the National Youth Parliament. Our most critical point was representation.

Representatives were elected at the local level and brought their city’s agenda to the parliament. All these foresights, plans, and implementations regarding youth happened under Habitat’s facilitation. At the start of the 2000s, concepts like governance, sustainability, and local development were still unfamiliar in our country and, to be honest, they clashed with our national culture. Developing new discourse, demanding rights in governance as young people, and raising awareness everywhere youth existed from neighborhoods to universities were, of course, met with suspicion. The most interest in our meetings came from undercover police officers. Around that time, Türkiye’s EU candidacy process was gaining momentum, and the Youth Programs Department began funding youth-focused EU projects. Like across Europe, it was called the “National Agency” in Turkish. We greatly benefited from EU project funds to introduce new concepts, involve young people in governance processes, and discuss youth issues. Still, despite being a local from a well-known Yalova family, people were suspicious of me because of my active role. After all, this new agenda could only belong to external forces aiming to divide our country. Money was being poured in from the National Agency for this purpose, and “our Gülgönül” could only

be an agent. Oh, what a pity... Under those conditions, no one considered their own share in being better governed. They attributed the work we were doing to external forces. Our efforts to promote newly adopted national policies using external funding sources without burdening local governments were seen as proof strengthening their own claims. Thankfully, over time, these processes were better understood, and many youth-focused goals were realized through the mechanisms we helped establish. For both Habitat and the many young people who walked this path, it marked the beginning of a new chapter in our lives.

Habitat volunteers, whether knowingly or not, overcame every obstacle placed in front of them with determination and resilience. The local governance practices carried out under the Türkiye Local Agenda 21 Program were selected by UNDP in 2001 as one of the most successful implementations in the world. In September 2002, the program was presented as a “best practice” example during the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, an event also attended by President Ahmet Necdet Sezer.

This success played a key role in the inclusion of City Councils in the 2005 Municipal Law. Later, during the UN’s 7th Global Forum in Vienna in June 2007, the City Council practices under Türkiye’s Local Agenda 21 Program were presented by UNDESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) as one of the world’s best “democratic governance” practices.

The Türkiye Local Agenda 21 Program, completed in 2011, was a crucial stage in Habitat’s journey, which saw a team under the name of “Youth Caucus” dedicated to addressing the con-



A moment from the visit of then-President Ahmet Necdet Sezer and his spouse to the IULA-EMME stand showcasing Türkiye's Local Agenda 21 efforts, during the United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg on the 10th anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit (2002). In the photo are Sadun Emrealt, Coordinator of the Türkiye Local Agenda 21 Program, along with Sezai Hazır, Ali Ercan Özgür, and Pelin Ayan from the Habitat Association. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

cerns of Turkish youth, continue their path with a shared spirit and purpose, ultimately forging a unique organizational identity for Türkiye.

This section deserves to conclude with the words of Sadun Emrealt, who was there from the beginning as the National Coordinator of the Türkiye Local Agenda 21 Program and Deputy Secretary General of UCLG-MEWA, from his publication titled *City Councils*:

I feel it is my duty to extend our heartfelt thanks, through my longtime friend and “senior youth” Sezai Hazır, to each and every one of the dear young people who, from the very beginning, carried the Youth Association for

Habitat to where it stands today with great dedication and volunteer spirit; who played a vital role in the establishment and strengthening of the National Youth Parliament, which formed the institutional backbone of the youth movement. While I cannot list all their names here, their contributions are deeply appreciated. I must also emphasize that it is no coincidence that all of my colleagues who undertook the challenging tasks of facilitating women's and youth work and communication networks at various stages of the Local Agenda 21 Program were themselves young people.*

* Kent Konseyleri (City Councils), p.8.

Testimonies That Shed Light on Part Two

Belma Üstünışık (Former State Planning Organization Expert)

“Habitat Association was influential in the process which eventually led to the formation of City Councils”

I worked for 40 years at what was formerly the State Planning Organization, now the Presidency of Strategy and Budget. Given my involvement in municipal and urbanization matters, I became engaged with Habitat as well. In fact, I've been part of the Habitat journey from the very beginning in one way or another.

Initially, there wasn't an association. Mr. Sezai was carrying out his work very intensively. Young people later continued their volunteer work by transforming it into an association. I also closely followed the work they led at various United Nations meetings focused on urbanization and local governance.

What mattered most was that Habitat's work aligned with public policy. The Local Agenda 21 initiative played a vital role in the foundation of Habitat Association. Habitat Association was also influential in Local Agenda 21 gaining momentum in Türkiye, which eventually led to the formation of City Councils.

Habitat Association has been a highly active and impactful institution over the past 30 years. I hope its work continues to grow and thrive in the years to come.

İtir Akdoğan (Vice President of Habitat Association)

“Habitat has become more institutionalized”

Habitat is something Sezai founded, almost like his own baby. Certain traits from his personality are clearly reflected in the organization. He's always adapting to innovations, following trends very well, having a keen sense, and being very open to change. He's never had a conservative mindset like, “We set out for one reason, so we must continue with that reason, those keywords, those partners.”

Sezai's real mission has always been to channel resources to those who need them. For this, he managed Habitat very openly to adaptation and innovation, without straying far from its core values but requiring whatever the conditions of the day dictated. Even the fact that the association changed its name several times reflects this adaptability.

At one point, Sezai used to say, “We're like a nonprofit company.” Since Turkish financial authorities couldn't define such a structure and there were no legal provisions for it, Habitat continued as an association. But Sezai always had an entrepreneurial mind and a civic spirit, and he sought to sustain a formula that combined the two. That's why almost all of his projects aim to strengthen not just public-civil society partnerships, but public-private-civil society collaborations.

The journey from three volunteers in a municipal office to a large organization with over fifty employees was made possible by

this openness to innovation, to the conditions of the time, and to adaptation. Ultimately, what he wants to do is social development.

He initially set out specifically for young people. It established and organized Youth Assemblies within City Councils across Türkiye and facilitated communication among them. Though a National Youth Assembly couldn't be formed, the National Youth Parliament was established. Sezai would plan a project's resources in such a way that they could be used for the National Youth Parliament's annual meeting. He knew how to use resources smartly.

Its core direction hasn't changed, but it's not just about youth anymore. It has diversified its focus groups to include women, migrants, children, and entrepreneurs.

When it first started, the association defined itself through democratic concepts like urban governance, youth participation, and democratic administration. Over time, it incorporated economic concepts like entrepreneurship and "I Can Manage My Money," or the technological dimension like the development of digital skills. Later, it also diversified its partnerships. It was already a strategic partner of UNDP, and while initially only public institutions like the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior were partners, international companies later joined them.

As staff numbers and project volumes increased, and budgets grew, the initial horizontal organization which I found very democratic and that I was dying to volunteer for when I was a student, began to fade. When I was 19 or 20, I used to call him "Sezai Abi." Later, I simply said "Sezai." Today, 90% of staff refer to him as "Mr. Sezai." Back then, he was in the office every day. So while the areas of focus and themes and areas of activity have changed, Habitat's internal organization has also gradually become more institutional.

Ender Merter (Communications Expert, Advertiser)**“Habitat is unique”**

My connection with Habitat began in 1996. When Youth for Habitat officially became an association in 1997, I was one of the founding members.

For the first time, Türkiye realized the global nature and influence of civil society organizations through the Habitat Conference. At the time, resources were extremely limited. We used my agency as Habitat's office, we set up a computer, and that's how it all started.

The early activities mostly focused on introducing Habitat to others. We visited various universities to talk about Habitat. We started building a volunteer base and so, step by step, we grew. Since I had my own business to manage, I left the execution of activities to Sezai and the young team.

At that time, because the concept of a civil society organization wasn't well-known, people were initially taken aback. Many would ask whether we were a political party, or affiliated with a party. There was even an antipathy towards associations in general.

I secured sponsorships from my clients for Habitat. Some, like Turkish Airlines, provided flight tickets, others helped with event venues and accommodations. Marshall, one of my clients, contributed to an international event at Galatasaray Island and the painting of a large wall as part of a youth activity at the park in Şişli, which would later be named Habitat Park.

Habitat has proven itself today as a unique and exemplary civil society organization that conducts boutique and international activities, supporting youth and entrepreneurship. It is unique.

The role of civil society is to act as a catalyst and Habitat has done that exceptionally well. Sezai dedicated his life to this work. If someone else had taken on the leadership role, it's hard to imagine Habitat reaching where it is today. Because Sezai was involved with this work 24 hours a day.

Dilara Sezgin (Pollyboot - Export Director)

“To me, Habitat has always remained a youthful entity”

Before the association was established, we were in a miserable state, getting by on nothing but simit all day. One day Sezai would borrow money from a relative, another day I would ask my father.

The perspective I gained at that age is one of the main reasons I now feel like a global citizen who is able to communicate across cultures with ease. I grew up understanding that all the world's problems are shared, that all people are one, and that racism and fanaticism have no place in humanity.

At such a young age, we touched many lives. Everyone we worked with during those years, equipped with the same vision, still believes that young people can change the world, no matter where on Earth they work. We showed that young people don't have to wait until much later in life to do great things.

I took part in various conferences as part of the Turkish delegation in Austria, South Korea, and Kenya. Each one was a distinct and incredibly valuable experience for me. We had become well-known as facilitators; in fact, I was personally invited to the summit in South Korea. As Habitat members, we represented not just Türkiye but the voices of young people globally at every UN meeting we attended. I saw firsthand in Kenya that we were

being taken seriously as equals. It was in Kenya that I first saw that we were perceived as a partner by the UN, and that our views were taken seriously. Political figures, including members of parliament and mayors from Türkiye, were also at that meeting, but we were the ones at the forefront, whose voices were heard. At that time, there weren't many civil society organizations that could reach that point in just two or three years.

I actively worked with Habitat from 1996 to 2000. Then I went to the U.S. for a master's in international relations and communications. When I returned in 2004, Habitat had an office in Istanbul. Though I haven't been as active as before as a result of my career, marriage, and kids, I've never lost touch with Sezai or my friends at Habitat. We're a bit older now, but to me, Habitat has always remained a youthful entity.

When I retire in about ten years, I'd love to return to Habitat not for any material reason, but simply to give back, to contribute, maybe to motivate other young people. For me, Habitat is a place where, even if I can't do anything major, I can still contribute to something in a corner of the association, or make coffee in its kitchen.

Pamir Yörük (Service Stream - Commercial Director)

“I wish there were more organizations like Habitat”

After being accepted into a university, I left for the US. So I was no longer actively involved in association work after '97, but I continued to support in various ways. For example, I attended a youth meeting in Portugal in 1998, and a few meetings in New York. I followed their progress, even from afar.

I know about Habitat's current state from what my friends tell

me. Emre Koyuncu told me during his last visit that “There are now 35-40 full-time professionals working in the office.” In our time, there was nothing like that. We didn’t even have an office, we used rooms provided by various CSOs, and their printers and computers. We finally had our first office only when the municipality offered us a space. Everyone worked on a volunteer basis. At that time, only one person would open and close the office and help us with some tasks during working hours.

I assume the current situation is vastly different, incomparable to the past. At least in terms of the number of people. From what I’ve seen, there are now sponsors and partner companies. TOBB is involved, and they’re working together. Coca-Cola was there for a while, and quite a few projects were done. There’s Vodafone, Microsoft, and other global firms. None of this existed in 1996. There were various sponsors back then, but they’re in no way comparable to the current situation. No one could have predicted this outcome from that time. In terms of size, impact, and the number of people reached, we were in a much more modest position back then.

Today, as far as I can tell, Habitat reaches a large number of people through its projects. That’s incredibly important. Second, Secondly, the focus isn’t just on metropolises or big cities. Things are being done almost everywhere in Türkiye. I wish there were more organizations like Habitat.

In every large company I’ve worked with, there have been corporate social responsibility projects. Huge sums of money flow into these initiatives, but from what I’ve seen, most of those expenditures barely went beyond a ‘tick-the-box’ mentality. Of course, there are idealistic people in the corporate world who attach much deeper meaning to what they do but from the insti-

tution's perspective, it doesn't carry the same significance. When a for-profit company allocates a budget to a social responsibility project, the question is where and how that money can be used most effectively. It's up to people inside the company and to civil society organizations like Habitat to make sure that money is used in the most impactful way, through the right channels and reaching the right people.

Even though my time with Habitat was relatively short, it had a major influence on me. I'm now 45, and when I look back, there are many things in my life where I question, "Did I really spend my time on that?" But Habitat was a place where I dedicated a lot of my youth, and I've never regretted it.

Emre Özdemir (Eczacıbaşı - Sales Director)

"We were the ones who lit the first fire"

As part of the UN Habitat II Summit held in June 1996, a series of youth activities were planned alongside the summit. Starting in 1995, a youth initiative was formed to organize these events. Sezai volunteered to lead the initiative, composed of high school and university students. When Habitat II ended, everyone returned to their countries, hometowns, and homes.

After over a year of intense work carried out with everyone's own resources, Sezai and a small group decided to continue their efforts to "follow up on and implement the decisions made during the meetings." That team of six or seven people included Sezai, myself, Emre Koyuncu, Zeynep (Aydemir), Pamir (Yörük), Mehmet Can (Tarhan), and a friend named Yavuz (Zeydanoğlu), who has since passed away.

Before Habitat, I had worked with the State Theaters Opera

and Ballet Workers Foundation (TOBAV) on youth organizations. I was a volunteer guide at amateur theatre festivals. In 1995, the foundation organized an international amateur theater festival in Ankara, which brought together around 250 young people from 25-30 countries. When Habitat's youth volunteer work began, I joined the meetings on behalf of TOBAV, and that connection continued. At the time, the Youth Initiative functioned like an international umbrella organization operating without sponsorship.

We moved forward with Sezai's motto "Don't criticize, offer an alternative," and Emre's (Koyuncu) saying, "We are not the leaders of tomorrow, but the partners of today." We set out to organize an international event without any resources and began receiving the necessary support along the way.

In Eskişehir, five or six of us stayed at a guesthouse provided by the municipality. We turned a couple of rooms into an office and were constantly corresponding. We were constantly learning from each other. I was 21 at the time; Pamir was about to start university at 18. I actually learned how to write official letters and use a computer from him.

There were many tough moments when I thought about quitting. But every time, I told myself: "If I walk away from this today, I will walk away from everything tomorrow. I need to learn how to see things through, so that I can overcome similar challenges in the future." And each time, we found a way and succeeded. We were the ones who lit the first fire and that fire grew, turning into a huge blaze.

We were all people who could manage more than one task simultaneously. Otherwise, it would have been impossible for just five or six people to carry out all those activities while continuing

their education without interruption. They always tell the story: Sezai and Pamir, while Pamir was preparing for his university entrance exam, went to a meeting in New York, covering their own expenses. Pamir was solving tests on the plane throughout the journey. He was also solving questions in his free time there.

Habitat always ran its projects by its own rules. When doing work locally, you cannot succeed if you don't involve the city's municipality, university, and civil society organizations. No matter where the funding comes from, Habitat never accepted any restriction that prevented local participation. On one occasion, at an opening meeting, someone asked, "The National Anthem will be played, have you prepared for it?" I'll never forget, Sezai said, "Then we need to play the national anthems of 30 countries." He wasn't against the Turkish anthem, of course. But in an international gathering, there was no reason to start with a national anthem.

Bilge Turcan (MRCIS - Co-founder & Board Member)

"Habitat still holds a very special place for me"

Although I wasn't part of the founding team, I was among the first members and remained involved in its activities for many years. Habitat still holds a very special place for me. Today, we all work in very different professions, but the knowledge and experience we gained through Habitat had a profound impact on our lives. For years, we'd talk among ourselves about the intense effort it took, as a 20-year-old, to sit at the same table with a governor or a mayor, negotiate an issue, and defend youth rights against them, often knowing more about the topic than those senior executives. All of this brought me and us to where we are

today. Now I can speak at a conference with no preparation at all which is a rare skill, because I've been doing it since I was 19, and some of my friends even since high school. If you've had to speak to people in their 40s or 50s when you were just a teenager, doing so in your 30s and 40s comes easily.

We developed the ability to think differently, question what was given, and propose alternatives. Throughout my life, I've seen the long-term benefits of our "Don't criticize, offer an alternative" philosophy.

Ayşe Şerifoğlu (Founder of Kuşadası Women's Initiative Production and Business Cooperative [KUŞAK] and Women's Initiative Production and Business Cooperatives in Agriculture; Former Kuşadası Deputy Mayor, Former Habitat Board Member)

"Sezai is a broad-minded person"

I met Habitat Association and my dear friend Sezai Hazır in 2003, during the establishment of the City Council, Women's Assembly, and Youth Assembly in Kuşadası under the Local Agenda 21 Program. We had the opportunity to carry out many innovative projects together. Dear Sezai Hazır, a remarkably foresighted and broad-minded person, and I became neighbors in Kuşadası, and through continuous communication, we ensured the organization of various events and training for diverse segments and age groups. With the support of Kuşadası Municipality, we helped establish City Councils, Youth Assemblies, and Women's Assemblies, which served as models for other cities to organize similar structures in their regions.

In 2008, we delivered our first training for women entrepreneurs as part of the “YG21 Kuşadası Kibele Women’s Entrepreneurship School Project,” supported by UNDP, the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (TOBB), and Kuşadası Chamber of Commerce (KUTO). Furthermore, we organized numerous training sessions in Kuşadası, such as coding literacy for primary and middle school students, and computer literacy for local leaders.

In 2016, we attended the United Nations Habitat III Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in Quito, Ecuador.

Our “From Labor to Basket Project” with Habitat was implemented in 2020 in collaboration with the Women’s Initiative Production and Business Cooperatives in Agriculture which I chair and which continues its activities in line with the Sustainable Agriculture Principles established under the Development and Acceleration of Women Entrepreneur Project in Agriculture carried out by KAGİDER, and with Kuşadası Women’s Initiative Production and Business Cooperative (KUŞAKK), which I spearheaded the establishment of.

One of our most impactful collaborations with Habitat Association was the establishment of the Kuşadası Station Community Center, the first of its kind in Türkiye to open in partnership with a municipality. Launched in 2021 with the support of Habitat Association, TOBB, International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), Meta, and Kuşadası Municipality, the Station continues to host training and workshops that support the digital transformation of youth, tourists, and local residents.

Throughout my working life at the university and Kuşadası Municipality, I engaged in close volunteer work with civil soci-

ety organizations, as well as public institutions and universities. I consider myself very fortunate to have had the opportunity to serve and work in various roles within my environment and culture-priority initiatives, including the Kuşadası Representative Office of the Foundation for the Protection and Promotion of the Environment and Cultural Heritage (ÇEKÜL), membership in the TOBB Kuşadası Women Entrepreneurs Board, and as a board member of the Kuşadası Training and Development Foundation (KEGEV), The Turkish Environmental Education Foundation (TÜRKÇEV), and HABITAT Association.

Through all of this, I'd like to express my gratitude once again to Habitat Association and to dear Sezai Hazır, who continues to increase the number of sustainability and technology-based initiatives and entrepreneurs in our country. Habitat's ability to adapt to the times and deliver long-standing sustainable projects, its outreach to young people, women, and universities, and its GEN Türkiye efforts are all critically important in this framework.

Burçin Yıldırın (Assembly Buildings - General Director)

“We all learned to work like professionals at Habitat”

As a student in the City and Regional Planning Department at Yıldız University in 2001, I met Mr. Sadun Emreälp, then Secretary General of the United Cities and Local Governments Organization (UCLG), at an Urban Planning Colloquium; he gave a presentation about the Local Agenda 21 Project. I enjoy participating in volunteer work, and the Local Agenda 21 Project caught my interest. During my time at Cağaloğlu Anatolian

High School, I was also among the high school volunteers at the Habitat II Summit. During a conversation with Mr. Sadun, he directed Levent (Koç) and me to Habitat. At the time, it was called the Youth for Habitat Association.

Bilge Turcan, a City and Regional Planning graduate from Yıldız Technical University, was also among the volunteers. Bilge took us to the Youth Houses in the Earthquake Zone in Adapazarı.

There, we met Mr. Sezai and other volunteers, and that's how we started volunteering at the association. Throughout our university years, all our time outside of school was spent at the association; once a week, we would all clean the office, wash dishes. We were responsible for everything.

There were two main branches within the association: "local initiatives" and "international relations." Since Levent (Koç), Bilge, and I were studying urban planning, we joined the "local initiatives" team. I started volunteering in activities related to implementing the youth component of the Local Agenda 21 Project, supporting the Youth Houses established after the earthquake, and contributing to youth work in the GAP region.

The Life Plus Youth Fund was the first collaborative project implemented in Türkiye by a trio of UNDP, the private sector (Coca-Cola), and Habitat. I was part of the team that wrote the project and became its first coordinator, working in the field for a year during its implementation.

My time as a volunteer at Habitat ended in 2008 after the Life Plus Youth Fund, but my connection didn't break. Even after entering the private sector, I continued meeting and developing projects with the association.

We experienced a lot of spiritual fulfillment at Habitat. We

learned what it means to be human and to help others without expecting anything in return. Learning to volunteer with a professional approach, teamwork, and taking responsibility before entering professional life always had a lasting positive impact on my career. Habitat also brought me many friends across Türkiye whom I know I can call when needed, even if we can't always meet.

**Yasemin Uyar
(EBRD - Social Consultant)**

“All that was expected was that you knew what you wanted to do”

As a student, I found myself walking through the door of an association one day. No one asked, “Who are you, what can you do, what’s your background?”

Instead, I was asked questions far different from what I expected: “What do you want to do? As a young person, what do you want to accomplish? What are your goals? How do they align with what we do?” And by the way, “what we do” was explained with great patience and care...

All that was expected was that you knew what you wanted to do, and that you were willing to give your time voluntarily... How you used your time and what you did with it was up to you. Looking back now, the first thing that comes to mind is an association that played a major role in helping me discover who I wanted to be and what I wanted to do.

Doing this in an environment woven with deep friendships and at the same time being part of helping young people from all over Türkiye realize their own dreams was a unique joy.

Zara Zeren Erik Yaşar (French Development Agency - Staff Member)

“For me, Habitat is a bond that will never be broken”

I went to high school in Ankara and studied at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. I became involved in Habitat after learning that some friends from school had joined a project and I volunteered there from 2003 to 2005. At the time, the only salaried employee was İlhan; everyone else in the association was a volunteer.

During my time there, one of the two things we championed was the Youth Parliament. I was involved in every aspect of organizing those first meetings, preparing agendas and presentations, logistics, and so on. The Youth Parliament was an extraordinary structure that connected the local with the central. All youth representatives were elected. It was a diverse group, composed of individuals from all levels, classes, and vastly different perspectives from Türkiye's (then) 79 cities. You could see how people, despite their differences in opinion, were able to come together and communicate with one another in a democratic environment.

Each region had its own problems and characteristics... but in that space, there you see the sword of democracy. Sometimes, ideas you might not like gain majority acceptance. You learned how to manage environments, how to express yourself better in democratic settings and how to develop strategy.

Ultimately, you're trying to build a structure that never existed before, in a country where young people still weren't adequately represented or given enough of a voice. I never thought about the future. I worked with the consciousness and belief of that moment. And I truly believe we did our best as a team.

At the time, Habitat was the only youth organization in Tür-

kiye following the Millennium Development Goals agenda. So when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or other ministries called for meetings, they invited our association. I was working on the Millennium Development Goals then and attended such a meeting in Ankara, representing the Youth Parliament or youth. After that I traveled to Switzerland and Kenya to the UN headquarters to represent Turkish youth and the association for a UN meeting. It was incredible. As a university student among such seasoned professionals, you gain representation and a voice. These were extraordinary opportunities for me.

Even after starting my professional career, my connection with old friends continues. Although I now follow the association's activities from a distance, for me, Habitat is a bond that will never be broken.

Yenal Sümertas (International Restaurant Group - Director of Business Development & Growth)

“I learned so much that I could say, ‘It wouldn’t have mattered if I hadn’t finished school’”

I was born in Sinop in 1982 and grew up there. My sister, İşil Sümertas (now DiPietro), and I both came to Istanbul for university. She went to Hacettepe in Ankara and became a Habitat volunteer there. I had enrolled in Istanbul University; my preparatory year had just begun, and I was involved in music at the time, even had a band. Seeing how much time music was taking up, my uncle, Sezai Hazır, told me in mid-2002, “There’s work to be done here. You should get involved.” That’s how I joined.

Back then, we worked actively in a tiny office. People were traveling abroad for meetings, preparing European Union proj-

ects, and people from different cities were coming in and out of the office. Aside from my uncle, there weren't many people over the age of 25. My English was good, so I started working part-time, almost like an intern, in the International Relations Department.

There was a Balkan Youth Festival in Thessaloniki. I was given the responsibility of leading a group that included artists, young people from Anatolia, folk dancers, painters, and performance artists. That's how my Habitat story began at 22. Then came Bulgaria, Hungary... things were quite active internationally. I made friends both within the association and across different cities. I really enjoyed it. I not only finished my economics degree but also learned so much during our Habitat activities that I could say, "It wouldn't have mattered if I hadn't finished school." I started as a volunteer and later became a professional, staying with Habitat for seven years before heading to the U.S.

When I first joined, we used to say, "We are not the leaders of tomorrow, but the partners of today." Habitat instilled this perspective not only in the young people in the Istanbul center but also in our friends in Antep, Adiyaman, Şırnak, and Batman, enabling them to take active roles in their City Councils.

Habitat's greatest contribution to Türkiye was creating the most widespread, organized youth engagement up to that point. Habitat had a unique quality of bringing everyone together in the same space, regardless of religious belief, ethnic identity, or political view. Some of our friends went on to enter politics or serve in public institutions.

Today, it's a source of pride to undertake projects with Microsoft, Facebook, TOBB, and Türkiye's most important business people.

Esra Aladağ (İPED Consulting - Assistant Director)

“Habitat is my family”

Habitat is my family. I even met my spouse at Habitat. In a way, I also found myself there. In 2008, I was studying Labor Economics and Industrial Relations at Sakarya University and serving as acting president of the Student Council. At that time, my vice-rector, Professor Ali Rıza, told me, “Esra, there’s a municipal event in Ankara, and they want a representative from us. We’re sending you.” Five young people went, one from the municipality, one from a political party, one from a high school, one from a youth center, and me from the university. It turned out to be the Youth Workshop organized every May by the National Youth Parliament. I was astonished. Everyone was talking about “Local Agenda 21 and Holistic Youth Policy”, presenting their activities and giving presentations. At first, I didn’t understand. At that time, Youth Assembly or City Council activities had just begun in Sakarya, and it turned out we had come to the very first introductory meeting. Everything they were explaining was what we were doing at the university. Finally, I understood that we were part of this work without even knowing it!

During that period, I met Rahim Aladağ (now my husband), who was the Türkiye Field Coordinator for the National Youth Parliament. I also met Bora (Caldu) from Habitat’s “Those Who Know Teach Computers to Those Who Don’t.” I became preoccupied with the question of “What can we do in Sakarya? How do we establish a Youth Assembly?” By May 2008, we had a meeting, and we held the first General Assembly of the Sakarya Youth Assembly in December. Throughout that period, I was constantly in communication with Habitat: What will we do? How will we

gather young people? Which young people should be involved?

While we were establishing the Youth Assembly, local elections were approaching. Habitat had launched its “A Youth Representative in Every Assembly” campaign. I began Youth Assembly activities through that campaign, not only in Sakarya but also helping with the formation of Youth Assemblies in neighboring districts.

As I became more and more engaged with Habitat, they said, “Esra, you’re really passionate about this and channeling your energy here. Why don’t we nominate you as a member for the next term’s executive board?” In 2009, I became the Marmara Region Executive Board member of the National Youth Parliament. In the six cities of the region, Edirne, Kırklareli, Tekirdağ, Sakarya, Bolu, Düzce, youth assemblies had not been established for years despite being mandated by the Municipalities Law, and they had not been included in the process. I traveled every inch of these cities and their districts.

In some cities, City Councils had existed for a long time, but they hadn’t developed the culture or organizational structure needed. As a young woman, I also supported Women’s Councils. Wherever I went, I spoke about Habitat’s projects, which always drew great interest from women. At the time, women were particularly eager to learn computer skills. I organized trainer trainings, and then directed the new trainers to Women’s Councils to ensure they also received education. The Düzce Youth Assembly, which I coordinated, was selected as the “Best Youth Assembly.”

PART THREE:

NEW HORIZONS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

New millennium, new Türkiye

The ultimate goal of the Local Agenda 21 Program in Türkiye was to establish City Councils where all civil elements would interact to solve various local problems. This was primarily the responsibility of the city's municipality. Under the unique conditions of Türkiye, it was transferred to the "Habitat youth," who had proven to be the most effective in organizing and mobilizing young people both nationally and internationally. The association that emerged from this process played a facilitative role in organizing the unorganized youth across different social segments under various local civil platforms, bringing them together under the name of City Council Youth Assemblies.

Going a step further, by establishing a communication bridge between the local Youth Assemblies, the association realized the goal of a National Youth Parliament to create a "holistic youth policy." Since the 1992 Rio Summit, the Local Agenda 21 Program had been implemented in thousands of cities across approximately 135 countries under various titles such as "Sustainable Cities Program" or "Healthy Cities Program." When the outcomes of these implementations were reviewed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg from August 26 to September 4, 2002, the UNDP named Türkiye Local Agenda 21 Program as "one of the most successful implementations worldwide." The process gained further momentum in Türkiye, and with the enactment of the Municipality Law in 2005, City

Councils were granted legal status.

At the same time, the association was also running the Youth Centers Project in the GAP (Southeastern Anatolia Project) region. In 2006, it changed its name to the Youth Association for Habitat. The change in question wasn't the result of an effort to opt for something shorter or more pronounceable. Two unrelated developments had also determined the course that the Youth for Habitat Association would take, one of which was the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

At the Millennium Summit held in New York between September 6 and 8, 2000, 189 UN member states adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

These goals, aimed to be achieved by 2015, were accepted as a tool to enable developing countries to work in cooperation with developed countries for the common future of humanity.

Within the scope of ensuring environmental sustainability, the emphasis was placed on harmonizing sustainable development principles with national policies and programs, reversing environmental resource losses, reducing biodiversity loss, and halving the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water.

Two years later, the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg between August 26 and September 4, 2002, focused on sustainable development issues. The summit, also known as Rio+10, underscored that sustainable development goals should not be owned solely by governments but by society as a whole. It also highlighted the need for establishing cooperation and partnerships among various sectors, particularly between the private sector, civil society, and governments, to achieve sustainable development goals.

Since its establishment, Habitat and Agenda 21 Youth Associ-

ation had operated in line with these principles. So it would not be difficult for it to participate in a more development-oriented effort in the new millennium. The second development that guided the association's future direction was the change that began to manifest itself in Türkiye's political conjuncture.

As the world was on the verge of leaving the second millennium behind, Türkiye's economy at the end of 1999 was in a dire state. The devastating earthquake also impacted the economy, shrinking it by 6.1%, pushing inflation to 70%, widening budget deficits, and driving annual average compound interest rates on treasury bonds to 106%.

Positive developments observed in Türkiye's foreign relations, a three-year program implemented with IMF standby support in 1999, and an increase in foreign capital inflows were insufficient for the economy to recover. By the end of November 2000, the liquidity crunch had reached a critical level. In the emerging crisis, the overnight interest rate, which was 39% in October, rose to 95% in November, and then to 183% in December.

As the erosion of trust in economic management could not be resolved, the dispute between President Ahmet Necdet Sezer and Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit at the National Security Council meeting on February 19, 2001, deepened the crisis. After Sezer threw a constitution booklet at Ecevit and the Prime Minister's statement that "There is a crisis in state administration" reverberated through the financial markets. The panic-driven process led to the collapse of 24 banks.

In May 2001, Kemal Derviş was appointed Minister of Economy from outside the parliament. With support from the IMF and the World Bank, he initiated a series of structural reforms under the "Transition to a Strong Economy Program."

The political consequences of the crisis were also severe. Discussions regarding Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit's illness "hindering his duties" led to the split of his party. While the coalition government formed by ANAP, DSP, and MHP had lost its authority and legitimacy, when the MHP leader declared his call for early elections, Parliament decided to hold on early elections in November 2002.

One of the parties running in the election was the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), founded on August 14, 2001. Its founding leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, had already gained recognition during his tenure as Mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998. Following the closure of the Welfare Party in the wake of the February 28 process (1997) Erdoğan, along with other reformist figures, distanced himself from the National View movement and began efforts to establish a more centrist, broad-based political party.

Positioning itself on a conservative democratic line, adopting goals such as economic reforms, democratization, and EU membership, the Justice and Development Party, founded on August 14, 2001, quickly became a significant force in Türkiye's political scene; it won a landslide victory and came to power alone.

In the 2002 general elections, where ANAP, DYP, Young Party, and DSP were wiped from the political scene, and parties following a specific ideology like MHP, DEHAP, and Felicity Party failed to cross the election threshold, the Republican People's Party (CHP) became the main opposition with 19.39% of the votes while the AK Party secured 34.28% of the vote and launched its uninterrupted rule that continues to this day.

In the 2004 local elections held during the AK Party's second year in power, the ruling party achieved absolute dominance. The

AK Party won a total of 1,773 mayoralties, while the main opposition CHP secured only 645. The picture did not change in the next local elections (2009): AK Party 1,387, CHP 378.

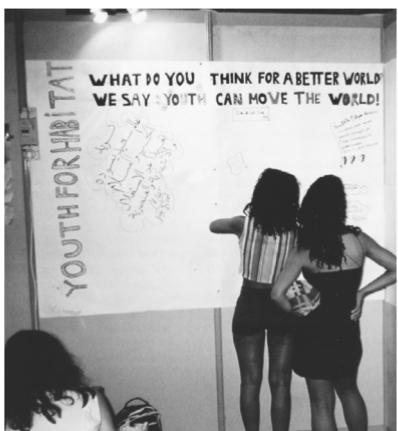
In its first five years of rule (2002–2007), referred to as its “Apprenticeship period”*, the AK Party gained broad public support through economic reforms, the EU accession process, and democratization steps. Increasing its votes to 46.6% in the next election, the AK Party initiated a series of breakthroughs in political, economic, and social spheres during its “Journeymen period” government (2007-2011). Constitutional amendments, legal reforms, and infrastructure projects constituted the major topics of this period. The presidential election debates of that year were resolved with the election of Abdullah Gül as President.

With the AK Party in power, a new doctrine, namely “strategic depth”, developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, became an important guide in Türkiye’s foreign policy. This approach, advocating for a more independent and multifaceted foreign policy by utilizing Türkiye’s geographical advantages, gradually prioritized relations with Middle Eastern countries (and with Russia in later years).

Changes in education policy epitomized by its founding leader’s statement “We want to raise a devout youth,” and issues such as the “One minute” outburst in Davos, began to widen the gap between the AK Party and the liberal elements within the “broad base” that brought it to power, and the Western world, especially the EU, during its “Journeymen period.”

Since Habitat had been a follower of programs related to

* The naming was personally expressed on various occasions by the founder and leader of the AK Party, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. For one of these, see: <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/basbakan-2011de-ustalik-donemi-baslayacak-17450622>



Representatives of the UN System and other intergovernmental organizations came together at the 3rd UN System Youth Forum, held in Braga, Portugal, from 2–7 August 1998. Türkiye's representatives from Habitat and Agenda 21 Association also attended the meeting. The aim of the meeting was to ensure "Youth Participation for Human Development," based on the premise that youth participation is a priority in the advancement of humanity.

Source: Habitat Association Archive.

United Nations organizations from the very beginning, its relationship with governments was also linked to agreements to which Türkiye was a party. Therefore, Türkiye's rapidly changing political conjuncture did not directly impact the organization's operations. However, the government change that occurred with the 2002 general elections was initially broad enough to embrace wide segments of society. The ruling party's internal alliances' dominance over the state bureaucracy, after its "Apprenticeship period," also reflected on civil society.

Sezai Hazır attributes this withdrawal from international engagement to the period following the Johannesburg Summit:

The United Nations launched the Millennium Development Goals in 2000. We were working with the UN support. As an organization that follows international relations, we made significant contributions to the preparation of that report and Türkiye's national report, and to creating a roadmap for countries to achieve those goals (2000-2015) over a 15-year period. The 2002

Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development was a meeting where all of them were evaluated.

Burçak Alagök, is one of the close witnesses to Habitat's preparatory work for the Johannesburg Summit. While a high school student in Çanakkale, one of the pilot provinces of Local Agenda 21, she met Sezai Hazır in 1997 and became a Habitat volunteer. After attending a youth festival in Portugal in 1998, she focused on issues such as sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, and energy management. She completed her university studies in the United States and volunteered for Habitat for five years:

Before the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, I participated in the preparatory meetings both at the United Nations in New York and at the Turkish Embassy, in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Following that, there was a meeting in Bali, a step preceding the Johannesburg summit; we also attended that as Habitat and Agenda 21 Youth Association with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Environment. Unfortunately, I couldn't attend the Johannesburg Summit because it coincided with my graduation.

With Pelin Ayan's participation, the summit where the voluntary collective effort of youth was also very skillfully demonstrated and, in many ways, culminated as Habitat's summit itself. Sezai Hazır continues as follows:

At the Johannesburg Summit, the world's largest session was chaired by Ali Ercan Özgür from our organization. Pelin Ayan, also from our organisation, spoke on behalf

of global youth. That's very significant. We were the only representatives from the official delegation, and we represented all of civil society there. It was the first and last time the Türkiye included so many civil society actors in its own delegation. We also presented suggestions to the Turkish government. But after 2002, civil society organizations were no longer included in Turkish delegations to international meetings. We did many things until that period, but after 2002, political preferences began to change.

The shrinking of the political sphere also revealed itself within the domestic context. Türkiye's Local Agenda 21 initiatives or City Councils, which were held up as an example to the world at the Johannesburg Summit, gained official status with the enactment of the Municipal Law. However, at this stage, the volunteering, sense of civic ownership, and partnership approach, which Habitat youth emphasized at every opportunity, also began to be buried under layers of bureaucracy. As Sadun Emrealt explains:

Back then, Habitat brought platforms like City Council which weren't even mentioned in the law into policies and practices. Today, we have a remarkable City Council regulation. Its first six articles are like poetry. Topics such as women, sustainability, development, and collective wisdom of the city were written into that regulation by those involved in the City Councils. But starting from article seven, you see the intervention of the Ministry of Interior regulating how executive boards should be formed, how many meetings should be held,

and whom the general secretary should appoint. From that point on, people only started reading from article seven. Nobody asked why City Councils were established; they put aside their function and began to prioritize the structure. Due to the mentality of “If there’s no seat for me, I’m not in this,” City Councils have lost some of their former functionality today.

The Municipality Law, which spearheaded the regulation of City Council formations, gradually became an obstacle for the Youth for Habitat Association. Sezai Hazır says, “Our close cooperation with governments continued until 2008, but after 2008, it reached a breaking point” and continues as follows:

Until that date, legal mechanisms were established. The Municipality Law [2005] mandated local governments to establish City Councils and Youth Assemblies; the municipality allocated a budget. Our dream when establishing City Councils and Youth Assemblies was to strengthen local organizations. But the process worked in reverse; those structures gradually became politicized; if the mayor was from a certain party, the Youth Assembly turned into that party’s youth branch, etc., and participation decreased. They also failed to institutionalize. When the correct legal legislation we spearheaded became an obstacle to our participation, we moved to another area. We had already completed our mission in Local Agenda 21.

Collaboration with the private sector begins with Microsoft

In line with the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations called on global corporations to share the burden of responsibility. As global companies stepped forward to fulfill this role through social responsibility projects, UNDP Türkiye, as always, took on the role of bridging the gap.

From the very beginning, Habitat had aligned its youth work with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), operating in areas such as “sustainable development”, “democratic governance and peacebuilding”, “combating climate change and natural disasters”. This alignment was not accidental; it was influenced by UNDP’s longstanding presence in Türkiye for over 50 years and its practice of conducting these activities with all stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector. But most importantly, through its youth work over the years, Habitat was in communication with an immense army of volunteers, capable of working at any moment, in almost every province and district of Türkiye.

Hansın Doğan, a UN official who has worked with Habitat since 2001 as the Governance Program Officer at UNDP, is a very close witness to the role the association played in the success achieved in Local Agenda 21 and youth work. Currently serving as the UNDP Türkiye’s Private Sector Partnerships Portfolio Manager since 2005, Hansın Doğan elaborates, “Since 2005, my field of work has expanded,” and continues as follows:

From Habitat's inception until today, we were already on a path to strengthen the private sector's role in development. We carried out joint projects with many companies. Currently, with richer content, we are working directly with both companies and business networks like TÜSİAD, TÜRKONFED, and TOBB. We continue to produce many high-impact results that can serve as models through individual projects.

Habitat's relationship with the private sector actually predates its formal establishment as an association. For example, Ender Merter, the head of Tür Tanıtım Agency, was a major financial and in-kind supporter during the Youth Caucus period. He even brought his client, Marshall Paint, on board as a sponsor. The association, in turn, embraced these contributions within the framework of the United Nations' "partnership" concept, emphasizing the "civil society-public-private sector collaboration" at every opportunity.

Habitat's initial private sector collaborations were limited to that. However, the partnerships that began in 2005 opened the door to major breakthroughs that would shape Habitat's entire future. One such project was initiated with Coca-Cola's The Life Plus Foundation and UNDP.

The Life Plus was a youth program that aimed to raise awareness about environmental and social issues among young people aged 18-30 and encourage them to develop projects for solutions. Although the collaboration with the company continued with other projects, the program was short-lived. It was then that a proposal arrived, suddenly broadening the association's horizons, from Şeniz Ciritçi of Microsoft.

Şeniz Ciritçi, a graduate of METU Computer Engineering, decided to step into the business world after trying academia for a while, moving from Ankara to Istanbul to work at Apple. Then, in 1993, she co-founded the Microsoft Türkiye office with a group of friends and spent the next 20 years of her career at Microsoft with a team she built in her twenties. Şeniz Ciritçi states, “Türkiye was in the process of computerization, and we were young people dedicated to the ideal of software development, international competition, and development through informatics.” Her quest for “doing something” eventually led her to Habitat:

I prepared projects that required working with civil society organizations, using my own initiative. In 2004, Microsoft and UNDP formed a global partnership to promote the widespread use of computers for development. The budget allocated by the two organizations was to be spent on projects prepared for this purpose.

We met with Hansin, who was then the UNDP Türkiye Representative, to discuss how and with whom we would implement the project locally. Since UNDP was already collaborating with Habitat, we began our work.

The goal was to provide basic computer training to young people and increase computer literacy. Habitat had a very strong volunteer network among young people at the local level, but it had never ventured into the world of informatics until then. At first, everything was a question mark for me. But Habitat had such a solid volunteer structure and effective infrastructure that Microsoft pulled Habitat into the world of informatics, and Habitat, in turn, helped expand Microsoft’s reach.



As part of the collaboration with the Educational Volunteers Foundation of Türkiye in 2007, a photo from a local “Those Who Know Teach Computers to Those Who Don’t” computer training session in Diyarbakır, delivered by volunteer trainer Serhat Özer. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

In Türkiye, computers became widespread in certain areas in the early 90s, replacing typewriters. Even when primarily featured in the media, computers, which suddenly rendered electric typewriters obsolete, were devices that required minimal usage knowledge and were of limited use to the uninitiated. Within a decade, the addition of internet connection signaled that the world was entering a new era.

It was being said everywhere that the Information Revolution was a result of information technology. However, despite Turkish society’s remarkable receptiveness for following and adopting innovations, its engagement with a device that removed distances and simplified access to information remained limited. By the mid-2000s, computer literacy was estimated at just 11-12%.

Sezai Hazır states that they “decided to collaborate with Microsoft” based on the analysis of the existing reality:

Although we had limited resources, we decided to work with global companies in line with the United Nations’ resolutions. Our collaboration with Microsoft began with a program called **Those Who Know Teach Computers to Those Who Don’t**. Initially, we received reactions ranging from “using computers is a sin” to “by teaching our children how to use computers, you’re leading our children into bad habits.” We began opening fully equipped computer labs in almost every part of Türkiye.

Trainer trainings

The project, which was to be implemented in eight countries in collaboration with Microsoft and UNDP, was initially designed for one year. The number of people to be trained within the allocated budget was also fixed. “For example, if you have \$100,000, you train 1,000 people with it. But in our case, we could train 10,000 people because there was a multiplier effect” explains Şeniz Ciritçi.

“The multiplier effect”, as Şeniz Ciritçi describes it, was the result of a practice Habitat pioneered with this project: “Trainer trainings.”

A close witness to those days, Başak Demir, a recent Koç University graduate, met Habitat in the summer of 2002 after graduating from Koç University and while considering an academic career, through a family friend involved in the GAP Youth and Culture Houses Project. She then decided to become an activist. Her volunteer work, which began in Habitat’s small office in Mecidiyeköy, soon included the role of “general secretary.” She continued her volunteer work from 2002 to 2007, periodically traveling to England for her master’s education. From 2007 to 2019, she worked professionally. Başak Demir states, “The first project I joined was the Life Plus project, which was already in the reporting phase. Afterward, I moved to the informatics side.”

Those Who Know Teach Computers to Those Who

Don't Project, launched in eight countries in collaboration with Microsoft and UNDP, was transformed into a special program in Türkiye in its second year. At that time, computer and internet literacy in Türkiye was around 10-11%, so we organized "basic computer and internet literacy" trainer trainings. This was the first project where we began to establish the volunteer trainer model by training trainers.

Habitat's "trainer trainings," which now function excellently and use curricula and educational tools developed for different gender and age groups, from children to senior youth, were based on a simple calculation. For example, Habitat would train 10 suitable individuals in a relevant subject, and those 10 individuals, as trainers, would then train at least 10 people in their respective cities. While the model, predicted to geometrically increase the benefit, could not, of course, be expected to be 100% efficient, it worked. The project spread to all cities of Türkiye. Since computer education cannot exist without computers, computers were also provided. 3,000 used computers from Garanti Bank's warehouse were serviced and made ready for use. The computers were distributed to schools and headmen's offices across Türkiye in cooperation with State Railways, and the army of trainers moved into action for the training.

By the end of its first year, Those Who Know Teach Computers to Those Who Don't Project had far exceeded Microsoft's targets in other countries. Şeniz Ciritçi reflects on the project's impact, saying, "Reaching so many people and doing such efficient work with the budget we received was something only we could have pulled off," and continues as follows:

People in the US couldn't believe the results. A team from the University of Washington came to Türkiye to see it for themselves, with this question in mind, "What kind of volunteering work is this?" and filmed the project. In our work, we generally prioritized young girls and women. One of their stories was especially moving. One day, our trainer friend entered the classroom, and a female student was upset. When asked why, the student cried and said, "They're going to marry me off." After the training, friends helped the girl find a job. Once she gained financial independence, she escaped that forced marriage. This and similar stories greatly appealed to the Americans. In the end, thanks to the project's success, Microsoft, Habitat, and UNDP received an award from the European Commission. I was personally recognized by the company as "the person who achieved the most with the smallest budget." What started as a one-year project lasted for over 10 years by developing its curriculum over time according to needs and adding something new each year. Even after I left Microsoft in 2014, the collaboration continued.

Habitat's transformative role

Those Who Know Teach Computers to Those Who Don't Project also created a facilitating effect in Habitat's efforts to implement the Local Agenda 21 Program throughout Türkiye, and in its work on the GAP Region Youth and Culture Houses project. Başak Demir explains:

In the early 2000s, young people demanded a voice, but they often struggled against a significant age hierarchy. We began by equipping them with basic computer literacy skills. This strengthened our work in Youth Assemblies and the National Youth Parliament, under the slogan, "We are not the leaders of tomorrow, but the partners of today."

We then carried this knowledge to local governments and various urban actors through City Councils. Teaching how to use computers and the internet accelerated our access to global and national knowledge, strengthening our muscle for localizing information and propelled those of us demanding equality into more empowered positions.

The success Habitat achieved through its partnership with Microsoft not only changed and expanded the lives of the individuals who learned to use a computer, it also elevated Habitat's own standing. A local organization once navigating inland waters now had the courage and capacity to venture into

the ocean. The results of a year of work, teaching computers across Anatolia, especially the collaboration between public, private, and civil society, including the Ministry of National Education and municipalities, were encouraging for thinking bigger.

With the right project in hand, Habitat soon became a “go-to” partner for public organizations and institutions. Microsoft’s decision to extend its project with Habitat was also encouraging. As digital transformation rapidly changed everything in the world, Türkiye, too, needed to adapt.

Cisco Systems, a global giant that develops products providing the infrastructure for establishing and managing corporate networks, regards all the training content it prepares in its field as a commercial activity worth several thousand dollars per certificate type in the Cisco Networking Academy. However, it also implements social responsibility programs worldwide by collaborating with non-profit organizations to help individuals who need or are already receiving this type of training reach international standards. The content mentioned is entirely technical, based on subjects that require extensive training when one wants to acquire a profession. Upon completing the training, individuals who obtain certain certificates gain qualifications that allow them to easily find jobs in a wide range of fields.

Deniz Sungurlu, who represented Cisco Türkiye, shares how this challenging program, which began in 2005 under the name **“Young Movement in Informatics,”** was overcome:

I began working at Cisco in 2001 and was the country representative for the Cisco Networking Academy, a social responsibility program. Cisco ran this collaboration-based education program with the education ministries of countries, universities, and, where appropriate, with

civil society stakeholders. In Türkiye, we mainly worked with the Ministry of National Education, universities, and especially vocational and technical high schools. The content of the courses, aimed at vocational training related to computers and computer networks, was not easy to learn and teach and required a computer-equipped classroom environment. Partnering with universities that already had instructors, assistants, and technical infrastructure made our work easier. Engineering students usually attend these types of courses at universities. It was difficult for non-students to participate. While researching possible stakeholders in our country, we thought, "If only we could establish the right collaborations in civil society and reach the unemployed, especially disadvantaged groups." With this in mind, I went to UNDP, where the official, Hansin Doğan, told me about Habitat and introduced me to Sezai Hazır. That introduction marked the beginning of a long and very valuable friendship. I explained the program to Sezai Hazır in detail, and he embraced it. Since this would be Habitat's first collaboration with the information sector, a long preparation phase was required. Our

**"Bilişimde Genç Hareket"
inisiyatifine yılın projesi ödülü**

Habitat'ın "Gençlik"ının Birleşmiş Milletler Kalkınma Programı (UNDP), Cisco Systems Türkiye, Türkiye Bilişim Vakfı ve İTÜ ile birlikte yürütülen "Bilişimde Genç Hareket" inisiyatifi, Cisco Systems tarafından NetAcad Yıllık Proje seçildi. Proje çerçevesinde 8 ilde 16-26 yaş arası sosyoekonomik düzey düşük 124 genççe bilgisayar açılan konuda uzmanlık eğitimi verildi. Habitat'ın "Gençlik"ının önderliğinde gerçekleştirilen projeyle, ülkemizdeki gençlere bilgisayar eğitimi verilecek yarının bilişim dünyasına hazırlamaları hedefleniyor.



An article in the monthly industry and economy magazine *KobiEfor* covering the success of Young Movement in Informatics Project. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

preparation period lasted until 2005. We secured funding, and planned how to establish the necessary infrastructure and provide volunteer trainers. That year, we announced this collaboration of the Cisco Networking Academy to the press as a partnership between the UN Development Program, Cisco, and Habitat. Habitat named the program

Young Movement in Informatics. With a structure established under the leadership of a project manager, young volunteers were selected to run the program in 16 provinces. These volunteers underwent a detailed selection process and received trainer training at universities we already had agreements with such as ITU and METU. Then, they worked to set up classroom environments in their own cities. They made announcements and opened classes, agreeing with Habitat to train at least two groups, each consisting of 20 people. The trainings began in this way and continued for many years.

Targeting young entrepreneurs

While Habitat's computer literacy development program, initiated with Microsoft, evolved and grew in scope, Vodafone which entered the Turkish market in 2006 also became involved. The cooperation with Habitat, which began with the company's **No One Left Without Learning Computers** (2008) project, would continue to this day. With the Cisco Networking Academy also joining the process, the transformative impact of the rich vein Habitat had struck in the field of informatics would become evident over time, extending the prevalence of digital transformation from SMEs (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises) to coding and robotics training for primary school children.

One of the works that involved broad segments of society was the **I Can Manage My Business** project, a personal budget management skill and individual financial literacy development project in collaboration with Visa, member banks, and UNDP. Habitat, along with municipalities and local NGOs it helped establish, had already been able to reach even the villages of Türkiye for years. A significant step taken during this process would create a milestone by increasing its recognition and visibility within the artisan, trade, and industrial sectors of society.

Sezai Hazır describes this step, aligned with the Millennium Development Goals, as follows:

During our work with the National Youth Parliament, we gained significant experience in building and mobilizing networks. To evaluate this network and include entrepreneurs in economic policies in Türkiye, we proposed to the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (TOBB) in 2005 the establishment of two institutions: the Women and Young Entrepreneurs Council. Rifat (Hisarcıklıoğlu) was highly supportive and remains so to this day. We signed a protocol between the two institutions. “The Young Entrepreneurs Council,” led by Ali Sabancı, was created and I served as vice president. This council played an incredible role in transforming the perception of entrepreneurship in Türkiye. A Women Entrepreneurs Council was also formed.



A photo from the first congress of the TOBB Women Entrepreneurs Council, established upon a proposal to the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (TOBB), held on 25 August 2008. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

Following the protocol signed between Habitat and TOBB, Young Entrepreneurs Councils began to form in each city's Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Denizli was one of the leading provinces.

Civan Sözkesen, himself an entrepreneur from a family of entrepreneurs and industrialists that had made various inventions in the textile field, did not hesitate to take on the presidency of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (TOBB) Denizli Young Entrepreneurs Council. After meeting Sezai Hazır at the first general assembly, Sözkesen also became interested in Habitat. Not only was he part of the founding of GEN Türkiye (Young Entrepreneurs Network), he also served as Habitat's Vice President. He describes the impact of entrepreneurship and the Habitat-TOBB collaboration on youth entrepreneurship as follows:

Sezai's 2005 call to establish Young Entrepreneurs Councils in every city and the participation of industry, trade, and stock exchanges as triple stakeholders in this structure, also strengthened TOBB politically. The first step was taken in 2005, and the Young Entrepreneurs Council officially established around 2007–2008. At the time, female entrepreneurship was still lacking. Through its partnership with Habitat, TOBB set out to break down stereotypes against women's labor and raise awareness about women's entrepreneurship across Anatolia. The initiative proved highly beneficial.

In the past, opening a flower shop was enough to be considered an "entrepreneur." Today, entrepreneurship refers to efforts that involve innovation, create difference,

and lead change, what we now call start-ups. A florist who now sells online and uses AI to personalize arrangements based on customers' previous orders and brings something different to the table, is seen as an "entrepreneurial florist."

For Türkiye's economy to grow, entrepreneurs are needed. Today, a university graduate faces three main options: Working for the government, joining a corporate company, or starting their own business. As the U.S. example shows, it's entrepreneurs who strengthen and grow a nation. 55% of the US economy is made up not of traditional companies, but of entrepreneurial companies, which we call start-ups. Therefore, this is a very large economy; it attracts foreign capital, creates a lot of employment, and helps control inflation. Türkiye also has a tremendous young population. It is necessary



A photo from the 7th G3 Forum, held on 14 November 2017 under the theme "Golden Egg-Laying Minds", where prominent figures from the business world provided roundtable mentoring to entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs. The event was attended by 1,500 entrepreneurs and entrepreneur candidates. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

to guide this correctly, not just to work in corporate or state jobs, but to encourage the production of different business ideas. If we do that, Türkiye can suddenly grow immensely.

When researched, the rate of entrepreneurship has risen significantly since then bringing billions of dollars into the country. Today, one of the top two sectors that attract foreign capital and generate employment is software. 15 years ago, we had no global companies. Now, we see many valued at over \$1 billion: Yemek Sepeti, Trendyol, Hepsi Burada, Markafoni, Peak Games, Kafa Topu, and Rolik are the first companies that come to mind.

Facebook Station

As of 2011, Habitat reduced its focus on governance-oriented Youth Assembly activities and prioritized development-focused programs and projects. In 2015, the association decided to continue under the name **Habitat Association**. As Sezai Hazır explains, “This was a period when we had professionalized and mastered our work” and continues as follows:

The diversification and growth of projects, funding organizations, and beneficiaries necessitated institutionalization. Habitat had to become an organization that operated according to regulations in many areas, such as procurement, volunteer management systems, and decision-making processes. We established the necessary mechanisms as an institution that moved beyond being dependent on individuals, now possessing its own established practices and a framework defined by rules. The Law on the Protection of Personal Data (KVKK, 2016) had a significant impact on us, as we were working with thousands of volunteers.

This period of professionalization also created a need for a different kind of office. Habitat, as a movement, emerged from people coming together and working in cafes and trade union meeting rooms, acquired its first office thanks to the Şişli Municipality and for a long time was housed in offices provided

or rented by local governments. In its early days, when work didn't require a fixed location, we had even functioned without an office. But as operations expanded and new departments like procurement and accounting were established, the number of employees who needed to work at desks grew. However, more importantly, Habitat had never had a workspace that reinforced a culture of collaboration aligned with its work, allowed it to interact with its stakeholders, and strengthened collaborative efforts. The office we needed now had to serve all these purposes.

Facebook (now Meta) Station, which aims to be a common workspace and knowledge-sharing platform for different communities, NGOs, businesses, and entrepreneurs in Türkiye, was launched in 2019 in collaboration with the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (TOBB), the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Türkiye, and



A photo from the opening of Facebook Station in Istanbul on 12 September 2019. Established through the collaboration of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (TOBB), Facebook, and Habitat Association, the initiative aimed to strengthen the national economy and communities by supporting the digital transformation of SMEs and entrepreneurs, helping them reach global markets. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

Habitat Association. Meta Station hosts a series of different trainings, programs, and workshops focusing on the digitalization of Turkish society and economy. The main trainings offered include digitalization, digital marketing, the use of Meta and Meta family products, online security, and related education. The opportunities presented by artificial intelligence and open-source innovation are also being evaluated, considering the current state of technology.

To ensure that the training and programs weren't limited to Istanbul, similar Meta Station community centers were established in other cities. This way, community centers in various Turkish cities continue to support efforts that enhance knowledge sharing and collaboration.

GEN Türkiye

Following Habitat's proposal to the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye to "support entrepreneurship and young entrepreneurs in Türkiye" in 2005, the establishment of Endeavor Türkiye in 2006 was a significant step for Türkiye's entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Established in 1997 to support effective, high-potential entrepreneurs worldwide, Endeavor is a global organization that aims to strengthen the entrepreneurship ecosystem and help entrepreneurs overcome obstacles they face during their growth process. It supports these entrepreneurs by providing them with mentors, investors, and business networks to help them grow and succeed globally.

Aslı Kurul Türkmen, Secretary General of Endeavor Türkiye, describes the organization founded in 2006 to connect entrepreneurs in Türkiye with the global Endeavor network as follows:

Endeavor Türkiye supports what we call "high-impact entrepreneurs", those with strong growth potential who can contribute to the development of their local ecosystems. At Endeavor, we help entrepreneurs grow their businesses faster, create jobs, find quicker solutions to the challenges they face, and gain access to global markets. This support begins with our selection process.

Every entrepreneur goes through a selection process

and receives mentorship from leaders in the local business community from the very beginning. Our entrepreneurs continue to benefit from our support as part of a global entrepreneur and mentor network.

In the long run, our goal is to create change in the ecosystem by leveraging the multiplier effect of these stories. We want our role model entrepreneurs like Nevzat Aydin and Hande Çilingir to inspire others by mentoring and investing in them, thereby helping more entrepreneurs emerge in the ecosystem. We want to provide a platform where entrepreneurs can turn when they're in a tight spot, allowing them to think bigger.

On the other hand, we aim to create a multiplier effect by supporting our entrepreneurs' expansion abroad and enabling those with international experience to mentor the new generation. We've been here for 17 years to make entrepreneurs' lives easier.

In the same year it was founded, Endeavor Türkiye began organizing an event called Entrepreneurship Week in collaboration with the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye). Endeavor Türkiye and Habitat first crossed paths during the 2008 Global Entrepreneurship Week.

Global Entrepreneurship Week was an event launched in 2008 by the Global Entrepreneurship Network (GEN), founded by Jonathan Ortmans. GEN aims to support entrepreneurship and encourage the establishment of new businesses globally. To this end, it organizes events and programs and provides a platform that brings together entrepreneurs, investors, policymakers, and mentors worldwide to develop the entrepreneurship ecosystem.



A photo from the Global Entrepreneurship Congress organized by GEN in Istanbul from 16 to 18 April 2018, showing the moment a plaque was presented to the President of the Republic of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who attended the program and delivered an opening speech. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

With the establishment of the TOBB Young Entrepreneurs Council, steps were taken to expand and strengthen the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Türkiye. Habitat was already organizing workshops and training sessions that encouraged and supported entrepreneurship from the ground up, and directing idle labor towards production. They also encouraged women to form cooperatives. Through its programs like “I Can Manage My Money / I Can Manage My Business,” Habitat instilled budget awareness in everyone at the local, grassroots level. It also taught digital marketing methods using digital tools through IT trainings and e-commerce sites, like the “Trendyol-Marketplace” example, provided platforms for significant products to be marketed.



In 2022, Buğra Avcı and Hilal Gerçek from the Habitat team attended the Global Entrepreneurship Congress (GEC) held in Riyadh to share best practices of Habitat Association and GEN Türkiye with participants. During the congress, a cooperation protocol was signed with Jonathan Ortman, President of the Global Entrepreneurship Network (GEN), to expand the reach of GEN programs. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

Thus, the Entrepreneurship Week events jointly organized by Endeavor Türkiye, Habitat, and the TOBB Young Entrepreneurs Council began to reach cities across Anatolia. In 2018, the Global Entrepreneurship Congress was held in Türkiye through a collaboration between TOBB, Turkish Exporters Assembly (TİM), Habitat, and Endeavor. The event attracted major attention. Soon after, Habitat GEN Türkiye was founded.

Berrak Kutsoy, Director of Corporate Communications at Esas Holding and a founding board member of GEN Türkiye, shares the story of its founding:

One of our biggest dreams was to establish GEN in Türkiye. But they were talking about huge sums. In the end, may he rest in peace, the late Sezai met with Jonathan

in the U.S. and said, “We’re not going to pay for this. If that’s acceptable to you, we’ll establish it.” He got their approval, and that’s how we founded GEN Türkiye. Nevzat Aydın, one of our country’s most prominent entrepreneurs, became the chairman of the board. Habitat took on administrative management and coordination. It’s a very important initiative. Türkiye needs such platforms that include and collaborate with entrepreneurs. GEN Türkiye is a network that includes the people and the ecosystem we’ve been working with for years.

Today, GEN runs programs and projects in over 200 countries with the goal of making it easier for anyone, anywhere to start



A photo from the opening of the entrepreneurship campus in Denizli on 15 October 2022 as part of GEN Türkiye, the umbrella organization of the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Türkiye, hosted by DEGİAD and organized in partnership with Habitat Association, TÜSİAD, TÜRKONFED, and KAGİDER. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

or grow a business. It has two campuses worldwide. One was established by the Nigerian government in Africa. The other, entirely the work of GEN Türkiye without any government contribution, is the GEN Türkiye Denizli Campus. Sezai Hazır says, “That’s what suited us best,” and adds:

We came up with the idea for something like Facebook Station and developed its prototype. People believed in it and are now building bridges with the other side of the world through it. Then we took it one step further. If we’ve built these spaces, then we should also run the Turkish operations of the world’s largest entrepreneurship network in Türkiye. When founding GEN Türkiye, our vision was to bring different disciplines together. We said TÜSİAD, TOBB, TÜRKONFED, Ali Sabancı, Nevzat Aydin should be a part of this. Then we took another step and founded the Denizli campus. Everyone was very surprised at how we managed to do it. Other countries and governments hadn’t even thought of it. But I believe this: If you believe in something, have built the right relationships, and those relationships have created an environment of trust, then it’s easy to make it work.

From volunteerism to professionalization

While Habitat's social responsibility projects with two international companies threw open a new door for collaboration, reactions from both within the association and the civil society world were swift. Although the association had stated from the very beginning, "We cannot get anywhere just with the government and government resources. We must also learn to utilize international resources," this new "international resource" was different from the allocations some countries set aside from their budgets for civil society. These were international corporations. "We were now collaborating with global companies, and that sparked serious debates for us. But it also created a model for us to secure sustainable income," says Sezai Hazır.

While Habitat operated entirely on volunteer labor in its early years, it gained legal entity status at its inception .through a fait accompli, influenced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with contributions from TOKI, also establishing a strategic partnership with UNDP. In the years that followed, public-civil society cooperation continued relatively smoothly. However, at a certain point, the political climate caused that space to narrow. The City Councils, which had been allocated budgets under the Municipal Law, quickly turned into "backyards of politics." The environment shifted to one where decisions were made based on "who would do the job" rather than merit, qualifications, value produced, or benefits provided by the government or municipality

acting “on behalf of the public.” Believing that “one cannot get anywhere solely with the government and government resources,” Habitat began to systematically ponder “How can we do this?” This was because, although the association worked on a project basis from time to time, it had not received any support from the United Nations since 2009.

İtir Akdoğan, Director of Research at TESEV and Vice President of Habitat, has been part of Habitat since 1997, except for necessary breaks for graduate studies and academic work. She states that the association’s only alternative to the “narrowing democratic environment” it faced was “to be shut down”:

Sezai would often ask, “Do I want to eat the grapes, or beat the grape-picker?” He worries, “If I take to the streets in the name of activism and get shut down, I might not be able to help the young people, women, migrants, and children whose lives I’ve been able to touch.”

It’s clear that Habitat chose to survive and it was prepared for criticism. While it didn’t ignore it entirely, it continued along the path it believed was right.

“During my volunteering period between 2002 and 2007, I didn’t just manage projects or train; I also served as general secretary and even as the president of the association” says Başak Demir and continues as follows:

I was part of a team constantly asking: What can we do? How can we develop? What new methods can we find? When we began collaborating with the private sector, especially in the field of entrepreneurship, we faced a lot of criticism from outside. There were even discussions questioning, “Is Habitat no longer a civil

society organization?” Habitat didn’t abandon everything else to partner with the private sector. Collaborating with business organizations was very uncommon, even alien, for rights-based civil society organizations at the time. Back then, İlhan (Ermiş) was our only professional, in the sense of a salaried employee. Professional teams started growing after 2005-2006, and working with such active professional teams was also new to us. We changed over time; especially given the high turnover in a youth organization, we put significant effort into transferring yesterday’s institutional memory to today’s teams.

Criticism directed at Habitat actually had little basis in reality for an association positioned relative to the UNDP, because what was done had relevance for both the Millennium Development Goals and the Local Agenda 21 Program, where Habitat was recognized as a partner.

However, the partnerships Habitat formed with business organizations like TOBB and TÜRKONFED in the context of “entrepreneurship,” and and its renaming itself **“Habitat Development and Governance Association”** by removing “youth” from its name in 2011 when the Local Agenda 21 Program concluded, led to interpretations that Habitat had “abandoned its goals of participation and local democracy, leaving the field unattended.”

İtir Akdoğan while admitting, “There were times I questioned things and debated them with Sezai,” finds this accusatory approach unfair:

The fact that Habitat gradually moved away from concepts like governance and local democracy, shifted its focus, and diversification of topics may have discouraged

local organizations in this area, perhaps not creating as much space as it could have. But still, the democratic space didn't shrink because Habitat stopped working on it. That would be an unfair assessment. You can't place that kind of responsibility on a single organization. A single civil organization doesn't have the power to either revitalize or constrict democracy, and neither does Habitat. That said, as a strong organization, If it were up to me, Habitat could have continued working in governance alongside its new focus areas. But Sezai enjoys renewal; he made a decision accordingly."

Partnering with the private sector quickly led to changes within Habitat's structure.

İlhan Ermiş was Habitat's first professional employee, starting on May 1, 2001, and retiring 22 years later. He had been laid off from the factory where he worked before his military service due to a crisis. A family friend sent him to Sezai Hazır. He had never done office work in his life, yet he was responsible for all the operations at the office in Ali Sami Yen Apartment. İlhan Ermiş says, "Habitat is often called 'the place where we learned everything, experienced everything, tried everything.' For me, Habitat is also 'the place that taught me how to learn,'" and he continues:

We were just a handful of volunteers there. I was the only one getting paid. Everything felt very strange to me. It was also very odd that that handful of people tried to explain volunteerism to me, and I just couldn't grasp it. My mind simply couldn't comprehend people coming there to work voluntarily. This state lasted for a year or two.

Mr. Sezai used to say, ‘We will be a communication bridge between people.’ In the office, everyone always talked about volunteering, and since foreigners also visited, they spoke English. I didn’t speak English, so there was an incredible gap between my world and theirs. That also felt very strange to me. I even considered quitting several times.

But it was there that I learned what having an ideal meant. The fact that I was being paid while others were volunteering tirelessly, often working longer hours than I did, truly gnawed at me. I wrote resignation letters a few times, but my friends talked me out of it.

Our workday usually started around 8 or 9 in the morning, but I’d arrive at 7. I handled everything the office needs from cleaning the office to serving tea and coffee to guests, answering phones and mailing invitations. We had only one computer. We’d turn it on and wait 40-45 minutes for emails to load. I’d leave the office around 10 or 11 at night. Computers had entered my life, and I wanted to understand what they were and do things with them. I’m 44 today, and I still watch educational videos on YouTube.

I worked hard to improve myself. I was always asking for tasks. During what we call that “school” period, friends like Emre Koyuncu and Bilge Turcan put a lot of effort into guiding me. Thanks to them, I created my first website there, which was one of Habitat’s first websites. I did my first design there. Every time I went to a stationery store, I’d buy the latest computer book and work on the computer by looking at those books. Today, I work as a

freelance graphic designer and web developer, all thanks to the skills I gained at Habitat.

In Habitat's history, besides Mr. Sezai, there have been two board chairpersons: Başak and myself. There's even a story on YouTube called "From office boy to board chairman." I worked in many areas, including as secretary-general. Before I left, I was working as a board advisor. When Emre Koyuncu left for military service and didn't return, I had to take over his responsibilities. This also taught me how to handle the organization's legal affairs.

When I joined Habitat, I was a guy living in a shantytown neighborhood. I had three friends. When we got together, we didn't know how to chat; we'd just look at each other. Honestly, I didn't even want to imagine what my life would have been like without Habitat.

The ongoing Local Agenda 21 and GAP projects were being handled in collaboration with local stakeholders. However, the new phase that began in 2005–2006 through a partnership with Microsoft introduced the field of information technology, which was an area completely unfamiliar to everyone at the association. Someone who "also understood civil society" was a key criterion, and the search didn't last long. That person was Gujan Şen. A friend he knew from AIESEC told him in 2008 that "Habitat needs a technical person," and he rushed to join.

One Friday, I sat down with Sezai Abi at the Ulus office and talked. He said, "Come on Monday, start," and we embarked on an adventure. At the time, Habitat was a very small team of about 10 people running fewer projects



In 2008, Habitat Association won the Best Practice award in the Geographical Participation category at the European Commission's E-Inclusion Awards held in Vienna, with its IT-focused projects. Representing Habitat Association at the event were Bora Caldu, Gujan Şen, Burcu Kılınç, and Başak Demir. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

than today. In those years, Habitat used to channel individuals who had volunteered for a certain period into projects, but when a technical person was needed for our project, I, as an outsider, stepped in. I was the first person to start working professionally at Habitat without being a volunteer of the association. What was asked of me was to structure a social network that would enable friends in local Youth Assemblies, jointly run by Cisco, the UN, and Habitat, to work together and facilitate their communication. I started by taking on that project.

Habitat was a volunteer-based organization, but its fundamental distinguishing feature from other CSOs probably lay in the implicit understanding of discipline embodied in Sezai

Hazır's words: "Volunteering doesn't mean doing whatever you want." Every volunteer was responsible for whatever task they took on. Those who couldn't bear it left, while the rest continued their volunteer work with a professional approach. Since the world of IT introduced through the Microsoft partnership was highly technical, purchasing external services became a necessity. Over time, however, Habitat's own professionals would begin to emerge from within its own volunteers, just like Bora Caldu.

Now serving as Habitat's Executive Chair, Bora Caldu began volunteering in 2007 while still a second-year university student. At that time, he volunteered for the "Those Who Know Teach Computers to Those Who Don't" Project, which was launched with a vision of development through IT. Bora Caldu chose to take on responsibilities in projects focusing on digital transformation within the association, believing that digital advancements would profoundly affect social life, the business world, the public, and civil society in those years. During that period, he became a volunteer trainer to help spread educational content aimed at developing digital competencies to broad segments of society. Later, as a professional at Habitat, Bora Caldu says, "Being involved in projects that touch social life was a great opportunity. The broad scope of responsibility given at Habitat, and the trust placed in us, both developed us personally and allowed us to amplify the impact of our work," and he continues:

During my time as a professional at Habitat, I became responsible for coordinating our projects that supported digital transformation. This responsibility excited me because I would be overseeing projects jointly carried out with major international companies in the IT

field. Managing communications with these important companies, coordinating thousands of volunteers in the field, and handling all the processes from financing to operational planning inevitably develops a person immensely. The broad scope of responsibility Habitat offers is a tremendous opportunity for personal development. After my professional life at Habitat, I had the opportunity to work at Microsoft, Samsung, and Apple. The skills I gained at Habitat have greatly benefited my career.

I'm very happy to now be back at Habitat as Executive Chair. Habitat is one of the most important and well-established institutions working in the field of sustainable development. As someone who grew up within Habitat, I'm thrilled to take responsibility for its future with my colleagues."

Over time, the societal changes Türkiye underwent due to external factors somewhat forced Habitat to make a choice.

İsmail Metin, now a member of Habitat's Executive Board, was active in student clubs, student communities, and *Genç Tema* in 2011, while a second-year student of Labor Economics and Industrial Relations at Trakya University. He learned about Habitat through an announcement from the Youth Assembly, affiliated with the City Council in Edirne. He joined the volunteer network by participating in the trainer training in Yalova for the technology and entrepreneurship program the association was running with Intel. He delivered trainings across Edirne and the Thrace region. He was elected Marmara Regional Representative for the National Youth Parliament and served on the executive board for three terms, from 2012 to 2015. After four years of vol-

unteering and gaining experience in nearly every field, he began working professionally at Habitat in 2015.

Ismail Metin argues that while Habitat made a choice in its journey to the present, it never truly disconnected from youth or its own past:

Habitat could have continued on its path by saying, “We will focus on youth and participation and stay out of other areas.” Or, it could have combined both by saying, “Let’s offer young people and women training in entrepreneurship, financial literacy, digital literacy, and coding through private sector projects.” Habitat chose the second path and continued to walk both lines until 2015. In other words, it carried out both participation and governance activities, as well as development projects. That’s also why the association’s name was changed to the Development and Governance Association in 2011.

By 2015, our topics had diversified significantly. In addition to rural development studies and cooperatives, the organization began partnering with larger global companies like Facebook. The priorities of young people changed. In the past, many discovered Habitat through the National Youth Parliament and joined Habitat’s projects from there. With the pandemic, their interest in Habitat projects increased even more. As the organization began teaching technology, AI, and coding to young people, participation was no longer the primary theme. Models of organizing also began to shift.

Many youth platforms and associations changed their structures. New movements like Ahbap grew faster,

because young people fully participate and support topics they like. And even when they are not involved, they do not fall completely outside the circle, they just observe. If something interests them, they can come together with a single cargo. Youth for purposes. Habitat also took such a form.

That's why we started talking about topics like data security, cybersecurity, and teaching coding to children. Gradually, we moved away from governance, reaching points that went beyond even development. Since everyone knew us by the name Habitat, we decided to continue as Habitat Association. We shaped our focus areas accordingly and relegated governance topics to the background. But we never abandoned youth. In our projects and in our teaching and learning models, we continue to use the method of young people teaching young people or young people teaching adults, and prioritize youth.

Since we work professionally and drive transformation, we can sometimes be blind to certain things. For instance, there might be things we simply don't see. From my perspective, we're still doing the same thing. The methods and institutions may change, but we are still doing the same thing. Just like before, we don't concentrate our efforts in the western part of the country and we reach every corner of Anatolia. In the past, we opened a Youth and Culture House in the GAP Region and now we're doing a next-generation version under the name "Station." Back then, cultural activities were at the forefront. Now we say, "Let's teach entrepreneurship, coding, robotics, and AI." We shape our work to meet the needs of the time.

Back then, municipalities hosted us and provided the venues, and we delivered the training. In today's Stations, our stakeholders are again the governorships and municipalities. We bring content and implementation there. When we say, "We're going to support young entrepreneurs, offer grants to women, help them start businesses and to do this, we'll organize hackathons, idea marathons, and mentorship programs," we try to take this to every corner of Anatolia.

Habitat and the future

Ho far, this work has covered Habitat's 30-year journey from past to present. Since the shutters are still open, it's customary to make a prediction about the future. Whether predictions will come true is anyone's guess, it's reasonable to assume that an organization that shines through its actions and has built an unshakable network of trust to reach this point also considers its future. As Sezai Hazır puts it, "If you're working in the field of civil society, you have to keep yourself excited. You can't afford to let fatigue set in," before going on to list the areas Habitat has set its sights on for the future:

If we had stuck only to the mission we set in 1995, we would be just another ordinary organization by now. But we've always motivated ourselves with new initiatives and in doing so, we created a public perception that "Habitat brings innovation." While we used to focus solely on peer-to-peer trainings among youth, after 2011, we empowered young people to support the empowerment of all segments of society.

As we empowered young people to provide coding training, these young people, in turn, went and trained children. Young people trained senior youth, meaning those who reached a certain age. Young people went and trained women. The backbone and transformation

of Habitat are still the youth, but now, they're not just transforming each other. Now it has changed a bit. As our training content has diversified in recent years, it's not just young people, but also a very significant untapped retired workforce in Türkiye, which I highly value and want to work on in the coming period. There's a vast amount of accumulated knowledge and experience, but because there are no mechanisms to activate it, this experience is being wasted. It is perfectly possible to activate this segment, involve them in social development, and make them feel valuable, and that's exactly what we're trying to do. There are organizations working on this abroad. In the U.S., people beyond a certain age go to different countries around the world and voluntarily support development activities there. We closely follow what is being done and proactively create tasks for ourselves.



As part of its collaboration with the Beşiktaş Municipality, Habitat Association's coding trainings were included in the summer school program of the Beşiktaş Municipality Children's Science Center. A photo from a lesson where volunteer trainers taught coding to children. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

Buğra Avcı, Habitat's Executive Board Member responsible for International Relations and Inclusive and Sustainable Growth, began his Habitat journey as a volunteer in 2012 and has been working professionally with the organization since 2017. He explains in detail the steps Habitat is taking toward the future:

Habitat brings international resources to Türkiye. These resources aren't just funding; they also include valuable networks, educational content, events, and new opportunities. For example, we are part of The Clubhouse Network, established with support from MIT and focused on next-generation skills. In the field of entrepreneurship, we work with Youth Business International and the Global Entrepreneurship Network. In digital transformation, we work with the Raspberry Pi Foundation and WSIS. We also take part in many international networks such as UN ECOSOC, the UN Global Compact, AFLATOUN International, and DYPALL, operating in the field of sustainable development. Thanks to these, we are able to offer many paid resources and support programs to young people free of charge. The development of an information society is crucial from this perspective, and Habitat places great importance on this development.

One of Habitat's strongest assets is its ability to understand the current needs of different communities and develop its work accordingly. In the past, we delivered computer literacy trainings with Microsoft. Today, we offer artificial intelligence trainings with Vodafone. With Meta, we're working on design and mixed reality through XR Academy. In other words, Habitat continues its journey by staying updated and drawing from various

sources. These demands can sometimes come from project partners; a new stakeholder might say, “We want to work on this, would you collaborate with us?”

Within Habitat, there are various programs and departmental teams. We consistently work on new projects with a team formed by individuals from each of these teams. In areas such as digital transformation, entrepreneurship, inclusion, and social impact, we closely follow the current needs of different segments of society and the emerging challenges of sustainable development.

From the moment it was founded, Habitat has been an international organization; it emerged as part of the Youth for Habitat International Network. Through the Local Agenda 21 program, it continuously developed its implementation methodologies and content which it disseminated across Anatolia and introduced innovative practices. This experience has brought Habitat to its current peak. Right now, there is no one in Anatolia that Habitat cannot reach. It may sound like a bold claim, but it's true: there's really no one we can't reach. This is because we have 30 years of stakeholder relationships, a volunteer network, and an extensive network. No matter which city we visit, we come across someone connected to Habitat. In that sense, Habitat has a very broad communication network. Its institutional relationships are also remarkably strong. In addition to national and international companies, we collaborate with organizations like UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women, TOBB, TÜRKONFED, and TÜSİAD, all of which have powerful networks of their own.

In recent years, as part of the Global Entrepreneurship

Network (GEN), we facilitated GEN's structuring in Türkiye. With GEN Türkiye, whose foundation and administrative coordination were undertaken by Habitat, we've further strengthened our international work. Habitat will continue to transfer its knowledge and experience abroad, forging strong partnerships and expanding its social impact internationally.

Testimonies That Shed Light on Part Three

Hansın Doğan (UNDP Türkiye - Private Sector Partnerships Portfolio Manager)

“Habitat is the most successful in volunteer management”

I first met Habitat in 2001, when I began working at UNDP as a governance program officer, and we've worked closely ever since. Since 2005, I've been responsible for the private sector program. We began our collaborative efforts under the first Local Agenda 21 Program, establishing City Councils and Youth Assemblies. But Habitat eventually expanded its work into digital literacy, digital transformation, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and many other areas. At a certain point, both Habitat and its young people grew. The organization evolved from being youth-focused and reached broader segments of society.

Together with Habitat, we've worked with almost every segment of society across Türkiye, encompassing different professions, ages, and genders. We worked with women on gender equality, with youth on entrepreneurship, and with farmers on financial literacy. The core mechanism of youth organization, volunteerism, and capacity building for those volunteers has re-

mained more or less the same. In addition to Habitat's own projects, local Youth Assemblies and later, other unique formations, began creating their own projects.

I view the transformation that Habitat underwent after its initial mission in a positive light. If Habitat's volunteer network only carried out youth-focused activities, it wouldn't realize its full potential. Expanding the target audience to make better use of that capacity was, in my view, a positive move. For example, the slogan "Those Who Know Teach Computers to Those Who Don't" was based on young people, who are proficient in a specific area, teaching senior citizens locally. Sometimes, a young person from a village would join this volunteer network, acquire trainer qualifications, return to their village and transfer the acquired knowledge to people in the village coffeehouse or homes. In this way, we could more easily reach communities that might otherwise have been difficult or impossible to access, through that channel.

I find Habitat's ability to manage its volunteer network highly successful. There are a few other organizations with volunteer management systems, but they aren't in harmony. Each organization has its own characteristics. But in my opinion, Habitat is the most successful. This is because managing a communication network where volunteers participate, gain qualifications, develop their skills, support and learn from one another. Within Habitat's activities, those who are successful transfer their experience and guide those who feel unsuccessful; the latter then use the method they learned and succeed. For a young person who's never been involved in such work before but has the intention, failure can be discouraging. However, they complete the task by consulting their peers when they encounter difficulties. Habitat's volunteer management system functions effectively in terms of providing

qualifications, encouraging, fostering solidarity, and cultivating team spirit.

In many other places, I've heard people say things like: "I volunteered, but no one told me what to do. I'm not sure whether I helped or hurt," or "I wasn't assigned work based on my skills. It was just 'carry this, do that, do this...' The days passed like a summer camp." But volunteerism is two-sided. The organization should also contribute to the volunteers, it should strengthen their capacity.

We've also seen Habitat volunteers achieve other successes over time. Some became mayors, some started their own businesses, others became successful entrepreneurs, and so on. Each of their individual success stories has always made us proud. And they have managed to maintain their sincere loyalty and communication over the years. That's why, today, Habitat has transformed into a vast family, like an alumni community.

Nilgün Çavuşoğlu (UNICEF - Program Officer for Child, Adolescent, and Youth Participation and Empowerment)

"Our official partnership began in 2011"

The UN Habitat II Conference, held in Istanbul in 1996, brought together many actors working in children's and human rights, youth, protection, urbanization, settlement strategies, and education. One of the most important outcomes of that summit was the recognition of the power of participation.

As a representative of the UNICEF Türkiye Office at the conference, I had the chance to meet many national and international innovators, UN experts, civil society organizations, and activists.

Sezai Hazır, whom I met during the summit, is one of my long-time companions on this journey. In our initial conversations, we realized that we had common goals regarding both youth empowerment and increasing their participation in all areas. Habitat Association, which was established following the summit, was one of the most important steps toward turning that vision into reality. I'd like to remember Sezai with love and respect.

As our goals and areas of work overlapped, we began crossing paths with Habitat Association in various settings and started contributing together to civil society efforts. The paths of UNICEF Türkiye and Habitat Association officially crossed in 2011. Together, we launched the Young Leaders Academy. This academy provided training on leadership, rights, participation, project cycle, coordination, and monitoring not only to young people from Türkiye but also from the Balkans, Caucasus, and Middle Eastern countries, enabling them to take on leadership roles in their communities. Through this peer-to-peer model, we reached millions of young people across these countries. Young people involved in this process continued their journey as volunteer trainers at Habitat Association. Many experts currently involved in various ongoing projects or initiatives are young people whose paths somehow crossed with this academy.

Habitat Association has the experience and capacity to bring together youth from different cities, countries, and social backgrounds. It is an organization that quickly grasps the cues of a globalizing world, effectively blends existing opportunities, and moves with the dynamism of youth. I wish them continued success in the development opportunities they offer to young people and their ability to connect our country to the world Happy 30th anniversary, Habitat. May your journey ahead be a successful one.

Ulaş Tepe (Mayor of Altınordu, Ordu)

“Our bond with Habitat is above politics”

I was born in Ordu in 1990. Ever since third grade, I dreamed of becoming a mayor. Consequently, I became class president in school and then school president.

In 2006, during high school, I was elected school president. A few days later, I received a letter from the Ministry of Education that the student council presidency would be gathering at a hotel. I went to the meeting, listened to the speakers, and we watched a video. Someone gave a speech as the Local Agenda 21 Türkiye Coordinator (I found out later that it was Mr. Sezai). It was announced that a Local Agenda 21 Youth Assembly election would be held.

First, I was elected president of the Youth Assembly and then a delegate to the National Youth Parliament. I was third on the list, but when they said they needed four people, I joined as well. That year, we attended the third ordinary general assembly of the National Youth Parliament at the Başkent Öğretmen Evi and that's where I first met Habitat. At the time, it was called the Youth Association for Habitat.

That day, in the lobby, there was a man with a different style of dress, and he was talking about very inspiring things. It turned out to be Mr. Sezai. During the opening meeting, he was on the mic asking questions like, “Who came from the furthest city? How many hours did you travel? Which football team do you support?” Then we saw that the man was Mr. Sezai. That's how Habitat began in my life.

Of course, I continued for a long time. I was active in the National Youth Parliament, in its campaigns, activities. I was elected

to the executive board and later served in the parliament's administration for four years.

The year I graduated, at a NYP summer school in Kuşadası, Mr. Sezai said to me, "We've got a new project. Start there, and you can continue from there." That's how I started working with Habitat, on the Life is Easy in Digital project. I worked on that project for a long time. Later, I worked on the "Socioeconomic Development Program" we implemented in Erzurum, Kars, and Ardahan as part of the TANAP (Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project). Eight months later, I left for military service. When I returned, I became a candidate for mayor and was elected Mayor of Gülyalı in the 2019 local elections. In the last elections [2024 local elections], I was elected Mayor of Altınordu, the central district of Ordu.

The National Youth Parliament, Habitat, and Mr. Sezai became a significant turning point in my life. I'm so glad our paths crossed and I'm glad I was here. Habitat was the place where I let go of the concept of "the other," where I understood that what we didn't know and what was imposed on us was actually different. Today, I know for certain that in all 81 cities of Türkiye, across 700–800 districts, I currently have a world of friends from Habitat and NYP whom I can contact. Sure, I might be able to do that politically now as a mayor, but our bond with NYP and Habitat is above politics. It's far more stronger, far more valuable.

Başak Demir (Dcube - Co-Founder)

"Habitat still preserves its initial values and characteristics"

During my 18 years at Habitat, I held many roles including serving as president. Even this year (2023), after the earthquake, I was

asked, “Başak, we need you, would you come?” I worked with the team part-time for three or four months to develop resources. So in a way, I’m neither fully inside Habitat nor fully outside it.

Habitat has always prioritized not taking sides, bringing together a mosaic of people, listening to one another, building partnerships, and acting together. To prevent divisions as much as possible, it has been an organization that introduces people, promotes collaborations between them, involves them in a voluntary process, empowers them to act as a spokesperson or leader in their own cities and neighborhoods, and supports them in taking initiative. And I believe it still preserves those values and characteristics. Compared to its founding period, its methods might have diversified, but I don’t think there’s been any serious shifts in its vision or mission.

In its early years, Habitat was active in structuring urban policies, civil organizing, and active citizenship initiatives. In a project we prepared for the Sabancı Foundation, we created a list of demands encompassing approximately 70 items, from public toilets to bicycle paths, to enable women, youth, and disabled councils in 10 different cities to identify priority needs and make joint requests from the city budget, becoming aware of both their individual rights and common rights. At a time when joint demands were not yet common, our project which emphasized the perception that one could be both disabled, a woman, and young, facilitated the presentation of policy proposals from City Councils to Municipal Councils, and some of these proposals came to life.

While rights-based work, organizing, and the structuring of youth and volunteer culture were being carried out, Habitat was also developing and implementing new initiatives in areas like entrepreneurship, financial literacy, new technologies, innovation,

and Blockchain Academy, which have become more prominent recently, along with efforts to develop and implement resources for projects, progressed simultaneously.

In my view, Habitat's strongest muscle is its refusal to be bound by the status quo, adapts to real needs, develops relationships, and transforms accordingly. It has never insisted on "playing only within this narrow field." Habitat will continue this way.

**Berna Ülman (Former General Manager of Visa
Türkiye, Member of Habitat Advisory Board)**

"We exported our 'I Can Manage My Money' project"

In the mid-2000s, while I was the General Manager of Visa Türkiye, growing problems were emerging around credit card debt. Difficulties were experienced not only with credit cards but with the use of many financial products. People being unable to pay their debts and going bankrupt was a situation that nobody wanted, including banks. We were brainstorming what could be done, but we were genuinely facing a societal problem. Beyond the use of cards, we were unfortunately not very successful as a society in terms of budgeting and managing financial resources. Research we conducted pointed us in one direction: Let's start an initiative related to financial literacy. However, not only did we lack the structure to carry this out meaningfully, but at the time, there wasn't a single CSO in Türkiye interested in this topic.

During a meeting with the Prime Ministry and UNDP, we brought up the issue and said, "As Visa, along with all banks, we can provide financial support, but someone needs to implement this nationwide." They responded, "There's an organization called Habitat; we'll introduce you. If anyone can do this, they can."

And that's how we met Mr. Sezai.

We first worked with academics to build a solid curriculum and launched pilot programs in a few cities. Then the number of cities increased; segments for women, youth, and farmers were created, and thus the number of participants steadily grew. Impact analyses provided results proving the program's effectiveness and further encouraged us. We conducted our work very closely with volunteers in the environments Habitat created. Together with UNDP, we also had a dream of developing a policy proposal based on the experience gained here. and making the subject a part of the formal curriculum as a life skill; we were pursuing that simultaneously.

Our work expanded significantly and eventually reached millions of participants. With so many stakeholders involved, the budgets could also become a bit more substantial and because everyone was satisfied with the results, both we and the banks were always inclined to continue. I believe this is the most important factor underlying why the project has been able to continue for so many years until today.

At that time, the general approach recommended to corporate companies was, "If you're going to launch a social responsibility project, it should be outside your area of expertise." In other words, as an institution working in the financial sector, for example, we would have been advised to do something related to child education or the environment. This principle had gained wide acceptance across the business world driven by the fear that the company might integrate its own advertising into that civil society project, and its reflexes might be in that direction.

Even though this was our area of expertise and a project we initiated, we did not use our own logo. The project had already

become so multi-stakeholder that, in addition to Habitat and Visa, all banks, UNDP, and the Ministry of Development were involved. We created a new logo called “I Can Manage My Money”, and the project became a brand in its own right.

Over time, we saw how accurate we were in undertaking a social responsibility project in an area we were knowledgeable about. Because we were able to support not only financially, but also in terms of expert knowledge and global connections. During that process, my area of responsibility also grew; and we had the chance to export our I Can Manage My Money Project to some of these countries. Together with Habitat, we guided banks and CSOs in those countries, broadening the impact even further.

Didem Karabuda (Visa Türkiye - Senior Manager of Corporate Social Responsibility)

“We believed in the project and grew it together”

My first encounter with Habitat and volunteerism was at the 1996 Habitat Summit in Istanbul. From that day to this, my path has continuously crossed with Habitat Association. In 2008, when the term “financial literacy” was not yet commonly spoken in our country, we met Mr. Sezai during a period when we went to UNDP and presented our vision to Hansin Doğan. We launched the I Can Manage My Money project which reached over 2 million people and we carried it forward together for many years. We reached youth, entrepreneurs, farmers, senior citizens, women’s cooperatives, and children. We believed in the project, and we grew it together. We presented it as a model project to other countries and were proud of it. We also added Disaster Preparedness and Olympic Values Education projects to our 17-year

collaboration. I feel the happiness and peace of mind of having conducted many large-scale and effective projects which we personally witnessed the creation of social impact, undertaking together with Habitat’s “dedicated” professional team, its local network strength, and its volunteers, I celebrate the 30th anniversary of Habitat Association, which continues to deliver exceptional work in the field through its unique, globally unmatched model. I wholeheartedly believe that the valuable team of Habitat Association will carry the legacy Mr. Sezai has built much further.

Attila Köksal (President of the Financial Literacy and Inclusion Association (FODER), Member of Habitat Advisory Board)

“Habitat is a proven institution”

I first met with Habitat through the “I Can Manage My Money” project. At the time, I was serving as the president of the Financial Literacy and Inclusion Association (FODER). It was one of the most important financial literacy projects carried out by Habitat, which deeply impressed me, not just in the country but worldwide. The program which has been running since 2009 has had a tremendous impact across the country. Since we didn’t have Habitat’s “muscle,” I admired them from afar, and thankfully, in 2013, I was invited to join the project’s advisory board.

Financial literacy is one of the key pillars of sustainability. Individuals and companies need to possess financial knowledge, but also reflect this knowledge in their attitudes and behaviors. Because our life expectancy has increased a lot. While our grandparents lived until 65, we now live into the 70s, and our children will live into their 80s or 90s. Therefore, a new risk, “long life risk,”

has entered our lives. Individuals need to prepare themselves for the future with regular savings and correct investments instead of relying on the social security system. That's why financial literacy is so crucial.

Habitat is a proven institution. I see that it will undertake much greater work in the future. Digital transformation, inclusive sustainable growth, and entrepreneurship are extremely important and well chosen focus areas for Türkiye.

Habitat strives to touch every segment of society from children and university students to women, farmers, retirees, and entrepreneurs. And to be honest, they also have important work aimed at preventing brain drain.

Emine Erdem (Chairperson of the Board of SEDEFED, Member of Habitat Advisory Board, Vice President of GEN Türkiye)

“Habitat reaches every field”

Habitat Association is very precious to me. Especially on the anniversary of such a structure that has completed 30 years, I feel great happiness and pride in being a part of it.

Since 1988, I've worked across many different areas of the civil society movement. My path crossed with Habitat while I was working at the Soroptimist Federation. However, since we were deeply engaged in intensive work as Soroptimists at the time, we weren't able to make much progress together. Later on, while I was simultaneously working with the Turkish Soroptimist Clubs Federation, KAGİDER, SEDEFED, and TÜRKONFED, Habitat and GEN Türkiye also entered my life.

I'm confident that Habitat will continue to make its strong

voice, excitement, and activism heard in the civil society ecosystem just as it has in the past and does today. In civil society, Habitat has a strategic structure between the individual and the state. It both addresses inequalities and shortcomings, raises awareness, produces and acts on policies, and follows up on them. Within Habitat, the youth movement and the entrepreneurial spirit create a great dynamism that feeds each other. At the same time, men and women are on equal terms, and it also nurtures the entire entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Another important point is that it provides socially and culturally beneficial education to young people and future generations and creates values through its action-based contributions. When I think of all these valuable achievements, I say, “I wish I were younger and could have gone to Anatolia with those young people.”

Habitat carries out successful work in youth, entrepreneurship, science, technology, gender equality, and financial literacy. And the ecosystem that surrounds it includes not only young people but also entrepreneurs and GEN Türkiye is one of them. They appreciate Habitat’s exceptionally successful work that creates difference and awareness in all areas and await new initiatives where they will be pioneers. As women, we too are looking forward to Habitat’s contributions to women’s entrepreneurship and gender equality.

The pandemic taught us that despite our differences, we must ensure cooperation, solidarity, and work with collective consciousness in our common areas of intersection. Habitat truly excels at this. It touches all vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. It finds the biggest stakeholders in the private sector, instills trust and conviction in them, and embarks on journeys with them.

With its inclusive structure, Habitat fosters collaboration very well.

On February 6, during the earthquake, I was serving as president of both KAGİDER and SEDEFED, while also being on Habitat's Advisory Board. Here, I won't be modest on behalf of Habitat; in the other two associations I was involved with, we might think ten times before acting once. Habitat, by contrast, managed to do a significant job by thinking once and acting ten times.

Habitat convinced Meta, Google, and Vodafone, opened a Facebook Station in Hatay, and created a major collaborative workspace there. It mobilized GEN Türkiye and other civil society organizations. If Habitat hadn't existed, GEN Türkiye would not have acted.

Gülden Yılmaz (Chairperson of the Board of Koton, Co-founder of TOBB Young Entrepreneurs Council and GEN Türkiye)

“We launched GEN Campus in Denizli”

I first got to know Habitat about 15 years ago, through Sezai, when I started working with Ali Sabancı on TOBB's Young Entrepreneurs Council. Sezai was also on that council. In fact, Ali used to make us laugh back then by saying, “I never understand what Sezai does.” To be honest, in the beginning, I also didn't fully understand what Sezai was doing either. But over time, our paths frequently crossed, and we worked together on many projects.

During the pandemic, we founded GEN together. As one of the founders, I took on the role of vice president at GEN. Our

president was Nevzat (Aydın). Habitat has been running the secretariat for the organization. I believe entrepreneurship is one of the main elements that develops and enriches countries and drives development. For the past 15 years, I've been working to support entrepreneurship through both the TOBB Young Entrepreneurs Council and GEN. I am an entrepreneur myself; we founded Koton 36 years ago with our enthusiastic and dynamic entrepreneurial spirit.

Entrepreneurship is the driving force of development. It's no surprise that entrepreneurship is always among the targets in the Ministry of Development's plans. In this context, I believe civil society organizations play a crucial role. Having worked in this field for many years, I can say that, thanks to the contributions of civil society, we are in a much better place than we were 15 years ago.

GEN is a broad entrepreneurial network. Among those who understand the importance of entrepreneurship and are involved in its development and support process, are certain government institutions, international companies like Google, Amazon, and Trendyol, universities, associations, individual investors and entrepreneurs. In the work carried out together with TOBB and GEN, Habitat played a significant role in popularizing entrepreneurship, in addition to Sezai's individual support.

From a gender perspective, while not very fast, there has been visible progress in women's entrepreneurship in our country. TOBB's initiatives for women and youth entrepreneurs operate in all 81 cities and these organizations actively continue their processes.

In Anatolia, women's cooperativism stands out as one of the ways to step into entrepreneurship; especially in some of our cities,

women's cooperativism has advanced and developed significantly.

In addition to TOBB, strong women's civil society organizations like KAGİDER also play effective roles at the local level. As volunteerism and motivation grow, so does local awareness. For example, we launched GEN's first campus in Denizli. The team there was well-prepared, found the necessary venues, pursued the work, and took ownership of the project.

Another important point is the significant increase in technology entrepreneurship and interest in this area over the last decade. The younger generation knows more about technology, understands better, follows it more closely, naturally thinks more about this field. New business opportunities offered by technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) are also extremely important for retail companies like ours.

Nesrin Serin (Habitat Association - Vice Chairperson of the Board)

“30 is just a number, but a significant one”

I was born in 1968. After graduating from the Industrial Engineering Department at Gazi University in 1990, I started working as an assistant at Erciyes University. During this period, I specialized in quality management systems. After working at the Turkish Standards Institution (TSE) for a while, I founded my own consulting firm in February 1993, which is still active today. Since 1998, I have been the founder and general manager of USB Certification, which operates in 10 different countries in the fields of product, system, and personnel certification with national and international accreditations in conformity assessment.

I'm an entrepreneur, but my civil society life and background are also quite extensive; I have served as founding president, chairperson of the board, and vice chairperson of the board in associations within the business world and conformity assessment sectors. Habitat, along with our respect and admiration for Sezai, is an association that has been in our lives for many years, creating value to our country and doing great work. I have been a member of the Habitat Board of Directors for a long time.

Back in 2012, while I was on the board of TÜGİAD, I met Sezai at a Development Agency board meeting and we became friends within the framework of association activities. Our relationship with Sezai began as two civil society volunteers in the world of entrepreneurship.

As I got to know Sezai more closely, I was deeply moved by his belief in young people and his dedication to civil society. Being part of Habitat's journey, contributing to projects shaped by volunteer leadership and vision, has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

Among all the civil society organizations in Türkiye, Habitat's most important characteristic has always been its ability to generate its own budget, create and implement projects, sustain them over time, and directly or indirectly touches many people while doing these projects. It is an association that approaches everyone equally regardless of religion, language, or ethnicity, manages its projects independently and truly aims to make a societal contribution. This structure is the work not only of Sezai but of everyone who believes in him, walks alongside him, and contributes.

But Sezai and I have a separate world outside of Habitat. We've traveled together a lot, discovering new places and cultures and

we return from every trip saying, “Where are we going now?” and set new destination goals. On our most recent journey, returning from Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world at the very end of Patagonia, we set our Antarctica goal for February 2025. Now we’re planning for that.

I often say, “Sezai is my travel companion, my companion in old age.” I’m the one who arranges his doctor’s appointments, follows up on his test results, and asks what he’s eaten or drunk. It seems I’ll be looking after him when he gets old too.

30 is just a number, but it’s also a significant one. Habitat is an association that has stayed true to its essence in Türkiye’s second century, carrying its values. Its purpose of establishment 30 years ago is the same today. Of course, we have projects that change according to circumstances. 30 years makes us all proud.

I see this 30th year as “Habitat entering its second 30th year with the legacy of the past and the light of the future.”

Mehmet Buldurgan (Chairperson of Habitat Association Advisory Board)

“A lot of work falls on all of us for the next 30 years”

I worked in corporate companies for over 30 years. I was the CEO of Temsa within the Sabancı Group. I left at the end of 2010 and founded MBCO Inc. in 2011, a strategy and mergers & acquisitions consulting firm. I also held independent board memberships. However, in 2013, I read a newly published regulation on angel investing, got my license, and realized this was a big undertaking and I couldn’t do it alone. So in 2014, I co-founded a company called Şirket Ortağım with seven partners. Over the last 10 years, we’ve brought together more than 90 angel investors.

Around this time, I met Sezai at various events. He was Vice President of the TOBB Young Entrepreneurs Council then, and he spoke to me about Habitat's work in entrepreneurship. That's how we met.

I had only heard of Habitat from the major conference 30 years ago. But as I got to know them over the course of many meetings, I got to know them, and I was hooked. One day, Sezai said, "Mehmet Abi, I'm putting together an advisory board, and you're going to be the chair." That was three years ago, and I've been leading the board ever since.

Our advisory board includes some truly valuable names. Sezai uses the board as a space for brainstorming. He shares his ideas openly with us, developing strategy, thinking about visibility, identifying areas of focus. What he and his team are doing is phenomenal. There's an incredible force within the team, a hidden power. Volunteers evolve into professionals, and the team is full of passionate young people deeply committed to their work. I admire every single one of them.

Habitat has strong partners, from UNDP to KAGİDER, TÜRKONFED, and others. It has the opportunity to develop projects with all of them. Its institutional identity is incredibly robust. I often test my friends by asking, "Do you know what Habitat does?" They say, "I don't know the details, but I know it's an excellent organization." Even if they don't know the specifics, the public perception is: "This is a great organization."

One day we asked ourselves, "What makes us who we are?" Bahadır (Kaleağası) said it best: Habitat is a transformative force. We all wrote it down in our notebooks. I added one more thing: We awaken people. We raise awareness. In any field we touch, we create a sense that "Habitat is doing something, maybe we should

check it out too.” And often, others follow. And they should.

Now, it’s up to us to help carry the Habitat flag even higher. As advisory board members and as its chair, we do our best to support Sezai and the professional team, starting with İsmail, whenever they need input or guidance.

Behind this 30-year success story are visionary leaders and those who’ve followed them. Looking to the next 30 years, we must work on expanding this leadership, distributing it across units, and turning Habitat’s mission into a sustainable, lasting legacy.

That means everyone has a role to play: the youth, the volunteers, the professionals, and yes, us older sisters and brothers who try to share what we’ve learned along the way. Sezai is a leader who’s always open to this. He’s generous, trusting, and collaborative by nature. So if we’re to build another 30 years on top of the last, it’s our duty to do our part.

Sustainability is a classic, difficult word, and its implementation is also difficult. In the next 30 years, we need to do something for this. Like a chain reaction, we need to defend Habitat, develop it, spread volunteerism, strengthen professionalism, and make corporate structures very solid.

Nevzat Aydin (Chairperson of GEN Türkiye Board of Directors)

“GEN serves as an umbrella for enterprises”

I had heard the name Habitat before, but I didn’t know much about it. When the Young Entrepreneurs Council was established under TOBB in 2009, I met Sezai and I learned about Habitat. Then, we began working together at GEN.

Until recently, the word entrepreneurship didn't exist on Türkiye's agenda. People used the English term instead. When we started Yemeksepeti, we'd say, "We're doing our own business." But over the last five to ten years, the word entrepreneurship has taken on a completely different meaning in our lives.

If we go a little further back and take a slightly sociological perspective, entrepreneurs weren't exactly viewed favorably. Entrepreneurs were seen as if they couldn't find a job or couldn't work properly for a company, so they were forced to start their own businesses. But times have changed and entrepreneurship has now become part of people's serious career planning. It's gratifying to observe this, certainly for me too.

GEN is an umbrella for enterprises. Its core mission is to strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the country, to increase the number of high-quality, effective entrepreneurs; to facilitate access to finance for ventures, to connect entrepreneurs with their international counterparts for idea exchange; and make entrepreneurs' voices heard in Ankara.

Habitat is the right partner when it comes to making GEN work effectively. Within the organization, there is collaboration, team spirit, valuing everyone, and democratic structure. I think Sezai plays a significant role in that. This allows for freer expression of diverse perspectives, paves the way for more innovative, tech-oriented projects to be realized, and fosters greater ownership and increased motivation among volunteers and employees.

In recent years, Habitat has already been focusing on entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and sustainable development. With GEN serving as an umbrella organization, it has become a very nice collaboration, and it's going well.

Hasan Süel (President of the Vodafone Türkiye Foundation)

“We have been collaborating for many years with the same vision”

I deeply value how Habitat Association creates space for young people in Türkiye to work either professionally or as volunteers in a civil society organization that generates social benefit. I've observed that young people who cross paths with Habitat develop skills such as taking initiative, decision-making, approaching problems with a solution-oriented perspective and self-confidence. Since 2007, the year Vodafone Foundation was established, we've implemented several projects with Habitat Association. In every project we undertake, we act with the perspective of generating long-term societal value and benefit. One of the key criteria for the success of a corporate social responsibility project is the collaboration of institutions that serve the same purpose. We have also been collaborating with Habitat Association with the same vision for many years. We set out to increase the digital competencies of young people and children. So far, we've introduced coding to more than 400,000 children. This year, with our new project AI Stars, we aim to bring artificial intelligence education to 35,000 young people. The real heroes of our projects are the volunteers trained by Habitat, especially university students across Türkiye. Thanks to this strength, we can reach our goals and create the social impact we aim for. In addition, the strong local partnerships Habitat has cultivated over the years enable our projects to expand and take root locally. Over the years, Habitat Association's internal and volunteer network management continues to develop and grow. Recently, I find its motivation to

carry its presence not only locally but also on global platforms, and its local experience to the international arena, very valuable.

Ozan Acar (Executive Board Member of Trendyol, Board Member at GEN Türkiye)

“An entrepreneur who knocks of GEN’s door can reach countless people”

My path first crossed with Habitat between 2005 and 2009 while I was working at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Türkiye (TEPAV). Later, at the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (TOBB), we collaborated on many projects. In the following years, I also participated in preparing several social impact evaluations. As someone who believes civil society and the private sector can play a crucial role in economic and social development, I have had a multifaceted relationship with Habitat.

GEN Türkiye is a structure, a network, created by a group of successful individuals who have worked or are working in strong institutions and want to contribute to the society they are part of, with the aim of encouraging and supporting entrepreneurs. I am also a part of this.

Usually, entrepreneurs have to knock on 50 doors just to share their idea. If an entrepreneur has met the GEN network, they can reach many successful, role-model individuals thanks to GEN. GEN also organizes events across various cities of Türkiye, giving people in these regions the chance to interact with individuals they might otherwise never have access to.

The fact that Habitat has carried out impactful work for 30 years without a very strong institutional structure behind it proves

its value, showing that the association has managed to present itself accurately to the public and the civil society community, and that its work has created lasting impact. Habitat has left its mark in all 81 cities of Türkiye. There are many successful people in top positions in public administration, in the private sector, and in academia whose paths have crossed with Habitat. The person who enabled so many people with different backgrounds and expertise to connect with Habitat is, of course, Habitat's founder, Sezai Hazır. He founded Habitat for young people to give them the chance to be part of something bigger than themselves. He succeeded in bringing thousands of people together for this purpose. I don't know if anyone else could have done this. I'm glad our paths crossed with Sezai Hazır at Habitat. I wish them many more 30 years.

Deniz Sungurlu (Consultant)

“Habitat is a rare example”

During my 19-year career at Cisco, there were times I left local groups to work with central teams in the U.S. Over there, things often moved slowly and inefficiently whereas here, things happened spontaneously. The environment that Habitat fostered was something very rare. The Ministry of National Education also offered support where possible.

We had tried working with NGOs before Habitat. I saw that the NGO environment was not easy. Often, several associations work on the same issue and sometimes they don't get along with each other. Collaboration is not easy. Like many others, we worked with the Turkish Informatics Foundation in the field of IT, but professionals already work in companies. So when you

proposed a new initiative, it was often difficult to find available people. Therefore, when you say, “Let’s do something like this,” it’s very difficult to find time.

We carried out our work with a youth association like Habitat much more successfully, by far.

Everything was driven by the creativity and wholehearted participation of young people. We announced the program, and Habitat reached all its members by saying “Let’s go!” The program evolved by generating its own solutions. In its wake, it left behind a large number of young people well-informed in information and computer networks, graduates working professionally in the field, and numerous collaborations established across various cities. Some even opened training centers related to this work. In the East, with the support of volunteer trainers and participants, there were places where they said, “We’ll take care of everything, just keep repeating these trainings.” I once visited a training center in Diyarbakır. I saw very nice classrooms, and also a common area where they were making tea. I noticed a large box in the middle of the room, filled with delicious pastries. I asked what it was, and they said, “Well, this is a box where those who have extra bring it and put it here, and those who are hungry take and eat from it.” I said, “Those who have bring, those who need take. Then they bring more and put it back. That’s the spirit of this program.” Because many of those who received training went on to become trainers themselves and gave training again.

For 19 years, I was a representative of a private sector company that collaborated with Habitat. I wasn’t a volunteer but in spirit, I became a Habitat member.

Young Movement in Informatics program was awarded as the “Best Civil Society Collaboration” example by the Cisco Net-

working Academy program. Habitat representatives who attended our international meetings told their story as a success story to other countries and provided support for it to be replicated. Although many tried to replicate it in many countries, it wasn't easy. Habitat is a rare example.

Burçak Alagök (General Manager of GrECo JLT Insurance and Reinsurance Company)

“Back then, we were creating everything from scratch”

My path crossed with Habitat at the end of 1997. Twenty-one pilot cities had been selected for Local Agenda 21 and Çanakkale was among them. I was a high school student at the time, I met Mr. Sezai and started working with Habitat. Throughout my high school years, I was in Çanakkale. In 1998, we took part in a youth festival held in Portugal. We focused on topics like sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, and energy management, continuing our work with the team there.

During my high school holiday breaks, I worked at the Habitat Istanbul Office located in the Maya Center. We would prepare for all the meetings there. Later, I went to the United States for university, where I double majored in international relations and economics. Even while I was there, I continued working with Habitat.

In 2002, there was a global summit called the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg. I participated in the preparatory meetings both at the United Nations in New York and at the Turkish Embassy, in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Following that, there was a meeting in Bali, a step preceding the Johannesburg summit; we also attended that as Habitat Youth Branch with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs

and Environment.

Unfortunately, I couldn't attend the Johannesburg Summit because it coincided with my graduation. But my relationship with Habitat continued until I entered professional life. The bond between the Habitat team and me has never been broken.

Habitat added so much to my life. The best part was the journey that started with Mr. Sezai and, thanks to him, the communication network of dozens of people that became part of my circle and that I still maintain today. It also helped me develop confidence, leadership skills, public speaking abilities, and different ways of expressing myself.

There's a world of difference between the resources Habitat had back when I was working and what it has now. At the time, we were creating everything from scratch. We used to host each other in our homes. Today, there's even a Habitat House where people can stay when they visit. When I was working at the Habitat office in Istanbul during the summers, since I didn't have a place to stay, my friends at Habitat hosted me in their homes like a sibling for a very long time. And when they visited Çanakkale, they stayed at our place. We literally lived like a colony. Our communication and organizational efforts back then came back to us as skills.

Abdullah Taygun Yavaşça (Executive Board Member of Habitat Association)

“Habitat is a bridge between what we want to do and the goals of development”

As a Public Administration student at Dumlupınar University. I first encountered Habitat in 2009 during the campaign for the “A Youth Story” project, while volunteering with the Kütahya City

Council Youth Assembly. I've been working under this roof for 15 years now, contributing as a volunteer for four of those years.

Throughout my university years, I was actively involved in civil society work through the Youth Assembly, Habitat Association, and the National Youth Parliament. In my final year in Kütahya, we invited Mr. Sezai to an event. At the time, he said, "You're coming to Istanbul," and I agreed. University had become more of a formality, we spent most of our time with friends on our projects. Habitat had become our school. When I arrived at the Istanbul office, in addition to my responsibilities at the National Youth Parliament, I also took on a technology and entrepreneurship program we were running with Intel.

Mr. Sezai would always tell young people coming to Istanbul, especially from Anatolia: "If you're going to try something, try it in the ocean. If you're going to learn to swim, learn it there." That's how our lives have always been.

At Habitat, there's always a job to be done; who does it is irrelevant. The only important thing is to reach the goal and achieve the right outcome. In this process, most people here see each other not just as colleagues, but as companions on a journey. No matter who officially leads a project, everyone acts as if it's their own responsibility. This pushes us to discover ourselves and expand our capacities.

Because we always learned through experience, no one ever came to us saying, "You can reach this capacity, let me teach you this." They gave us more than that. Looking back, I now realize that the contributions of those who came before me, though not always visible at first, combined with my own experiences to push me a step further each time. I may not have realized it at the moment, but later I saw that this is where I gained the confidence to

act. It didn't just stem from personal capacity. And because this process happens so naturally, those who came before me don't become my superiors, and those who follow aren't my subordinates. That hierarchical bond completely disappears. I'm experiencing it now, and others will after me. Because this progression is so organic, the energy, the desire to learn and to achieve, never fades.

For us, Habitat is a bridge between what we want to do and the goals of development. The professionals working here always advance the projects they lead, aligning with the Habitat mission. Growth starts with ourselves, and through Habitat, we touch as many people as we can to mobilize change. Here, working hard means increasing opportunities that will benefit many more people.

Our greatest motivation isn't just what we gain for ourselves, but what we can enable others to gain. This also enriches our own story while contributing something new to the Habitat story.

Hüseyin Üçpinar (Habitat Association - Operations Director)

“There’s a whole different world at Habitat”

I got involved in civil society work when I was around 23 or 24. I started as a Habitat volunteer in the National Youth Parliament, and later, I was elected to its Executive Board.

Habitat felt very interesting to me during its first meeting; different views, different geographies. There's a whole different world at Habitat. You can develop yourself and also do beneficial things for society; your network expands. Thanks to the people I met here, I traveled to nearly ten different countries for various projects without spending a single penny out of my own pocket.

After four years of volunteering, I've now been working professionally at Habitat for eight years. At one point, coding was very new; I received training and then taught coding to thousands of children. A few friends and I developed a coding curriculum that children could understand more easily; we wrote a book about it. Later on, I became a field coordinator, received an offer for a full-time job, and moved from Ankara to Istanbul. After Mr. Sezai, I became one of the people who traveled to the most cities and covered the most kilometers.

Most recently, in 2021-2022, I traveled nearly 100,000 kilometers. I set up computer labs in a total of 60 cities, even reaching village schools.

Our project partner was Vodafone. We were setting up a robotics coding workshop from A to Z. These were projects with computers, 3D pens, 3D printers, and system kits, all designed to develop children's creativity.

We went to Sivas, and when the villagers heard something was being done for the village, they brought us cottage cheese. They wanted to give us gifts. Seeing the excitement of children touching a computer for the very first time was amazing; it gave us so much.

There's a very remote district of Elazığ called Arıcak, located between Bingöl and Diyarbakır. We thought it was close, but it turned out to be three hours from the city center. We were going to the village of Üçocak. One side of the village is Hani in Diyarbakır, and the other side is Genç in Bingöl. The teachers there had made such preparations because we were coming. They had arranged where we were going to stay, and made *çiğ köfte* (raw meatball) for us. They hosted us that night. Then, they gathered, and we set up the classroom all together.

Taha Aydoğmuş (Executive Board Member of Habitat Association)

“I took the longest bus ride of my life”

I went to high school in Bingöl and in 2013–2014, I started studying Computer and Instructional Technology Education at Atatürk University in Erzurum. One day on campus, I came across an A4 sheet that read: “Free Cisco IT Trainings.” Cisco IT training was related to my department and a subject I really wanted to learn, but I had avoided it because the certification was very expensive, so the notice immediately caught my eye. I knew nothing about Habitat but I did some research and applied for the training.

Back then, the training was delivered by a Habitat volunteer, and we took an exam after each session. After passing the exams, we gathered to receive our certificates. At the time, our name was Habitat Development and Governance Association. I thought I was simply joining an event related to IT, but at the same time, I considered Habitat as a concept related to the environment, so I started a conversation with a volunteer friend who said, “This Habitat is an association, and I’m a volunteer trainer here.” That sparked something in me. What is it? How does it work? I had so many questions.

Following that, I learned everything about the association, from the archives of the Second Habitat Conference documents to international websites. As a university student, I wanted to do something, but I was also wary of what the word “association” implied.

The volunteer friend told me, “If you’re not going to teach here, there’s an area where you can nurture your teaching spirit

very well.” These words broadened my horizons, and I decided to become a part of Habitat. At the time, İsmail (Metin) was managing the IT program at Habitat. I reached out and said, “I’m in Erzurum, studying in this department, and I want to volunteer here.” Shortly after, they launched a trainer training for the coding project. I applied and contacted İsmail again. Even before becoming a trainer, I had already organized the children I would train in Erzurum. Since I was studying in the teaching department, I had arranged for the schools of my friends who were doing internships in their fourth year. I got accepted and came to Istanbul. It was the longest bus ride of my life. It took 16-17 hours from Erzurum to Istanbul. I had come to a place where there were people who asked more questions than me, and it was very enjoyable.

Just three days after returning to Erzurum again by bus, I conducted my training with the children. It was very stressful for me. We brought 30 kids to school, but taking them back was harder. Just like I learned at Habitat, I organized 8-10 friends from my department, and we delivered the children all the way to their homes. From that day on, Habitat became a key part of my life, and my volunteering journey began.

With the Habitat Socioeconomic Development Program, which we abbreviated as HASEKAP, we were going to visit exactly 90 villages in Erzurum, Kars, and Ardahan by caravan between 2017-2019. Four or five days before the project started, during a meeting where I was a trainer, Mr. Sezai offered me a professional role. I was in my third year of university at the time.

In the remote villages of these three cities, our focus was on children and the elderly. Our target groups also included people with disabilities, and it was a very interesting experience.

By the time the project ended, I had also graduated. I wanted to move to Istanbul, and apparently the team here wanted the same. The team here also wanted me to come to Istanbul. I came to Istanbul and continued in what is now called the Digital Transformation Program.

PART FOUR:

HABITAT'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVIL SOCIETY IN TÜRKİYE

Local democracy and City Councils

The Local Agenda 21 Program was, at its core, a democratization program that aimed to be established starting from local governments. City Councils served as a mechanism to facilitate, oversee, warn, and critique local authorities by offering solutions to local problems. Representatives from professional chambers across all sectors were natural members of these councils. Habitat played a pioneering role in ensuring that unorganized youth and disadvantaged groups also took part in this process. It did so by organizing them within women's and youth assemblies and bringing them together in working groups.

It also spearheaded the coming together of high school and university student communities, student clubs, youth CSOs, and local associations within local Youth Assemblies under the umbrella of the National Youth Parliament. Although the Youth for Habitat Association later broadened its focus to prioritize development-oriented projects following the enactment of the Municipality Law, its youth work continued for quite a long time.

Ismail Metin, a member of Habitat's Executive Board, describes one of the organization's thematic campaigns, "the rejuvenation of politics," which serves as an example of the impact and the contribution of the local to democratic decision-making processes, as follows:

Local Agenda 21 was not yet complete at the time. City

Councils and Youth Assemblies were very active during that period. Within the National Youth Parliament, Youth Assemblies were active, while student clubs and NGOs working in the field of youth had a more limited presence. In addition to volunteering as a trainer, I was elected in May 2012 to the Executive Board of the National Youth Parliament during its General Assembly, representing the Marmara Region. I served on the board for three terms, from 2012 to 2015.

At the time, we launched a campaign called **“Youth-Friendly Candidates, Youth-Friendly Cities”** ahead of the 2014 local elections, which were scheduled for March. We prepared a pledge for candidates to sign that ended with the statement: “If elected, I will plan my city in accordance with the needs of young people.” As NYP, we met with the deputy chairs responsible for local governments from all political parties represented in Parliament, AK Party, CHP, MHP, and BDP, to introduce the campaign. All the parties said, “We support this, and we will announce it to our candidates” and we launched the campaign from Ankara in December. We also told our friends at the local level: “Go to the candidates from all political parties without discrimination, explain the campaign, collect signatures from those who wish to sign, and then let’s announce it to the public.”

The campaign had a big impact locally, and once it hit the press, mayoral candidates started calling us, saying, “We want to sign the youth-friendly campaign as well.” One of the first signatories was Burhanettin Kocamaz, the mayoral candidate for Mersin Metropolitan Municipality.

He had served four terms as the mayor of Tarsus and was among the first mayors to establish City Councils and he knew Habitat from those days. Another early signatory was an MHP candidate, who put up billboards with the slogan: “My young friend from Mersin! I will govern the city together with the youth.” The media coverage of this motivated other candidates to take action.

In total, we signed protocols with more than 260 mayoral candidates. At the time, major metropolitan mayoral candidates who signed included Mustafa Sarıgül (CHP) for Istanbul, Sadullah Ergin (AK Party) for Hatay, Osman Baydemir (BDP) for Şanlıurfa, Yılmaz Büyükerşen (CHP) for Eskişehir, Özlem Çerçioğlu (CHP) for Aydın, and Aziz Kocaoğlu (CHP) for İzmir. Ekrem İmamoğlu (CHP), who was running for mayor of Istanbul’s Beylikdüzü district, also signed the pledge.

About 70 of the candidates who signed the pledge were elected as mayors. We sent them thank-you letters to remind them of the pledge.

Apart from that campaign in 2015, we also launched another campaign advocating for the lowering of the minimum age for candidacy from 25 to 18. This issue was already a topic of public discussion and following our campaign, the legal candidacy age was officially lowered to 18.

We expanded the “youth-friendly” concept we had built through NYP campaigns to 20 cities, aiming to better understand the challenges young people face in those areas. In OECD countries, studies on “youth well-being” are conducted. In Türkiye, however, there had been no well-structured and comprehensive research of this kind. Prof. Dr.

Emre Erdoğan from Bilgi University was engaged in youth issues, and we worked together. In 2016, our joint study “The State of Youth Well-Being in Türkiye” was published. Professor Erdoğan and his team analyzed the state of youth under five different categories.

In both Türkiye and Europe, there are young people who are neither in employment, education, nor training (NEET). At the end of the study, this concept was defined in Türkiye as the “house youth.”

When we first released the research findings at a meeting in Ankara, they generated an incredible amount of public interest. This was because it was the first time in Türkiye that a study on youth was conducted by direct-



As part of the “Life is Easy in Digital” Project, carried out in partnership between Habitat Association, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Türk Telekom, trainings were organized for women in Mersin in collaboration with the Women in Entrepreneurship Association. The first of these trainings was delivered by Ulaş Tepe on May 17, 2017. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

ly surveying them. The findings led to serious discussions among politicians and on television broadcasts.

Since many people, who had previously volunteered with the National Youth Parliament, had transformed into political figures during the campaigns, they participated in the 2019 local elections. These individuals had not only matured in age but had also gained experience through youth work. Our colleague Ulaş Tepe, who had been an active participant in NYP's work and had also worked professionally at Habitat, was elected as the mayor of Ordu's Gülyalı district, becoming "Türkiye's youngest mayor." This was a significant milestone for us.

Fostering the development of local CSOs

When youth work began as part of the Habitat process, as mentioned in other sections of this book, civil society in Türkiye was weak, and the number of civil society organizations was almost negligible. Many academics working in this field point to the end of 1999 and the early 2000s as the starting point for civil society awareness in Türkiye.

Prof. Dr. Emre Erdoğan, lecturer in the Department of International Relations at Istanbul Bilgi University's Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, offers an apt observation:^{*}

What we call civil society in Türkiye is not something that emerged “spontaneously,” but something that was “born.” The Habitat Summit was critical here. Later on, during the Europeanization process in the 2000s, we began to learn what “civil society activism” is.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ulaş Bayraktar, who joined the Youth for Habitat activities at the end of 1996 while studying Public Administration at Galatasaray University, and who later took part in

* After leaving Habitat, Ulaş Bayraktar began working with Fikret Toksöz, the Secretary General of the Marmara and Bosphorus Municipalities Union (today's Marmara Municipalities Union), and this choice has also shaped his academic career. He is currently serving at Mersin University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, in the Department of Urbanization and Environmental Issues.

the Local Agenda 21 activities supported by the association after its institutionalization, also shares a similar perspective:

Although the term civil society organization started to be discussed in academic and political circles starting in 1996 due to the Habitat II Summit, the visibility that AKUT (Search and Rescue Association) gained through its work during the 1999 earthquake allowed what we call a civil society organization (CSO) to reach the grassroots.

This “visibility” increased public interest in the mentioned association, but the true driving force behind civil society efforts emerged earlier, with the launch of the Local Agenda 21 Program in 1997 across 21 pilot cities. With the Local Agenda 21, City Councils, Youth Assemblies, Women’s Assemblies, and working groups focused on disadvantaged populations gained momentum. In many cities, especially Youth Assemblies became the pioneers of Local Agenda 21 efforts and the driving force behind City Councils. The association also reinforced a form of local democracy network through activities carried out with other resources in cities not included within the scope of the Local Agenda 21 Program. For example, following the 1999 earthquake, the association launched the “Foster Family Campaign”, established Youth and Culture Centers in the affected cities, enabling young people there, whether within the scope of Local Agenda 21 or not, to come together within a broad network and build bridges among themselves.

The work carried out across Anatolia by Habitat and the Agenda 21 Youth Association during the Local Agenda 21 Program not only helped strengthen civil society in Türkiye, but also

contributed to an increase in the number of civil society organizations. Of course, a favorable domestic and international political context of the time was a factor in this development, but the association played a significant role as well. Assoc. Prof. Ulaş Bayraktar emphasizes the association's "pioneering" role during those years:

With the emergence of funds during (Türkiye's] European Union candidacy process, advocacy work that was once conducted solely by Habitat, such as youth participation in governance and local democracy discussions, began to be adopted and expanded by others. Similar activities were carried out in many different fields and cities. Habitat led, inspired, and supported many of these efforts.

A horizontal organizational model

Habitat carried out its youth caucus activities in the form of a youth initiative. It preserved this character even during the association's institutionalization phase. The organization was not structured as a top-down hierarchical system. Leadership within the small core team played a facilitating role. Habitat's horizontal organizational model, which prioritized relationships among equals, stood in stark contrast to the traditional, patriarchal organizational approach prevalent in Türkiye. Sezai Hazır explains how Habitat's groundbreaking approach played a role in the spread of CSOs in Türkiye as follows:

We always kept our distance from centralization. In our structure, decisions are not made solely by a single executive board, every decision is made through consultation. We've always valued the demands of young people, and by translating those demands into projects, we created in them the confidence that "They're listening to us. They're taking our needs into account. They're making us part of the implementation."

When we first founded the association, there was no one else, just us. Whatever we said or did, people joined in. Apart from strengthening local organizations, Habitat never had a policy of recruiting members or opening branches. We always worked to strengthen local organizations. That's

why, in Türkiye, everyone at first looked at us and said, “They are a center.” Yet, in fact, we only began our first activities in Istanbul five years after our establishment. We said, “Let’s first go to the disadvantaged groups, and later we can always work in Istanbul.” We told people, “You are a community, and as an independent community, you are very valuable. We want to collaborate with you.” Of course, we faced challenges because of this unconventional approach; because everyone wants to subject themselves to a power structure. But had we acted differently, we would have prevented the emergence of many of the organizations now active across Anatolia now.

By the 2000s, Youth Assemblies had become recognized and well-known mechanisms in several cities. And starting from the mid-2000s, we began to establish entrepreneurship networks in partnership with TOBB.

Capacity building through the “train-the-trainer” method

Starting from the International Youth Meeting organized in Eskişehir in 1997, the association encouraged local organizing efforts. Alongside this, it introduced workshops on fundraising and project development, which it continued to offer these workshops in subsequent events. Within the framework of the Local Agenda 21 Program, the activities of City Council Youth Assemblies and the National Youth Parliament enabled civil society in Türkiye, particularly in terms of local organizing, to develop and grow stronger.

Dr. Derya Altun Emre, an economist, served in 2019 as an Executive Board member of the Izmir Sustainable Urban Development Network, which was active in 25 of the city's 30 districts. Since she was also a member of the Youth Working Group within the Izmir Local Agenda 21 Youth Assembly, she applied to volunteer in Habitat's project titled “Those Who Know Teach Computers to Those Who Don't.” She became more closely involved with Habitat by participating in the first group of trainer training.

Derya Altun Emre shares her insights on Habitat's horizontal organizational model, its facilitating role in the organization of CSOs in Türkiye, and the innovations it brought to civil society:

After receiving our trainer training, we began training new trainers in our local communities and facilitating the

delivery of those sessions, while also building a closer relationship with Habitat. Habitat does not operate within a top-down hierarchy where one teaches and the other learns; instead, it promotes a perspective of "inclusion and co-development." This is a more inclusive approach that brings people in, and in doing so, both teaches and learns, and both develops and empowers. With this approach, we began collaborating with Habitat on other initiatives as well. Habitat is a school that allows young people from different family backgrounds, with vastly different life stories, experiences, and perspectives and therefore often conflicting political and social views, to experience how they can come together under one umbrella. Accepting the existence and contribution of others, while also changing and transforming yourself, and allowing others to hold their own space while you hold yours, isn't something that can be codified into a curriculum or in structures that can only be described as platforms, not even in the context of civil society. Local Agenda 21 had its Youth Assemblies and youth working groups. Those who crossed paths there eventually took part in City Councils and brought new people into their ranks along the way. Habitat continued to act as a mentor for local communities throughout this process. The Local Agenda 21 processes for civil society organizations also influenced, changed, and transformed the development of City Councils. Moreover, many young people who came together there founded their own civil society organizations, which are still active today. During those project processes, coordination meetings and consultation gatherings they learned things like how to behave with-

out realizing it, how to manage an organization, and what kinds of relationships and principles to operate by. Habitat offered all young people the opportunity to learn through practice. I know those young people (although they're no longer young) across different parts of Türkiye, who have transformed civil society work into a way of life, through the numerous associations they founded and continue to run. It's a wonderful power. And the relationships among those people still continue. Some of them left Habitat and became professional staff members at other strong civil society organizations. This demonstrates that civil society work has a professional dimension, that it's viable and that the skills of those young people continue to grow there or that it could provide human resources to such spaces, and that Habitat played a role in making this possible. Since Habitat positioned itself from the very beginning to "do things together and move forward together" and created an environment based on this, it didn't cross paths with competitive groups. Those who need competition cluster on a different side. Horizontal relationships, doing things together, contributing together, combining strengths within a network, demonstrate the formula for making things possible, whether at the local or central level.

Local and international Habitats

Initially, Habitat organized events like training sessions and summer schools for those involved in City Council Youth Assemblies, and participants tried to put what they learned into practice. From the mid-2000s onward, long-term major projects developed in partnership with international companies were conducted using a “train-the-trainer” method which Habitat carried out with its own resources. At every stage, these capacity-building trainings were repeated in local areas by the participating youth who had now become trainers, amplifying their impact exponentially.

Kazım Hasırcı, a former Habitat member now living in a small city in Spain’s Galicia region, continues to work in civil society both there and in a neighboring city in Portugal. He dropped out of Boğaziçi University, where he had been the 75th highest-scoring student in Türkiye, after his first year and became a Habitat volunteer in 2012. He spent six years at Habitat, including four years in a professional role. Kazım Hasırcı, who moved to Spain in 2018, offers rich insights on the transformative power of Habitat and its train-the-trainer model, on individuals, at both the central and local levels:

They always used to say, “Habitat is a school.” In 2012, on the last day of my trainer training, I was the clumsy one who got on stage and said, “I can’t do this,” and stepped

down. Yet afterward, I went on to deliver trainings in nearly all 81 cities and became a master trainer. I learned what civil society is, participated in trainings, developed myself, and learned how to write projects. Two years later, I was offered a professional position. By the time I left Habitat, I was someone who wrote million-euro projects, conducted trainer trainings, took the stage countless times, and built partnerships and networks. I grew up at Habitat. I learned everything there. My whole life, my days and nights, my friends revolved around Habitat. At Habitat, you're not just a volunteer or an employee. All your friends are either staff members or volunteers from the office. For me, Boğaziçi University ended in a year, but I graduated from Habitat University in six.

I was involved in fieldwork and trainer trainings over and over again. I observed very clearly what Habitat changed in the lives of young people. In my last two years, I worked more from the office. When we secured new funding, the number of staff jumped from 20 to 60. This also brought change to the life of a Habitat member living in Istanbul and working a salaried job. I was one of those young people.

Habitat creates numerous opportunities for a young person to develop skills such as being on stage, overcoming stage fright, leadership, and public speaking. Because young people don't get to acquire these skills much in their schools or educational settings. Beyond that, Habitat also supports peer socialization among young people and provides spaces where local institutions can meet and collaborate. And it also offers an international network.

At one point, youth organizations from every province would come to the National Youth Parliament, but such a thing no longer exists in Türkiye today; Habitat has also discontinued it. Back then, a youth organization from a district in Hakkâri would come to Ankara, get up to speak and say, “I’m doing these things in Hakkâri.” Habitat provided opportunities not only for developing individual capacity but also for building institutional capacity. And at the time, European opportunities, volunteer work, youth exchanges abroad, and training courses were not very common either. The National Youth Parliament provided a space where many young people took their first trip out of their hometown to cities like Ankara or Istanbul where they met their peers.

The “train-the-trainer” model is very beneficial. It enables any young person, regardless of whether they have a university education or not, to develop themselves and increase their capacity. Habitat, for example, would train a young person in Hakkâri through a trainer training program, enabling them to enhance the capacity of other young people in their own local community.

At the end of a training I delivered in Adiyaman, while chatting, the young people there said, “Kazım, you explained it very well. We learned, but there were some things we couldn’t quite grasp. We understood better from Abdurrahman.” I had trained Abdurrahman myself, but he was local. He spoke with the Adiyaman accent, in their dialect, and in a way that resonated with the local reality. The story I told, coming from Istanbul to Adiyaman, didn’t feel real to them. Habitat’s strategy of training local youth

and turning them into local actors is a beautiful and very important method for supporting local development.

Habitat's impact on the lives of its Istanbul-based employees is different; Istanbul is a place where change happens very quickly. A young person working in Istanbul would develop themselves in a few years and move on to a higher-paying job elsewhere. The situation I mentioned must still be continuing with local young people becoming Habitat professionals, and that's very important. Habitat develops the capacity of its volunteers, provides them with a career path, then further enhances their skills as employees and ultimately, with their graduation from the "Habitat School," they are able to build a life for themselves by carrying out similar work in other fields.

If Habitat hadn't been in my life and I had continued university, I'd probably be working somewhere in the private sector. Without Habitat, I might still have discovered and liked this field, perhaps doing work on a smaller scale. But by 2018, when I decided to leave everything behind, I had already become Habitat; I knew how to write projects, manage budgets, organize, build partnerships, and run them. I could deliver trainings and had a command of a wide range of content. I had an extensive international, national, and local network. Habitat turns everyone into a "Habitat" in their own right, in proportion to the capacity they develop there. Many of the people I call "Habitat graduates" go on to achieve greater things after leaving, because that is where they learn.

In June 2018, I obtained a work permit through a company and moved to Spain. Today I live in A Coruña, in the

Galicia region. It's a rural city with limited connection to Europe and very few people speak English. I was unemployed for a year. While I was thinking of returning to Türkiye, I met with local foundations and associations here. I started developing projects for them. Since then, I've been managing social responsibility projects and content for a number of foundations and associations.

Right now, I'm working in a way similar to Habitat. I'm still creating content and developing projects. Unlike Habitat, the organizations here are much more local. The foundation in Galicia does regional work on rural development and young people in rural areas. The other is in northern Portugal and does more local work. At Habitat, we used to approach issues from a much more national and international perspective. Here, we are now trying to move from the local level toward the national and international



Kazım Hasırcı provides information about the project to participants from all over Türkiye at the I Can Manage My Money Project Trainer Training held in Artvin in March 2017. Source: Habitat Association Archive.

level, but in essence, the Kazım of 2012 and the Kazım of 2024 are doing similar work.

Habitat had a policy of not opening branches or granting official representation anywhere. However, being taken as a role model and inspiring similar local initiatives was of course beyond its control.

One such example is Serdar Özyeşil, now the president of Cedid Association in Siirt, whose life was transformed by Habitat 20 years ago, turning him into a “local leader.” In 2004, he attended a Habitat training titled “Project Cycle Management”, held at Bozdoğan Hotel in Adiyaman, along with a few friends through the Siirt Governorship quota. That was when he first met “both Mr. Sezai and the Habitat family.” Upon returning, they put their heads together and asked, “What can we do here?” Özyeşil recalls: “Our main question was, ‘How can we become Siirt’s Habitat?’ because we were deeply inspired.” He then adds, “And we became Siirt’s Habitat,” as he tells the story of Cedid Association, one of the typical examples of Habitat’s pioneering influence on local organizing:

In 2006, with the friends who attended the training, and before we founded an association, we wrote Siirt’s first-ever project in 2006, under the name: “Self-Taught vs. Schooled.” In Siirt, people play chess in coffeehouses. They distributed chess sets to ten schools alongside those coffeehouses and provided trainings to the students. They then selected champions from each side and had them compete against one another. The self-taught players won the tournament, and the champion was awarded a computer.

That project gave us the confidence to say, “So, we really can implement a project.” And we also raised awareness in Siirt. The National Agency had given us a grant of €6,000 for the project, a huge amount at the time, and we completed it with our heads held high. Beyond that, whatever projects Habitat implemented elsewhere, we also brought to Siirt together with our team. Hundreds of people benefited, and we built a fantastic network. Over time, we became a “mini-Habitat.” We founded our own association (Cedid Association) and wrote our own projects. So far, we have sent over 300 young people from Siirt and other parts of Türkiye abroad.

We sent young people from Kezer (a place so local they had never even crossed the nearby Kezer River) to Europe free of charge. Their worlds changed, their perspectives changed, the way they spoke changed, their lifestyles changed, so much changed. In the same way, we also bring young people from abroad to Siirt. We carry out EU projects such as Youth Exchange Programs. Every two months, eight of our friends come from Europe and blend into the lives of people in Siirt. We take them around the surrounding neighborhoods, schools, and kindergartens.

Wonderful interactions take place. A student in Siirt might study English for years but be too shy to speak it, and here, they overcome that. A 17-18 year old girl from Europe comes all the way to Siirt. Our projects are designed for those between the ages of 17 and 30, and thanks to these examples, our girls from Siirt are slowly starting to go abroad as well. Young people in big cities do not need Habitat as much. There are municipalities, district gover-

norships, associations, and large foundations there. But in Siirt, you don't see such foundations or associations. The biggest project that established Habitat's presence in these areas was the GAP Youth Houses. Through those houses established in nine cities across Southeastern Türkiye, they organized many activities touching the hearts and lives of young people who had otherwise been far removed from these kinds of activities.

Building development-focused bridges between civil society, public institutions, and the business world

The concept of “building bridges” was one the Habitat team most frequently expressed from the very beginning, when they first started working under the name “youth caucus.” They quickly realized that acting alone would not be sustainable. The very founding of Youth for Habitat was a reflection of this awareness. The motto, “Building a bridge between a young person in one corner of the world and a young person in one corner of Türkiye,” evolved over time. As the association redefined its direction in alignment with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), it broadened its focus and began to prioritize content that could contribute to sustainable development. Key themes of this period included women’s and youth entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship and technological transformation, capacity-building trainings, and ease of access to finance.

As a civil society organization, Habitat initiated a culture of collaboration among the “public, civil society, and private sector” to prepare Türkiye for the future. This process began with its partnerships on Local Agenda 21 with UNDP and public institutions, and later expanded to include business organizations like TOBB and TÜRKONFED, which were striving to achieve the same goals.

Civan Sözkesen is among the closest witnesses to the role Habitat played within the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye, one of the oldest and most widespread organizations in Türkiye's business community, and to its efforts in bringing together the three sectors and mobilizing the public sphere:

In 2005, Mr. Sezai's recommendation to establish a "Young Entrepreneurs Council in every city," and the awareness created through the participation of industry, commerce, and stock exchanges as triple stakeholders in this structure, also spurred ministries into action. Incentives and regulations were introduced to encourage entrepreneurship, which in turn led to foreign venture capital funds beginning to invest in Türkiye.

Habitat sparked this movement and acted as its patron. Through its partnership with TOBB and the public sector, entrepreneurship in Türkiye flourished, and the country became a pilot region. Today, for instance, while block-chain technologies are sweeping across the globe, Türkiye with 12 million active users is ranked first in Europe and among the top five globally. There's a platform called Roblox where 5.8 million NFTs were created in 2021, and these have changed hands billions of times. Türkiye is ranked among the top 8 countries worldwide in NFT trading, not just in terms of storage of digital assets but also in interest and trade activity. Türkiye is closely following blockchain technologies. That is why today, the biggest blockchain technology companies such as Ethereum Foundation, Sandbox, and Polygon have their eyes on Türkiye;

they want to open offices and invest here.

Türkiye is also far ahead in the mobile world. Particularly in mobile banking and internet technologies, it provides services that are far more advanced than those in many other countries. I believe Türkiye has made remarkable progress in finance, gaming, and digitalization. This has been achieved by creating an entrepreneurship ecosystem, introducing incentive packages, and attracting foreign venture capital funds to Türkiye. When an exit takes place, it motivates other entrepreneurs. In 2015, Yemek Sepeti had an exit for \$600 million. Around that time, Getir had just been founded yet in recent years, it received investment at a \$12 billion valuation. That's why today, when you create a startup in Türkiye, it's possible to turn it into a company worth \$3–5 billion within just a few years. This ecosystem was built in this country.

Habitat is truly a special association that reinvents itself. It implements social projects in the innovation and entrepreneurship channels for many of the world's leading technology companies, such as Vodafone, Microsoft, Visa, Google, Apple, and Facebook. At the same time, it brings many innovations to Türkiye. One example is the Artificial Intelligence Study Center, established in collaboration with Istanbul Technical University and inspired by MIT. Another is the community centers founded together with Facebook (Facebook Station), as well as the Global Entrepreneurship Network, GEN Türkiye... All of these are "firsts" for Türkiye, and whichever one you look at, you will see behind it Habitat Association and the leadership of Mr. Sezai.

Testimonies That Shed Light on Part Four

Arda Batu (TÜRKONFED - Secretary General)

“Habitat is a place that brings all three forms of capitals together”

Habitat is a highly innovative and agile association in terms of both management and its way of working. In this sense, it's an excellent example in Türkiye, and even on a global scale. I met Sezai Hazır, the person identified with Habitat and its brand, about five years ago. We were introduced by my dear friend Hansin Doğan, who said that Sezai and I would get along well and be able to collaborate and Hansin was right! Over the past five years, both a valuable friendship and a strong institutional bond have been built.

Sezai Abi and I have similar ways of doing business and similar corporate cultures. Habitat and TÜRKONFED, where I serve as a manager, are organizations that love creating projects, going into the field, connecting with people, and making an impact. So we clicked quickly, and a strong synergy emerged between our two institutions. We immediately brought Habitat into TÜRKONFED as a member. Sezai Abi also brought me into several gov-

erning bodies and platforms. Similarly, many contemporary and progressive businesspeople and CSO members from all over Türkiye who are part of TÜRKONFED have joined Habitat's various platforms and projects. That sparked an integration process. There was a lot we learned from Habitat, especially concerning the entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Habitat is a respected and valuable platform for entrepreneurs. Why? Because I believe it has two exceptional qualities. First, it serves as a great source of guidance for entrepreneurs; the institution has a know-how, which we can call intellectual capital. Second, it has social capital. Habitat brings together both new-generation entrepreneurs and large-scale entrepreneurs on a single platform. When knowledge and networks combine, success becomes inevitable.

Of course, creating and sustaining networks is by no means an easy task. That is why my final words are about Sezai Hazır, the architect of this network. With his knowledgeable, innovative, progressive, colorful, sociable, fatherly and honest personality, Sezai has given Türkiye a powerful institution. If Sezai gave birth to Habitat, then Habitat gave birth to Sezai, and in doing so, we have gained an important civil society leader.

Bahadır Kaleağası (Former Secretary General of TÜSİAD, Member of Habitat Advisory Board)

“The world is in search of Society 5.0 across every area of life”

Habitat's roots go back to the 1990s, a time when the Cold War had ended, globalization was accelerating, and Türkiye was opening up to the world more rapidly. These were the years in which

Turkish society, universities, and the private sector were making major strides in economy, politics, and democracy, in parallel with the country's EU accession process. Habitat was also a major conference that Türkiye hosted, creating the first significant global brand impact for the country.

Habitat Association, founded by Sezai Hazır and his team, began with an international perspective and extended into the national sphere, developing high international standards within its own ecosystem. It has since become one of the most important civil society leaders in the country. Human civilization is in search of a society that goes beyond the industrial revolutions: a Society 5.0. Governments, corporations, science, the arts, sports, and civil society work are all now being filtered through the lens of the sustainable development goals.

The path toward better democracy, a better economy, and better social development lies in citizens who possess digital, financial, and social skills; who possess digital, financial, and social skills; who are more conscious; who take part in social solidarity networks; and who have the freedom and democratic rights to further develop these skills. Habitat represents exactly such a story of building civil society capacity, an organization able to adapt quickly to multilayered transformations, manage challenges with the support of human capital, produce solutions, and serve as a model for other countries.

I have been a member of Habitat's Advisory Board for some time now, but even before that, Habitat's activities and visibility within international networks were always a topic that interested me.

When we review Habitat's activity reports, we see a concrete portfolio of work that aligns with global societal transformation

and the evolution of human civilization. Moreover, Habitat has demonstrated the ability to respond quickly on the ground to unexpected events such as earthquakes. Habitat is very successful at “collaborating with institutions,” which is one of the most crucial elements of civil society and sustainable development that horizontally intersects with other goals. Its ability to adapt to evolving conditions is among its most distinctive characteristics.

We are now in a period where sustainable development goals, gender equality, education, environment, justice, the actual practice of democracy in every field, corporate social responsibility, clean air and water, space exploration, quantum computing, blockchain-based technologies, and biotechnology are all converging and where artificial intelligence will accelerate the implementation of everything. Adapting to the age of AI is one of the greatest challenges facing all organizations, Habitat included.

The speed of change in space-time continuity in human civilization has increased. In this age where the physical and digital realms are deeply intertwined, we constantly need new equilibrium points for progress. Habitat’s success formula for the 21st century is being shaped within this very framework.

Ece Başay (Facebook [Meta] - Programs Manager for Public Policy)

“We launched Facebook Station in 2019 in partnership with TOBB, Habitat, and Meta”

The partnership between Habitat and Meta began in 2017 with the I Have The Control Project. Later, our work diversified, and we took on more projects.

When we look at the realities of digital literacy in Türkiye,

the rate is around 25 percent; but if we also take rural areas into account, it may be even lower. At Meta, we think about how we can address the capacity gap in using tools like Facebook and Instagram correctly, avoiding hacking, accessing accurate information, and so on. Habitat is an institution specialized in capacity building.

Beyond Habitat, I work with a wide range of institutions from the Ministry of Trade to the Information and Communication Technologies Authority, from the Ministry of Technology to universities, SMEs, and organizations that build capacity such as Hello Tomorrow, or third-party fact-checking networks like Teyit and Doğruluk Payı. As part of my job, I try to collaborate with relevant experts after performing analysis to determine who I need to work with.

We launched Facebook Station in 2019 in partnership with TOBB, Habitat, and Meta. The main hub is located in Istanbul, with local hubs in seven other cities. Our goal in creating these spaces is to build a bridge between Istanbul and different provinces in Türkiye, as well as between Türkiye and other countries, for businesses and for anyone who needs capacity development, whether they are from civil society, academia, or are students or individuals.

Our motto in this field was “Türkiye Beyond Borders.” We took our first steps by starting to address the needs of SMEs, especially in the field of exports, and developing their digital marketing skills. Today, the initiative continues as a space where we train many different groups, from technology startups to university students.

In my view, Habitat is an organization that has taken root across all 81 cities of Türkiye. If I wanted to travel to a village

without an internet connection, I know I could go with Habitat. For a civil society organization, that's such a valuable and difficult achievement. Managing volunteers and keeping them motivated is a very difficult job. Habitat's young base and professional team are very curious and solution-oriented. Habitat is an institution that follows technologies and developments, has ties with various universities and researchers and always focuses on solid, well-grounded work.

When we started with the I Have the Control and Digital Literacy Project, our initial focus was on young people to strengthen their capacity in this area. Now, we've come to realize that we need to focus a bit on parents.

Habitat is very helpful with its open-mindedness and solution-driven attitude when it comes to integrating its own network as well as the network I request. Working together has been truly enjoyable.

As we continue to carry out this work in Türkiye, our partnership with Habitat will also continue.

Cem Kinay (Tourism Expert, Member of Habitat Advisory Board)

“Habitat is highly active, agile, and provides great benefit to society”

I've been following Habitat since the late 1990s. Having lived abroad for nearly 40 years in different countries, I came to Türkiye in 2012 and attended various meetings. I met Sezai. Since I had been following Habitat for a long time, I was already well-informed about its work. For the past five or six years, we have been exchanging ideas, particularly on tourism-related matters, and

reflecting on what more could be done. For the past three years, I've also been a member of Habitat's Advisory Board.

In my view, Habitat is one of the most valuable civil society organizations in Türkiye.

First, it is active. Second, it has ensured its sustainability. Third, it is timeless yet timely, engaging with the issues of the day while also being agile enough to shift its themes as times change. I believe this stems particularly from the fact that both its volunteers and the organization itself are young, belonging to a new generation.

Habitat runs many projects with social impact. For instance, digital technology is an area that has entered our lives particularly in the last 15 years, and it's progressing very quickly. Habitat has remained highly active and responsive in this space and has created tremendous value for society. In this field, Habitat is highly active, agile, and provides great benefit to society. First, it raises public awareness and conveys the message that people should think critically about this topic. Moreover, through its nationwide activities, it integrates young people into this field and, with the trainings it provides, equips them with the fundamental skills they need.

Through its "Train, become a trainer of trainers" model, Habitat has achieved a tremendous multiplier effect. It has a structure capable of reaching into every capillary of Türkiye, especially across Anatolia. Not every civil society organization is able to achieve this.

For example, following the February 6 earthquake, Habitat was able to immediately set aside all of its current work and focus entirely on the earthquake region, doing very impactful work that many other civil society organizations did not. This shows that

Habitat has built up a significant level of know-how, a remarkable attitude, and incredible agility.

Habitat is a community that can drive ideas and a philosophy in every sector. That's why I believe it could be even more beneficial to Türkiye, especially to Anatolia in the future by adopting a broader perspective without limiting itself to specific sectors. That is how highly I value Habitat.

Elif Dağdeviren (Member of the Habitat Advisory Board)

“Habitat represented by a president like that is the right kind of Habitat”

My relationship with Habitat began many years ago, back when I was working as a journalist. Because of the magazine I managed, my primary focus was on women. Then, when I founded netbul. com in 1998, young people came to the forefront, because the internet was synonymous with youth. That was precisely when I had the opportunity to get to know Habitat more closely.

While I was trying to explain to people that “the internet is a reality,” Habitat had already started working in that field. I was very impressed. From its early days, Habitat struck me as an organization that was strong both locally and globally, not only in terms of its content but also in its technological capacity. However, my closer communication and meetings with the team, especially with President Sezai Hazır, date back about seven or eight years.

I met Sezai at a meeting that Habitat organized for Coca-Cola, where I was the motivational speaker. Afterward, I told him, “Now that I've met you, I can't just be a speaker; give me more

work!” and that’s how I slowly progressed to becoming a part of the advisory board.

There’s a saying like this, “A fish rots from the head down” and it is as though it was coined for Habitat. Sezai is someone who never seems to age and in my view, he owes part of that to Habitat itself. Being constantly engaged with young people, working for them... Habitat represented by a president like that is just the same: witty at times, gets older but doesn’t age, raises new generations, takes his work very seriously but also knows when to assert his influence. He is a leader who can step forward when needed, but who can also blend into the background like wallpaper when the situation calls for it. Sezai can both surround people with his presence and influence, and at the same time manage to keep his presence understated and he reflects this directly in the association.

When Sezai invited me to join the Habitat Advisory Board, I joked, “Am I that old already? I’m still far from retirement.” But, like Habitat itself, the Advisory Board is young, dynamic, and visionary, regardless of age. There are such valuable people involved that even if we just gathered for conversation, useful insights for Habitat’s work would emerge. The Habitat team makes great use of this. Our criticisms are taken seriously, which is very valuable and makes you feel like you’re not just there for show. Topics we comment on or criticize in one meeting are quickly incorporated into the projects. And we’re not there to create a “brand-new Habitat.” We’re not there with the idea of “Let’s create a brand new Habitat,” but rather with the mindset of “How can we contribute to what already exists?” Because we are proud not only of Habitat’s presence but also of being part of it.

Fatoş Karahasan (Writer)

“I have known from the beginning that it has been doing lasting work”

I've been part of Habitat's Advisory Board for a year now. Habitat creates an ecosystem and brings different sides together. For us, the most important thing is bringing disparate parties together into one place. Habitat has a unifying quality. If you asked me to define Habitat, I would highlight this unifying quality. Because, as in many fields, civil society also has vertical organizations, meaning everyone does their own work. But within the same category or around the same need, there can be many CSOs. They are all valuable. Each addresses one part of the problem but scaling up is necessary. That's why I find Habitat so valuable because it has managed to create that scale.

Habitat brings together civil society organizations, finds funding, and brings together those in need. Everyone does this, all civil society organizations do, but Habitat creates multiple clusters and brings vertically structured organizations together on a more horizontal level. That is the first thing.

Second, Habitat keeps its promises. When it starts something, it continues. The organization's work in the earthquake region over the past two years is an example. From the very first day of the earthquake, Sezai and his team were in the region. They were there even during the hardest times. A month later, a year later, they were still there and they continue to stay today. Keeping promises once made is very important. Mr. Sezai always says, “We can't heal until that region heals,” and I find that very valuable.

Habitat has many projects in entrepreneurship, creativity, and other fields, but in my view the most valuable recent project has

been the establishment of more than ten coworking spaces in various parts of Anatolia. In these cities, they built reliable platforms that are clean, well-equipped, and supported by strong technological infrastructure, where young people could come together and feel good about themselves. This is an invaluable support. My hope is that these numbers will rise to 60 or even 70.

When it comes to the earthquake, Habitat's mindset isn't "There's a problem, let's just get past it," but rather, "Let's do lasting work." Take the container cities, for example. Once settlement areas are prepared, container cities will remain as an investment. Hopefully, they won't be needed, but in case of another crisis, they will be used again. As for the permanent spaces, like the most recent one I visited in Hatay, it was an enormous site originally prepared for Expo, and there were people working in every corner of it. It will still be there 50 years from now. It is a space for education, gathering, libraries, knowledge-sharing and morale-boosting. From that perspective, the fact that resources were channeled there was, in my view, a very smart move in this period.

Mr. Sezai is a bit stubborn. What he decides on goes for the long haul, and it is solid. He is also very careful in his relationships; he creates an objective platform for many different parties to come together. We need to work together, and Habitat does this perfectly.

I used to follow Habitat from afar. I have known from the beginning that it has been doing lasting work. At the very least, it focuses on specific areas. Each one is valuable and has touched the lives of many people. But as I said, the coworking spaces hold a special place in my heart. Because not everyone can do this. And now that a formula has been developed, they can replicate it. I've even learned that they plan to expand this model abroad.

Erhan Erkut (Prof. Dr., Leader of YetGen Foundation)

“Habitat is the leading organization in reaching vast numbers of people”

About ten years ago, when I joined the TOBB Young Entrepreneurs Council, there were around twenty people sitting around the table. One of them was Sezai, representing Habitat Association.

When I first heard the name Habitat, I thought of the U.S.-based NGO working on housing needs and assumed this was its Turkish branch or affiliate. But Sezai was talking about entrepreneurship. Later, we met at different events, and I realized that Habitat had nothing to do with construction or housing. He invited me to speak to a group of volunteers in Kuşadası and I learned about Habitat by asking the kids there: technology literacy, financial literacy... I was also trying to do similar things at the university.

After that, we went together to Armenia for an entrepreneurship initiative organized by TOBB. Most people around him didn't quite know what he was doing, but they would say, “He's doing something very unusual.” I could sense what he was trying to do, but I still couldn't quite figure out who was at the forefront of the organization and who was behind. Nor could I understand where Sezai stood in all of it. Even by the end of the Armenia trip, I wasn't still quite sure.

When I was invited to a volunteer camp organized by Habitat in Kuşadası, I finally had the chance to speak with Habitat's full-time staff. It was at that camp that I truly began to understand what Habitat was all about. After the launch of Facebook Station, we started going back and forth very often.

Sezai is a bit of a madman who, 30 years ago, at a time when hardly anyone in Türkiye even knew what a civil society organization was, came forward saying, “I’m going to do civil society work in Türkiye.” I also heard people say he was a “spy,” or suggesting he was “an extension of foreign actors.” I even heard some say he was “doing contracting work.”

There are many foundations and associations working in Türkiye, but most lean on the state or municipalities, spending public money. Anyone can do good that way. But Sezai, by the skin of his teeth, either finds it from abroad or responds to the need of private sector companies in Türkiye to connect with young people by serving as a vehicle. That is how Habitat became the leading institution in reaching vast numbers of people, with countless volunteers across the country.

Seda Atabay (Amazon Spain - Compliance Specialist)

“Volunteering may change its form, but it always stays within”

I first encountered Habitat in 2001, during my first year at the Faculty of Political Science at Ankara University (Mülkiye). I was deeply involved in youth communities back then. Through a youth organization working in the field of international relations, I met Duygu Güven and Gökhan Aytürk. They asked, “There’s a Youth for Habitat Association. Would you like to contribute?” I accepted. That’s how we formed the small Ankara branch of the Istanbul-based association. We were very active both nationally and internationally. Following this invitation, the World Young Volunteers Meeting took place in İznik in 2001. When I first went there, I met Sezai Hazır, my mentor and a beloved figure I see as

an elder brother, a very valuable person; his influence on my life is immense. And, of course, I met other young friends as well.

Coming into such an event filled with young, dynamic, and voluntary-driven people had an incredible impact on me. I said to myself, “This is how my story will continue.” At the time, I was a first-year student and my goal was to become a diplomat. But later I told myself, “I don’t want to work in a field related to the public sector. I want to be in and work in the field of civil society, and to invest in both myself and the field I work in.” That’s how I began my journey with Habitat. To me, Habitat is, above all, a family. I, as young Seda, learned how to define myself as an individual in society there. That’s what civil society means to me. Therefore, while living within civil society, I was also getting to know myself again.

As a Habitat volunteer, I worked most actively during the founding phase of the National Youth Parliament. I organized numerous meetings in Eskişehir and İzmir, helped establish communication with young people, and carried out meetings with UNDP, municipalities, and other institutions.

After graduating from university, I continued with Habitat professionally, first through a joint project with Vodafone and UNDP. The second was with Cisco Systems. Beyond projects, I also attended numerous international meetings in Jordan, Egypt, and various cities across Europe. I fell in love with Barcelona, where I had come for a meeting on increasing youth capacity, and decided to live here. Those meetings allowed me to put into practice the theoretical knowledge I had gained at university.

My active involvement with Habitat lasted five years, from 2002 to 2007. The last year and a half was professional, as I worked as a project manager. After completing my degree in International Relations at the Faculty of Political Science, I did my master’s

degree at METU. Eventually, I moved to Barcelona, where I have now been working at Amazon for four years.

If volunteering has been injected into a person's body and soul in the right way, it might change its form, but it always stays within. During some part of Habitat's second 30 years, I hope to re-integrate into those volunteer efforts if my resources and capacity allow. Today, I'm at Amazon but it could just as easily be at another company. Questions like how we can build new partnerships with a youth-focused civil society organization, which for me is Habitat, within the framework of corporate social responsibility, and how we can once again generate a social benefit through international partnerships, are constantly in a corner of my mind.

Şeyhmust Yılmaz (Manager, Turkish Development Foundation)

“For people searching for something more, for those with a problem to solve, Habitat was a true opportunity”

I was a student in the Sociology Department at Mersin University. One of my professors was an advisor to the mayor. One day, he said, “We want to implement the Local Agenda 21 Program as a municipality. There's a meeting in Istanbul; would you like to attend?” I went to Istanbul and met Mr. Sezai and Habitat. It must have been 1999.

A month after that meeting, we invited Mr. Sezai to Mersin for the establishment of the Local Agenda 21 Youth Assembly, and that's how my connection with Habitat continued.

At the end of 2000, Habitat Association, UNDP, and the GAP Regional Development Administration launched a new project aimed at young people in the GAP Region. Mr. Sezai invited me

to the project's kick-off meeting and said he wanted to work together on this project.

For the project's opening, we organized a large gathering in Diyarbakır. There, I also met officials from the GAP Administration. They said they would be hiring and encouraged me to apply. Following the interviews, I suddenly found myself in the Social Projects Unit of the GAP Regional Directorate. So, within just three days of starting this journey with Sezai Abi, I ended up inside a public institution.

From 2000 to 2006, I was responsible for the project on behalf of the GAP Administration. Together with Mr. Sezai and the Habitat team, we established Youth Houses, while also running Local Agenda 21, City Councils, and Youth Assemblies processes. This project, which focused on young people in the Southeastern Anatolia Region, received numerous awards and became a model for other public institutions across the country. It became Türkiye's most comprehensive and largest social development project for youth, as a network. At the same time, it was also one of the most significant projects in Habitat's own institutional transformation. Habitat's ties with the region never faded, and it has continued to develop new projects there.

The team that launched Habitat in 1996 were the founders; we were the second generation. The project ended for Habitat in 2006, but our bond never ended. Even after 25 years, I still feel the same way I did the first day I stepped into that basement office behind Ali Sami Yen Stadium. The sense of belonging continues.

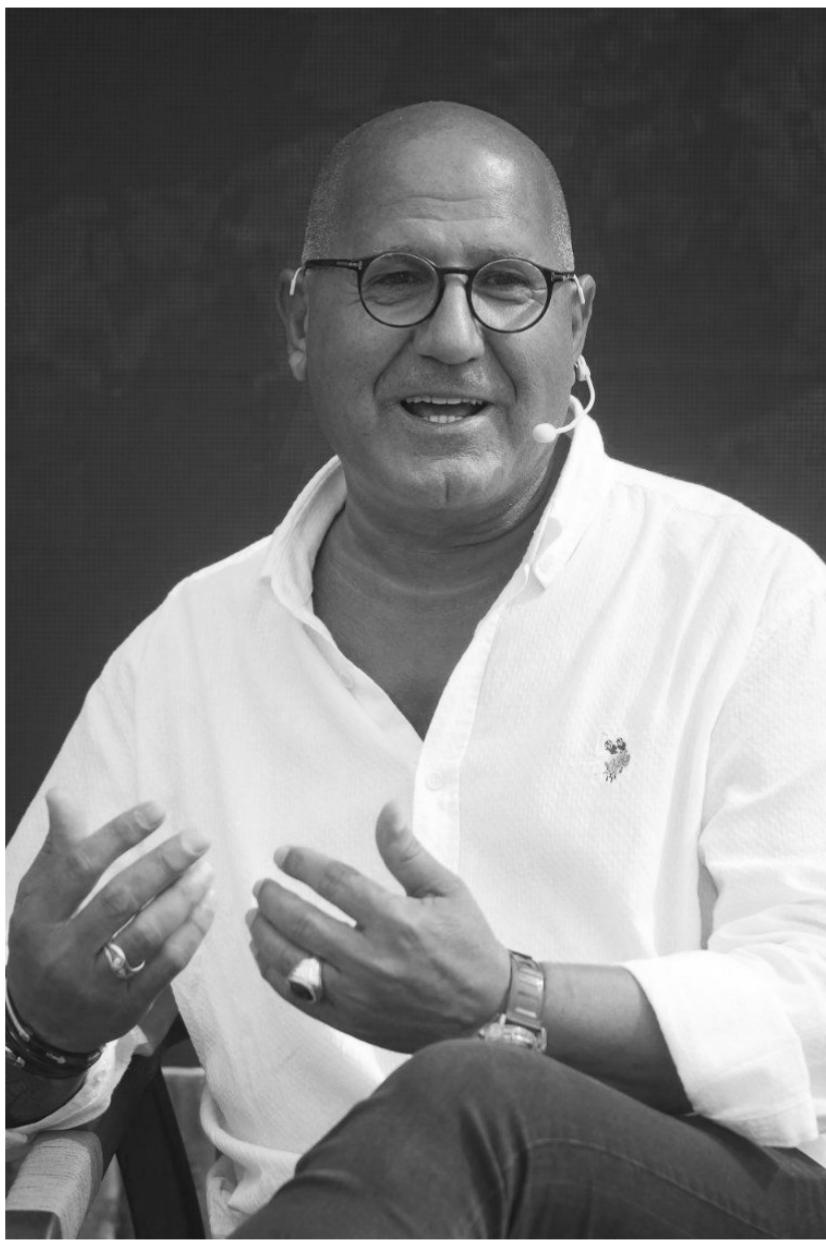
Habitat was a breakthrough for young people living in provinces outside of Istanbul, Ankara, and a few other major cities. In these cities, young people struggled with limited opportunities and inequality and this had been the case for years. Habitat primarily

ly created space for these young people and increased their access to innovative ideas and new developments. In his meetings with them, Mr. Sezai would explain the concept of development in a language that everyone could understand. Habitat became the organization that trained the country's youth workers. Young people who went through these programs either founded youth organizations in their cities or started initiatives in this field. Habitat also became a key actor in shaping participation mechanisms, youth policies, and the country's digital transformation.

Today, there are many people who have crossed paths with Habitat and gone on to build successful careers. And they are dispersed not only throughout Türkiye but also in many countries around the world.

We still have a network reaching from Konya to Mardin, from Diyarbakır to Kars, Bingöl, and Muş and we still keep in touch. Habitat became a door of opportunity for young people who wanted to do something; it created space for them and connected them with Türkiye's leading experts. We entered environments we would never have been able to enter otherwise. During my student years, Habitat's resources were also limited. I would use my Prime Ministry scholarship to go to a Habitat meeting. We always had to create everything from scratch, and that's what happened. We all pursued different careers, but our love bond has never been broken. Currently, we work together in the field whenever possible.

Of course, everyone has potential, determination, and a fighting spirit, but someone needs to hold a light for you, to be a light, for you to see the path. Mr. Sezai and Habitat became our light. Mr. Sezai was a source of inspiration for me and thousands of young people like me. His unwavering determination, motivation, and guidance also became my direction.



Farewell to Sezai Hazır

“Every death is premature,” the poet once said. But the passing of Sezai Hazır on Sunday, May 12, 2024, in İzmir was not only premature, it was unexpected. Two days later, at the funeral ceremonies held at both the Bayraklı Cemevi and the Bostanlı Beşikçioğlu Mosque, the deep sorrow caused by this untimely loss never truly lifted.

Sezai was accompanied on his final journey by his family, close friends, colleagues from Habitat Association, and representatives from the business world and civil society organizations.

At the farewell ceremony, many of his loved ones and friends expressed their emotions, offering their final goodbyes. Emre Koyuncu, Vice Chair of the Habitat Board of Directors, delivered these words on behalf of the organization:

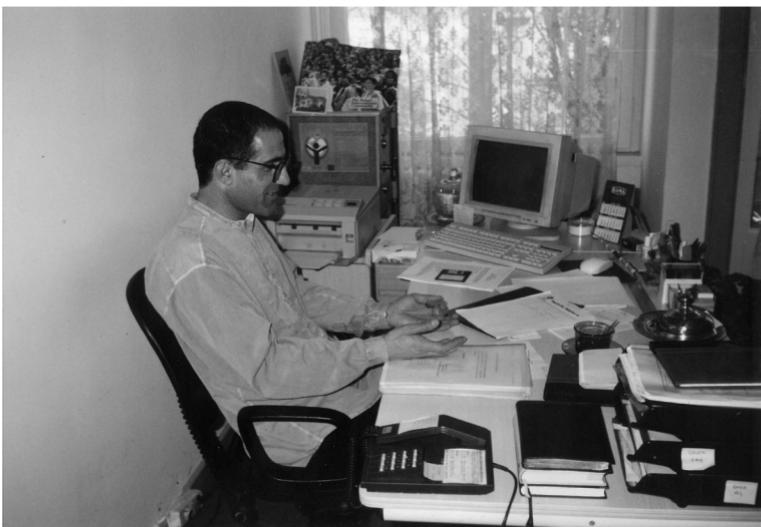
“In life, it’s not about how long you live, but how many friends you gather along the way. Grateful to have you, dear friends.”

This was, in fact, the last message Sezai, our dear friend shared on social media before going into surgery.

He had no thought of leaving this life. He had undoubtedly shared what his friends, who surrounded him during his surgery process, made him feel.

We know this from the things he shared before his surgery and after regaining consciousness. For instance, he

Source: Habitat Association Archive.



spoke about when he could resume work and where he could travel. Yet, although the surgery on Friday morning went well, in the night between Saturday and Sunday he passed away due to a rare pulmonary embolism.

Today, we gather here with only a part of the many friends Sezai had collected throughout his life, to accompany him on his final journey. We feel deeply that those unable to be present in person, those following through our media channels, and those who could not join at all are still here with us in spirit. In this great family of the heart that Sezai built, we are trying to share our sorrow by embracing one another.

When talking about Habitat, he would always reiterate that our mission was to build bridges, weave networks, and develop partnerships. With his inexhaustible energy, he would meet with hundreds of people and institutions during his non-stop travels from one city to the next, and

he would increase the social capital of this country that he loved so much. The countless works and projects that we have carried out as an association to this day have come to life on these bridges, networks, and partnerships. Sezai touched the lives of tens of thousands of people and became a turning point for many.

From him, we learned to always offer an alternative when criticizing; that volunteering does not mean working on a whim; that instead of explaining why we couldn't, we should show how we would; that equality requires first establishing equal communication; that wherever we went, we must become part of that place, and that when contributing to the association's work, we must act not out of affection alone but to change, improve, and create impact.

To be like him is impossible but it is possible to walk forward with the vision he laid out. With its institutional capacity and its great family of hearts, there is no doubt that Habitat Association will continue to keep Sezai's legacy alive.

Sezai Hazır was a beloved and respected figure to his family and close circle, as well as to countless people whose lives he impacted through his civil society work, which he carried out with great effort and dedication for 30 years. His loved ones, who never left his side until the very end, addressed him one final time at the farewell gathering. Those who could not attend the funeral or the gathering shared their feelings on social media.

In this section, we bid farewell to Sezai Hazır through the memories, emotions, and words of tribute expressed first at the memorial gathering and later in some of the social media posts.



Source: Habitat Association Archive.

İşıl Sümertas

(Sezai Hazır's niece, Habitat volunteer)

It's not about how long you live, but how many friends you gather along the way, isn't it? Everyone leaves too soon, but he left a little sooner. After so many years, friends I hadn't seen, volunteers, and colleagues from the association did not leave us alone. You took care of every detail, and you came from everywhere to be with us. I'm so grateful you're here.

One never thinks something like this will happen; you always assume it will happen to others, never to yourself. And when it does, you try to remember the last words you spoke, the last thing you said, whether there was a gentle smile on his face. If only I had one more chance to listen carefully to his advice, to tell him how much I loved him. Before his surgery, I had said, "You are my father; all you need to do is ask." And he had replied, "My dear, it's enough that you said it." My last message to him was "I love you." It went unread. If only I had said it once more. Rest peacefully. May you be surrounded by light.

You touched the lives of so many of us through hundreds of projects. Rest assured, all of us whose lives you touched through hundreds of projects, to whom you taught leadership, whom you raised at your side, who drew inspiration and vision from you will continue to create great value in your name.

Kayhan Kavas

Sezai was an interesting man, he had beautiful rings and belts, things not often welcomed in the public sector, yet he had an irresistible charm about him that never disturbed anyone.

We worked together for many years. He used to call me "an intellectual and artsy-craftsy governor," and I would reply, "And



you're a fancy man." We loved each other very much. Sezai left a profound mark on my life and my wife's life. I will never erase his name from my phonebook.

Hansın Doğan

It is very difficult for someone who never met Sezai to understand him.

He dedicated his entire life to people as a humanist and a patriot who touched the lives of millions. Whether they realized it or not, he gave a part of himself to everyone. Sometimes it was an idea, sometimes a job, sometimes direction, or his beloved ring. To me, he gave his brotherhood, which I hold most dear. Sezai always called me "my brother." After our 24-year shared journey, I now feel the deep sorrow of losing a brother. We would always consult one another and value each other's thoughts. Sometimes we argued, he loved to debate. Once, while riding in a taxi, we ended up shouting at each other so loudly that the driver stared at us in disbelief in the rearview mirror. But after a moment of silence, he said, "Come, my brother," and we made peace. We argued often, but always reconciled quickly, each time we would agree on new ideas and new projects.

Başak Demir

My dear, beloved Mr. Sezai,

I am grateful that almost every day of our 22-year friendship was spent side by side, shoulder to shoulder, putting our heads together. Every single moment is unique and irreplaceable for me. Together, we dreamed without limits. Our dreams collided, transformed, and in the end, they always came to life. From the very first day we met, when I was 22, you believed in me, you

trusted me. And was it just me? You embraced each of us with endless initiative.

When one speaks of joy for life, of course, it is you who come to mind. How much you savored this world, how much you delighted in it. You loved to travel, to see, to listen but above all, you loved to tell stories. You never complained. You always took responsibility. You were always the first to act, the one who moved us all into action.

Beyond this hall today, you have become immense in the hearts of thousands across our country and in many different countries around the world. With all our differences, we became part of the whole of your diversity.

You were our beacon, and your light will never fade.

İtir Akdoğan

My dear Sezai, you taught us justice, hard work, equality, innovation, and how to savor life. With all that we learned from you, we carried on and we will continue to carry on. You left us too early. I promise to do everything I can to keep your memory alive and to ensure that Habitat continues to build bridges.

Rahim Aladağ

In 2003, I attended a meeting in Eskişehir. I had come from Elazığ, dressed in a suit and leather shoes. I stepped into the hotel lobby, and there he was, wearing Dallas boots, tight jeans, and a belt... a stylish man. When he saw me, he said, "What's with this look?" And I replied, "Brother, what about your look? Isn't this a meeting?" He said, "Rahim, don't get stuck on suits, break the molds." That bold remark of his was a sign of not conforming to stereotypes. We started working together later.

One day, my phone rang. I answered, “Yes, brother.” He said, “Go ahead, Rahim.” I replied, “But brother, you’re the one who called me.” And he said, “Alright then, don’t waste my time,” and hung up. Sezai Abi was someone with such a quick wit, thinking about more than one thing at the same time. The last time he called was on a Wednesday. I said, “Brother, you’re about to have surgery, doesn’t that mean you’ll need the Khoja?” He replied, “It’s fine, son, no problem.” I teased, “If you want to learn the Subhaneke prayer, I can teach you.” He said, “You’ll pray plenty for me after I’m gone, it’s ok.” It was as if he had already sensed what was to come...

Ulaş Tepe

I met Mr. Sezai in 2006. In the lobby of the Başkent Teachers’ Lodge, there was a man surrounded by people, saying unusual things, making rhyming sentences... The journey went on, and later I became part of the Executive Board of the National Youth Parliament. From then on, his mentorship and brotherhood always continued. For those going to the military, for those getting married, he offered every kind of support, even helping them set up their homes, doing more than what one’s own parents might do. Mr. Sezai always spoke his mind without ever offending or hurting anyone. After I became mayor, he would say, “I don’t like taking photos with politicians,” and would refuse to pose with me. I always called him “My dear General President.” On the day he went into surgery, I entered his room saying, “My dear General President,” and we spoke at length. Before I left, he said to Taha, “Take a photo of Ulaş and me and post it right away, saying ‘Ulaş came to visit us.’” I shared it with the words, “Mr. Sezai took a photo with me for the first time.” That photo turned out to be our last.

İsmail Metin

If he were here now, he would say, “Don’t drag it out.” Whatever we say about Mr. Sezai is never enough. He grew up without a father and never had children, yet he was a wonderful father to us all.

As his children, we will protect this legacy and will always be here to ensure that Habitat lives on and progresses. We will all work together with you. Before he was hospitalized, we were visiting the earthquake zone. I told him, “Mr. Sezai, let’s cancel the programs.” He said, “No. Even when I’m not around, everything will continue. Don’t change your schedule.” Even though he is no longer physically with us, the entire program will carry on. What matters is not where we are, but how much we feel Habitat within us.

Berrak Kutsoy

We used to talk almost every other day. It started with calling him Mr. Sezai, then “Sezoş,” and in the end he became our “Sezeğimiz (our Sezai).” In 2009, Ali Sabancı gave me a list for the Young Entrepreneurs Council. He said, “Berrak, take a look, we’ll form a board of 25 people.” Alongside familiar names, there was Habitat Association on the list. I called TOBB and said, “What is this association doing here? We need to remove it.” They told me, “Berrak, please go to Habitat Association, meet Mr. Sezai, and you’ll change your mind.” I went to the office in Beşiktaş, and from that day on, Sezai and I were inseparable.

There wasn’t a single city in Anatolia we didn’t travel together, or an event we didn’t attend. His colorful personality, his vision, his love for Habitat, his skill at leading a halay (Anatolian folk dance), his presence in the office... We will never forget him.

Sezai, you are a role model for me, and you always will be. You will always be with us, and we will always protect what you left behind.

Excerpts from Social Media Posts

Following the passing of Sezai Hazır, countless people both in Türkiye and abroad whose life paths had crossed with his, or who had been influenced by him shared their feelings on social media. The majority of the messages reflected sadness over his “early death.” Here, I have only been able to include a small selection of those messages that highlight different aspects of Sezai Hazır’s character.

Seyhmust Yılmaz

(Development Specialist)

Sezai Hazır passed through this world leaving behind a beautiful echo. How fortunate he was! For three days now, he has been remembered with thousands of messages, prayers, and blessings from all across the country, an honor not easily granted to anyone...

If you were to ask, “How much impact can one person make in a lifetime?” I would say that, given the conditions of this country, Sezai Abi more than succeeded.

A heavy grief had weighed on me for three days, but seeing today’s farewell ceremonies and reflecting on them with a clear mind brought me comfort and helped me pull myself together. I told myself, “What more could a person ask for?” and found solace in that thought. With its diversity and the participation of people from all walks of life, the ceremonies were truly befitting

for him and more than well deserved.

In the last 25 years of my life, apart from the final six or seven years, I spent intense time with Sezai Abi, especially on the project through which we established Youth Houses in the GAP Region. It was the most challenging and complex project in Habitat's history, and we spent a great deal of time together on it. But in the end, it produced a model project for Türkiye and exemplary practices.

And what did we teach him in the region? First of all, *halay*. His arm was a little stiff, but there was nothing to be done. He was a guest, and a valued one. He learned that halay could be danced anywhere, at any time, regardless of place, subject, or occasion. Of course, he made the diagnosis: "Here, people even dance halay to the sound of a squeaky door." During his travels in the region, he was hosted in many homes. This pleased him very much. He got used to crowded dinner tables. For us, it was a process that went far beyond a project or meetings, it was filled with hospitality...

Sezai Abi brought a civil society approach to development. For me, this is among the most valuable things he did. In our country's 70-year history, beyond the activities that public authorities deemed fit for young people like wrestling, boxing, karate, he pioneered concrete actions that championed social development, participation mechanisms, leadership, advocacy, entrepreneurship, and participation in global networks.

For the past three days, the most common phrase has been, "He touched lives." In my view, for many, he did more than touch their lives, he helped set the very course of their lives.

The impact or movement he created is now nearing 30 years. This approach that changed and transformed us also shapes the

work we each do today. And we also have something to pass on to our children. This is a case of influencing several generations.

He had a profound impact on my own life, which began with limited means. I am deeply grateful to him. His vision was a source of light and courage. The night I learned the news, and in the three days since, there was a great weight on me. Beyond the pain of never seeing him again, there was also a feeling that I couldn't repay Sezai Abi for his efforts. But he did what he came here to do, and more.

Farewell, Sezai Abi. Until we meet again in the halay dances and around the crowded tables.

Olgu Okumuş

(Senior Expert in Climate Policy and Finance Strategy,
Clima-Med)

So sad! Beyond contributing to the development of so many people in this country, Mr. Sezai was also a pioneer in sustainable development efforts.

He was someone who strengthened my confidence in what I could achieve. Thanks to the people who made our introduction possible, I found the chance to shape how I perceive the world and to define myself and for that, I am grateful. He was one of the people who sowed the very first seeds of my professional life. May he rest in peace.

Elif Kalan

(Senior Product Operations Specialist, Amfori)

I cannot imagine what my life would have been like without Mr. Sezai and Habitat. He brought us together so beautifully... around the table, in the halay circles, in debates, in campaigns, in

projects, out in the field. In Ankara, in every place and in every way, he always believed in us and supported us. And through it all, he was simply himself, he gave his life to this path.

I am grateful that our lives crossed, and grateful for my friends His absence is really heavy... yet his voice still rings in my ears.

Çiğdem Yıldız

(Marketing Consultant, Peryum Biotechnology)

I don't know what to say. There is no one left like him, so frank, so open-hearted, a man who embodied the difference between merely pretending to do something and truly doing it. Even his simplest sentences were lessons in themselves.

Mücahid Gerede

(Software Specialist, Habitat Volunteer)

Our teacher, whose signature can be found on many of the most important projects carried out for this country, who captivated everyone who had the chance to talk with him, and whose heart always beat for goodness. May your place be in heaven, dear teacher.

Kezban Kobaz

(Teacher, Habitat Volunteer)

The last time I spoke with Sezai Hazır was at the Ankara Volunteers Gathering. It was around 11:00 p.m. I still remember the eye-opening conversation he had, with all the volunteers gathered around him, and the incredible ideas he offered us. We are mourning the loss of a genius and a role model who brought a new perspective to the concept of CSOs and made it beloved by all segments of society, especially the youth.

Aday Adanır

(Project Manager, Index Group)

I am so sad. The way he touched my life, and the organizations and training we did afterward changed my perspective on my surroundings and on life. We have lost someone irreplaceable. I am very, very sorry.

Gizem Büyükduran Kaya

Exactly ten years ago today, I had the honor of working with dear Sezai Hazır on the “I Can Manage My Money” Project within the framework of the National Youth Parliament. Before that, we had also had many valuable years of working together.

I will always remember Sezai Hazır not only as a successful manager and entrepreneur but also as a mentor and source of inspiration. His passion for entrepreneurship, his commitment to civil society, and his faith in young people deeply affected me.

Sadly, we lost him far too soon. His passing is a great loss for the entrepreneurship and civil society community. I remember him with love and respect, and I extend my heartfelt condolences to his family and loved ones.

Mustafa Özer

(Specialist and Content Manager, Impact Hub Vienna)

I always felt as if Mr. Sezai would always be among us. It feels like he's about to sit in his chair at the weekly meeting. Sezai Hazır, who made incredible contributions not only to my professional life but also to my personal story will no longer be just a phone call away, or in a hotel lobby.

He was someone who created space for civil society and the architect of many strategic partnerships but more than that, he

was the founder of Habitat Association and everyone's Sezai Abi. Even though you are no longer with us, your teachings and your vision will always remain.

Ali Ercan Özgür

(Co-Founder, IDEMA)

Today, in İzmir Karşıyaka, we bid farewell to dear Sezai Abi on his final journey, with ideals that will outlive him, and with his loved ones. I remember the Şişli office where I first met him 25 years ago, and with dozens of beautiful memories about him today...

His vision for organization and international partnerships was always his compass.

Mehmet Onarcan

(Founder, Mentors Network Türkiye)

Warm-hearted, helpful, innovative, inquisitive, a listener, someone who made others listen, a teacher, a leader, a developer, diligent, determined, disciplined, and at the same time, a fun person, a doyen of civil society, a unifier, an entrepreneur, productive, someone who prioritized service before himself... So many adjectives could be listed for Sezai Hazır. I was very saddened by the news of his passing. It is truly hard to believe. When such productive people, who create such profound impact both around them and in society, leave us too soon, the sadness is multiplied. Sezai, there was still so much more you could have done for young people.

But rest assured, the young people whose lives you touched, whom you led, trained, and inspired through hundreds of projects, will surely take over the flag and continue to make a great impact.

Suat Özçağdaş

(Member of Parliament for Istanbul)

Today in İzmir, together with friends from the civil society world, we sent my friend Sezai Hazır off to eternity. Beloved Sezai, who dedicated his life to empowering young people and strengthening civil society, carried out significant work through Habitat Association he founded, as well as through the numerous social initiatives he initiated.

His vision and devotion touched the lives of thousands of young people, helping them become stronger individuals in the social and economic spheres.

We have lost a joyful, passionate, full-of-life, visionary agent of change who built bridges between hearts, geographies, and fields of expertise. I bow with respect to the memory of Sezai Hazır, and I extend my condolences to his family, friends, and all who loved him.

TEMA Foundation

We are deeply saddened by the loss of Sezai Hazır, a precious figure in civil society, one who believed in collaboration and collective wisdom, guided young people, and served as the Founder and Chair of the Board of Habitat Association as well as Vice Chair of TOBB Young Entrepreneurs Council. We wish God's mercy upon Sezai Hazır and extend our condolences to his family and loved ones.

The Federation of Women Associations of Türkiye

We are deeply saddened by the loss of our companion on this journey, Sezai Hazır. We wish him God's mercy and extend our condolences to his family and loved ones.

Hello Tomorrow Türkiye

With deep sorrow, we have learned of the passing of our esteemed professional elder, Sezai Hazır. As the Hello Tomorrow Türkiye family, we extend our condolences to his family, loved ones, all our friends at Habitat Association, and to the entire entrepreneurship ecosystem for this painful loss.

Nisa Nur

My dear teacher Sezai, I am so glad to have had the chance to know someone like you.

Your contributions to us, your constant devotion, the opportunities you gave to young people, and the lasting projects you carried out to develop Hatay have contributed so much to our lives.

Yeşim Oruç

(UN Resident Coordinator, Moldova)

I was saddened to learn of the passing of civil society pioneer Sezai Hazır. Sezai, whom I met at the 1996 Habitat Conference, brought the voice of youth and civil society to the international development agenda. He was an irreplaceable companion on the journey.

My condolences to the entire Habitat and civil society community.

Hakan Tarhan

(Managing Partner, DATAMIND, President of TOBB Ankara Young Entrepreneurs Council)

An irreplaceable loss. Sezai Abi, you have saddened us all so much. I am glad to have had the chance to know you. This is where words fail.

Engin Özören

(YouTube Content Creator, Trainer, Consultant)

I was very happy to have met and had one-on-one conversations with him. When I heard the news today, I felt as though I had lost someone very close to me.

Ali Rıza Durgun

I feel fortunate to have had the chance to meet and talk with him. He was such a gentle, egoless, genuine, and sincere person.

Under his leadership, Habitat Association touched the lives of many people not only in big cities but also in rural areas and I am one of them.

I am very sad...

Sezai Hazır, through his approach to human relationships, the value he gave to people, and his actions, left a mark on the lives of many individuals from different walks of life. While the main subject of our conversations with those who contributed to this book was Habitat Association, without exception, every speaker began with words of praise for Sezai Hazır. Some of those have found their place in various parts of this book. The lines below are ones I could not allow to be lost.

Şengül Akçar

(Founder, Foundation for the Support of Women's Work, KEDV)

When I think of Sezai, what comes to my mind first is his communication and networking skills. I think that's the area where he was most competent. He was extremely successful in building corporate relationships. He also had the ability to include people

and organizations in his own equation, to make them partners in his cause. Most importantly, he had the ability to communicate with young people and to understand their language. In my opinion, that alone is a remarkable quality.

In Türkiye, many civil society leaders, including myself, are not able to do this. With this unique communication skill, Sezai would expand and grow partnerships and collaborations. In terms of sustainability, he is very good at maintaining relationships. He might put a relationship on hold from time to time, but he would never end it completely. We are not as skillful in these matters.

He is also persistent and I consider that an important talent. Some of us are persistent, of course, but Sezai was more so. The world of civil society does not easily encourage people to take action. Founding, managing, and running a civil society organization, and sustaining it without deviating from its mission... All of these require both skill and persistence, determination, or, more accurately, dedication.

For this reason, I admire Sezai greatly. He never saw Habitat Association as a professional career. In fact, he could have easily pursued such a career elsewhere. That's why his dedication deserves respect.

Tuğçe Çiftçibaşı

(Head of Foreign Relations Department, Antalya
Metropolitan Municipality)

My Habitat journey began in 1997-1998, when I was selected to attend the “Sustainable Europe” meeting in Sweden. It wasn’t just a meeting, it became a turning point that shaped my life, opened doors to entirely different worlds, and led to friendships with people whose hearts beat with the same excitement as mine.

When I was selected for the meeting, I was invited to Safranbolu with the words, “Mr. Sezai would like to see you.” That invitation drew me into the process of Local Agenda 21, Youth Houses, Youth Assemblies, and the establishment of the National Youth Parliament (NYP).

At such a young age, how many people get the chance to touch the lives of other young people?

During the period when we were working so hard to establish the National Youth Parliament, Türkiye-EU relations entered a whole new phase, and in 1999, with the EuroMed youth program, the first EU grant came to Türkiye.

That was when I realized once again how valuable the organization I was a part of was, because Habitat was offered the opportunity to run the program in Türkiye. However, Sezai, with his usual foresight, said, “If we take this on, many other organizations or young people may not benefit.”

Instead, he put all his effort into helping the process spread in Europe and Türkiye. It was at that time that I was introduced to the EU process, to funds, and to advocacy, all of which would shape my career today.

By deeming me worthy of a position on the European Advisory Board, my Habitat family, in a way, turned my childhood dream of becoming an ambassador into reality.

Sezai was a true “talent scout,” someone who believed in young people and had the ability to find and bring out their potential.

Now, when I look back at us, I think about how many wonderful and right people he chose and what valuable investments he made. We developed each other, held each other’s hands, and learned together.

Thanks to this, we became our own “influential connection”

and became sought-after individuals at a very young age, even when we had no one else behind us.

Münteha Adalı

(Member, GEN Türkiye)

I knew Sezai exactly as I first met him, and I once told him: “You are really embracing Türkiye; you are trying to bring it together.” I am now on Habitat’s advisory board. I have also been a member of GEN for two years.

My concern was a matter of national importance, just like everyone else’s. Working on issues of national importance was not a privilege but a necessity. Because everything that happens in this country, every problem, eventually comes back like a boomerang and hits all of us, and we each take our share.

That is why you cannot say, “It’s not my problem,” or “It’s not my reality.” It is so important to be part of both the problem and the solution.

Mehmet Gün

(Founder, Gün + Partners Law Firm, Vice President – TÜRKONFED, Habitat Advisory Board Member)

If a manager continues in their position for such a long time, and Türkiye has this problem, they can fall into manager’s blindness. The way to overcome this is for the people being managed to allow the manager to do so. Mr. Sezai was a democrat, and in that sense, he was able to turn what might normally be a weakness into a strength.

After someone departs, words often fall short of expressing our feelings. Whatever we say about Sezai Hazir will always feel incomplete. As a “man of meaning,” he most of all wanted to read the story of the path on which he spent at least 30 years of his life. He left us before he could reach that goal. So let us bid him farewell with two verses from Yunus the Dervish:

*A man of deep insight will not despair upon this path,
For hearts that perceive meaning shall never truly perish.
The body is mortal, yet the soul does not die; those who
depart never return.
If death comes, it is only the body that dies; the souls are
never to perish.*

Conclusion

The United Nations Habitat II Conference, held in Istanbul from June 3-14, 1996, was the largest international meeting in Türkiye's history. During the preparations for the conference, one of the working groups formed under the name "caucus" was dedicated to youth. In Türkiye at that time, where even the very concept of civil society was foreign concept and there existed no youth organization that embraced all young people, one man who had grasped the importance of civil society for social transformation, together with a group of high school students, each half his age, set out in 1995 under the name "youth caucus." This journey, which began purely with the desire to achieve something, with belief, determination, perseverance, and dedication, has reached its 30th year today.

In 1997, youth emerged from its caucus and established an association, adopting the name of the very event that had brought it into being: Habitat II. Although, over time, the association made changes to its name depending on the content of its work, it never abandoned the word "Habitat." One reason was that it had become known to the public through the Habitat Conference. The less frequently stated reason was that from its very beginning, the association had positioned itself in alignment with the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

From the very beginning, the team whose work was facilitated by the UN-Habitat Centre during the conference's organizational

flow was recognized as a program partner at the stage of establishing the association in 1997 by both the relevant state institutions and UNDP, and received financial support.

Habitat continued on its path without excluding anyone or discriminating on the basis of religion, language, ethnic identity, gender, physical appearance, or sexual orientation while at the same time drawing a clear line with those who did not embrace these principles. Despite Türkiye's stifling political atmosphere of the 1990s, it successfully carried out the Local Agenda 21 Program, which aimed for democratization starting at the local level by creating its own mechanisms.

During this process, Habitat brought together young people from across Türkiye who had never seen the sea with young people oblivious to life east of Ankara but lived with their prejudices, uniting them in places they could never have imagined and helping them bond and form genuine connections.

Habitat youth, who expressed the demands of young people at UN conferences, visited different countries through youth exchange programs, engaged in cultural exchange, and developed friendships. Beyond all this, by encouraging and supporting local organizing, Habitat became a vital source of life for Türkiye's civil society, which was then nearly nonexistent.

Entirely a volunteer movement at the outset, Habitat entered a stage of institutionalization by the mid-2000s. The engagement of global companies in corporate social responsibility projects, framed by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, focused on eliminating poverty, basic education, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and global partnerships, helped shape the association's direction.

Working in every city of Türkiye through public-civil soci-

ety partnerships, Habitat also brought the private sector into this network for digital transformation and preparation of society for it. The Digital Transformation Program, which started by providing computer literacy to the broadest segments of society, has continued for 15 years, expanding with new content along the way.

Although Habitat was founded as an Istanbul-based association, it always kept its focus on Anatolia, working with the mindset of “we will reach Istanbul anyway.” Habitat consistently built and expanded networks, remaining committed to its principle of “building a communication bridge between a young person in one corner of the world and a young person in one corner of Türkiye.”

Within the framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, Habitat implemented various projects and programs to promote and develop entrepreneurship across different segments of society, in collaboration with the networks of TOBB, TÜRKONFED, and TÜSİAD. It also brought GEN, the Global Entrepreneurship Network, to Türkiye.

Habitat is an organization that adapts easily to the world’s rapid changes. Benefiting from the flexibility of never having defined itself too rigidly at the beginning, it now steps into its second 30 years.

Acknowledgments

The preparation of this work owes much to the efforts of many people that go beyond what is visible on these pages.

I want to thank Prof. Dr. Gürel Tüzün, Coordinator of the Habitat II Project Coordination Unit (HPCU), for not only his oral contributions but also for sharing the Habitat archive with us;

I also want to thank Dr. Sadun Emrealp, for his oral contributions as well as for allowing us to draw upon his publications;

Additionally, every single speaker who helped bring this into being by sharing their testimonies, impressions, and experiences as volunteers, professionals, and/or in various other capacities over Habitat's 30 years deserves a separate thank you.

In the course of preparing this book, interviews were conducted with a total of 126 people, both in Türkiye and abroad, including Sezai Hazır. The stories and experiences they shared with me were, of course, unique and extremely valuable.

Each one of them deserved to be included on these pages individually and exactly as told. However, I was only able to include a portion of them, to the extent permitted by the Habitat narrative. For reasons that are easy to guess, I could not include many of the speakers on the list at all. I ask for their forgiveness.

I also owe special thanks to Gelengül Erkara, who transcribed our conversation recordings into text for this work.

We began the writing of this book together with Hande Yavaşça from Habitat, but later continued on with another Habitat colleague. From the very first day he assumed responsibility, Ersin Kopuz carried out the coordination with great skill, ensuring that our work was completed flawlessly. For this, he too deserves our sincere thanks.

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Habitat Association gained its legal status in 1997. However, its origins can be traced back to the UN Human Settlements Summit (Habitat II) in Istanbul in 1996, the formation of the Youth Caucus as part of the Habitat II Host Committee in late 1995 to coordinate civil society work for the conference; or even earlier that same year to the "Youth for Habitat II" international youth network, which was created at the UN Social Development Summit in Copenhagen to ensure strong youth participation at Habitat II.

Although today, those who don't know about this major event hosted by Türkiye have long since outnumbered those who do, Habitat Association can be regarded as perhaps the most important outcome or impact of this UN international summit for Türkiye.

This book recounts a 30-year journey that began at a time when concepts like stakeholder, governance, and sustainability were entirely new in the world of development, even when there were debates about how the term Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) should be translated into Turkish.

Hidden within its pages is also the practical meaning of the public, private, and civil society partnerships, often emphasized in international texts for achieving sustainable development goals. As you read, you will witness how Habitat Association's business model, which has been in place since its early days and is based on building strong partnerships to reach different segments of society, not only yielded significant development impacts but also gave meaning to these very partnerships.

Beyond all this, this book is a written history of founding a civil society organization, of growing it, and of making it sustainable. It is offered with respect to all who are curious, who wish to learn, and who seek to understand.

