

EFFECTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Meydan Events in 2022

Let's meet at Meydan!



INTRODUCTION



We met in Meydan to discuss common needs and solutions that will increase the impact and power of civil society!

As YADA, we continue our efforts to increase the dialogue between civil society and other stakeholders, and in this context, to increase the impact of civil society. Based on the need emerging in these studies, we also monitor the changing decision mechanisms in Türkiye and try to develop alternative approaches to the issue of accessing the "decision", which civil society is increasingly distant from. At this point, we think that it is imperative that civil society focuses on expanding the definition of "decision" and on influencing the decisions of different actors, especially in the transformation process we are going through, even though the decision mechanisms have changed, and civil society has become increasingly closed. Here, too, politics and political parties are the first "new" actors that come to mind. We believe that civil society can contribute to policy decisions, discourses, and action plans, thus taking a more active role in solving social, environmental, and economic problems. While we are constructing our strategies at the stage of realizing this idea, in order to examine the current status of the dialogue, relations and cooperation between civil society and politics, to identify the gaps and needs in this field, and to contribute to the construction of a more effective civil society-politics relationship, "The Relationship of Civil Society with Politics and Decision Mechanisms" research study that we conducted in 2021. The research, in which we interviewed representatives from both civil society and the world of politics, shows us that today politics and civil society in Türkiye do not know each other enough. So much so that many political representatives have a prejudice that civil society organizations have turned into a tool to legitimize those who hold political power. Civil society, on the other hand, criticizes the inability of politics to create a social movement. On the other hand, everyone agrees that the channels of politics, like the civil sphere, are blocked and its space is shrinking.

Based on this, as YADA Foundation, we came together this time to talk about ways to increase the impact of civil society with all stakeholders in the Meydan meetings, which we developed in order to strengthen the dialogue within the civil society and with other stakeholders and to create an effective negotiation ground. At the point we have reached after the change and transformation that took place in Türkiye, we felt the lack of a space that appeals to all decision makers, including politics/political parties, and that speaks to the unique and 'free' problems of civil society. From this point of view, while experiencing a critical threshold this year, we brought together the representatives of civil society operating in different cities and different fields to discuss the common problem areas experienced by civil society and to suggest solutions together. Under the title of "Effective Civil Society for Participatory Democracy", on 17 October, 5 November, 24 November, and 23 December 2022; we met face-to-face with nearly 100 civil society representatives working in democracy and different fields in 4 different cities: Istanbul, Diyarbakır, Ankara and İzmir, and discussed the structural problems that need to be changed in order for civil society in Türkiye to be more effective. Our goal is to convey what needs to be done for a possible civil society reform to relevant decision makers, especially politics.

We would like to thank all the stakeholders who participated in the Meydan meetings, where we came together to talk about the problems experienced by civil society in Türkiye and the solutions for these problems. We would also like to thank our "working group", for which we designed all the contents together and contributed significantly to our work in the upcoming period.

PROGRAM

10.00-10.30 Introduction

10.30-11.00 "The Relationship of Civil Society with Politics and Decision Mechanisms"
research report presentation, YADA Foundation

11.00-11.30 Opening Speech: What to do for "civil society for participatory democracy"?,
Emine Uçak - Civil Society Expert

11.30-12.30 Civil Society Forum for Participatory Democracy

- + What are our dead ends?
- + What would be our possible roadmaps?

12.30-13.30 Lunch Break

13.30-15.30 Collaborative Works with the World Cafe method: Problems and solutions to
problems

- + How will it change?
- + Contribution to the policy note/What would you say to politics?

Working Themes

- + Legislation and legal limitations
- + Financial sustainability and fundraising
- + Public-CSO relations / Politics-CSO relations
- + Association, development of civil society
- + Media and visibility
- + Transparency and accountability

15.30-15.45 Break

15.45-16.30 Closing and final comments



OPENING: WELCOME TO MEYDAN

The Relationship of Civil Society with Politics and Decision Mechanisms Research Study

Meydan meetings started with the introduction of participants by stating their names and institutions. After the introduction, highlights of the research “The Relationship of Civil Society with Politics and Decision Mechanisms” conducted by YADA Foundation and which forms the basis of these meetings were shared with the participants. Research on the relationship between civil society and politics tells us:

- + Politics and civil society do not know each other well enough.
- + While defining civil society and its function, political actors make an assessment through the institutions or visible structures they have been in contact with so far.
- + Politics tends to see civil society only as the demanding party. This causes politicians to distance themselves from civil society.
- + Politicians establish dialogue with civil society like they either establish a kind of dialogue they establish with the voters, or they establish it by coming together in certain conflict areas.
- + When civil society organizations come into contact with politicians, they refrain from appearing engaged in politics and try to establish an equal dialogue with all parties.
- + The civic space is shrinking, and it is getting harder to work in the area.
- + Polarization and contraction are experienced not only in the civil sphere, but also in the field of politics.
- + Political parties, like CSOs, have problems in terms of freedom of expression and organization and cannot go out on the streets in many provinces.
- + The polarization among politics, public administration, and civil society prevents dialogue.
- + There are problems arising from mutual prejudice, distrust, polarization, and lack of communication among politics, public administration, and civil society.
- + These problems affect the impact capacity of civil society.
- + Political parties communicate more with CSOs close to them.

What to do for “civil society for participatory democracy”?

Following the presentation of the highlights of the research, Civil Society Expert Emine Uçak, who is also in the working group, shared the current situation and her experiences in line with the question what to do for “Civil society for participatory democracy?”. She started her speech with this question: “Why do we have to put participation forward by saying participatory democracy?”. She underlined that the approach of the diversified opposition that all problems will end when they return to

the parliamentary system is not enough and stated that other problems brought by centralization should also be discussed. She stated that centralization causes the locals to have no right to decide, that quick decisions are actually not a good thing, and that especially local decisions should not be centralized. She stated that centralization has also become a problem of participatory democracy, eliminating equal access to rights, opportunities, and decisions. Emphasizing once again that politics and civil society do not know each other well enough, Emine Uçak said that when politics, especially the opposition, talks about democratization, they should see that the civil sphere is a part of it.

CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM FOR PARTICIPANT DEMOCRACY

What are our dead ends? What could be our possible roadmaps?

At the forum held after the opening speeches, all participants, based on their own experiences, answered these questions: "What are our dead ends for participatory democracy? What would be our possible roadmaps?" While general issues were discussed in this joint discussion session, some of the topics were focused on local issues.

The common topics spoken in all regions, where the impact of civil society is negatively affected, are as follows:

- + Lack of democratic environment.
- + Presence of pressure mechanisms.
- + The marginalization of the concept of civil society by different actors, primarily the public, in the eyes of the society, placing it on a political ground, and creating a negative impression by criminalizing it at the same time.
- + Lack of a clear scope when it comes to civil society organizations.
- + The rights-based-aid-based division in civil society prevents dialogue.
- + Civil society's lack of transparency and accountability creates an atmosphere of insecurity, which in turn affects donations and other financial resources.
- + The inability to establish organic associations among CSOs, the absence of unifying institutions, the inability of the existing ones to maintain a strong influence, the inability to organize institutions in similar working areas.
- + Communication strategies are not organized according to needs, short content is not presented when communicating with media, and a constructive attitude is not used in the cooperation process.
- + Presence of CSOs that are extensions of politics.
- + Funding institutions' frameworks restrict CSOs on issues such as inclusion.
- + Seeing CSOs as a leap forward.
- + Weakness of local CSOs.
- + The words are limited to similar audiences and cannot be conveyed to people with opposing views (echo bell).
- + Competence conflict between volunteers and professionals.
- + Hierarchy of public benefit status (Tax exemption, fundraising permit).
- + Audits are not impartial.
- + No legislation for volunteers.

In addition to common problems, local issues of civil society are discussed in Meydan meetings, for example in Diyarbakır, the issue of insufficient inclusion of the public comes to the fore. However, the effect of ideological bias and distances on visibility and the motivation of CSOs to stay small are also among the dead ends of civil society in Diyarbakır.

Meydan Buluşmaları

For the civil society operating in Ankara, which is closer to the world of decision in terms of the city, it is a prominent issue that CSOs cannot provide principles when communicating with politics. Similarly, the failure of politics to benefit from civil society expertise is among the problems experienced in Ankara. Influence on the decision through parliamentary commissions is especially expressed in Ankara, unlike other cities, and is expressed as an alternative way.

Civil society structures in İzmir bring up the issue of institutions being unsustainable and personal/corporate benefits coming to the fore rather than influence, and they are smothering themselves. Non-inclusion of young people in the process of participation is also among the prominent issues in İzmir. In addition, the issues of reaching the most disadvantaged group but not reaching the main group, and the introduction of international institutions into the field with the corporate culture are among the prominent dead-ends of İzmir's civil society.

COLLABORATIVE WORKS: PROBLEMS AND PROPOSALS FOR SOLUTIONS

After the Civil Society Forum for Participatory Democracy session, the participants were divided into groups around certain topics-themes and discussed the problems and solutions for the problems. The working themes were divided into six groups: Legislation and legal limitations, Financial sustainability and fundraising, Public-CSO relations / Politics-CSO relations, Association and development of civil society, Media and visibility, Transparency and accountability. With the World Cafe¹ method, all participants contributed to each other's ideas and suggestions by discussing under all group themes. Suggestions were developed around two basic questions for the problems discussed under the themes: "How will it change? Contribution to the policy note/What would you say to politics?"

We have gathered the needs and the steps to be taken as a result of all the discussions made in this direction under 10 headings: Freedom, Reputation, Accreditation, Resource, Participation and Cooperation, Standardization, Transparency, Visibility, Self-Control and Volunteering.

1. FREEDOM

The inability to produce a discourse due to the limits of subjective freedom, which is far from inclusiveness, and the inability to reflect the current situation are among the biggest setbacks experienced in the process. In order to increase the impact of civil society, it is important to recognize the existing areas of freedom and to advance these steps with an inclusive attitude.

Among the steps to be taken is making inclusive legal changes. One of these steps is the repeal of Article 271 of the law, which is often referred to as the "Censorship Law". With such pressure on the transfer and interpretation of information, it is important to remove the obstacle to the right of communication. Another step that needs to be taken regarding freedom is to ensure that abstract expressions such as "general morality", "indivisible integrity with the state and its country", "deviance" are not included in the constitution and replaced by clearer concepts. Another important article is to align the broad and vague definition of "terrorism" in its content with the definition of the United Nations Special Rapporteur, who emphasizes the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the fight against terrorism.

¹ The World Cafe method is a collective knowledge creation and brainstorming technique.

2. REPUTATION

Criminalization and recognition of legitimacy to a group leads to damage to the reputation of civil society and to the destruction of the environment of trust in the eyes of other collaborators, especially the society. The 'civility' of civil society needs to be emphasized and removed from its position as an ideological and political extension.

It becomes even more important to emphasize the 'legitimacy' and 'independence' of civil society, especially in times of disaster and crisis. Including civil society in the statements, opening the area of authority and responsibility by relying on its expertise during the studies, taking it into account during the studies are among the important points in the restoration of reputation.

3. ACCREDITATION

It is obvious that there is an ambiguity in the answer to the question: "Who do we call civil society?". The fact that the 'public interest' status is not transparent and inclusive increases the need for new mechanisms for accreditation.

It is valuable that the evaluation structure is based on representation power, trust, and inclusiveness within the civil society structure. It is thought that the recognition of accrediting institutions by the state, transferring the burden of supervision to these institutions, and granting rights to approved institutions will increase functionality. It is foreseen that making independent and impact-oriented studies more prominent and conducting impact-oriented studies rather than risk-oriented ones will be effective in increasing the benefit.

4. RESOURCE

As soon as civil society organizations want to exist institutionally, they begin to take on a financial burden. Items such as renting a place alone and tax burden are the most basic expenses, and it is very difficult to create a resource to cover these expenses. The call for donations also gets stuck in bureaucratic difficulties.

Suggestions for facilitating the process; reducing expenses and increasing revenues. Removing the physical space requirement to reduce expenses is one of the leading suggestions. Another suggestion is easing the tax burden and gradually removing it. Suggestions for increasing revenues can be listed as facilitating aid collection and increasing public resources. Removing the 'public interest' status and distributing rights to all accredited institutions is among the important steps to be taken in terms of access to resources.

5. PARTICIPATION AND COOPERATION

Considering the fact that civil society organizations carry out studies in thematic areas and at the same time their functions at the junction of theory and practice, the value of the knowledge produced in the sector becomes more evident. In order for this potential to turn into efficiency, the parliament, public institutions and political parties need to consider civil society and its suggestions while preparing policies and making decisions.

During the implementation of the model in question, it is one of the important points to apply it in the axis of procedures. The basic principles of the procedures can be listed as follows: They should be open, transparent, and announced to the parties in advance, have different political approaches, operate in different themes and in different localities.

6. STANDARDIZATION

Attitudes and approaches towards civil society differ from province to province in public institutions, sometimes based on arbitrariness. In the civil society-politics relationship, it is seen as a burden since the time and work plans to be allocated are not defined.

In particular, the standardization of the relations and functioning of the General Directorate of Civil Society Relations has an important impact on the healthier relations between the public and civil society and the strengthening of the bond with the local. In the civil society-politics relationship, the foundations of a consistent and equal approach can be laid by making legal arrangements at the point of participation in the decisions.

7. TRANSPARENCY

The ideal atmosphere is for the state to be accountable to civil society, and civil society to the state and citizens. It is an environment that should be created in this atmosphere that the civil society shares all its activities with the society in a transparent way.

The state's reporting of the steps and savings in thematic areas, and in particular sharing the data it collects in the field with civil society are among the important factors. Sharing by civil society organizations in a democratic manner, reflecting the will of their target groups, is one of the important steps to be taken for transparency.

8. VISIBILITY

While defining civil society and its function, it evaluates both citizens and political actors, institutions with which it interacts, or structures that are visible. Limiting civil society to this framework prevents seeing its true potential.

These are the steps that can be taken: Developing legislation to encourage civil society in all media areas under the control of the public, especially TRT and Press Advertisement Agency, using state-owned dissemination resources such as public service ads, providing incentives for press broadcasting, producing new communication channels and mechanisms, focusing on the problem represented rather than the institution itself.

9. SELF-AUDIT

The fact that the relationship between civil society and the state is based on fear and that audits are positioned as a tool of fear hinders a healthy state-civil society relationship.

Bringing the communication to the level of information sharing and evolving the motivation to increase the level of trust by the accredited superstructures can pave the way for a healthier relationship. Increasing the number of accredited institutions

and making them competitive are also among the important factors. Shifting the burden of audit from the state to civil society will increase the atmosphere of trust and will also be effective in relieving the tense atmosphere caused by polarization. In this model, the role of the General Directorate of Civil Society Relations can be transformed into “consulting” to “access to information”. It is important to provide training and consultancy services on document management, especially to small institutions that are in the process of being established.

10. VOLUNTEERING

It is impossible to imagine a civil society where volunteerism cannot be developed. Civil society volunteerism will also be positively affected by restoring dignity and supporting active citizenship. In addition, there is a need to provide the necessary support to support volunteerism with the law, to cooperate with educational bodies on volunteering, to direct volunteers to civil society organizations and to ensure continuity.

CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

Mandatory step for democracy: An effective civil society

We, as YADA, have developed Meydan in order to create a ground for dialogue and negotiation by creating common sharing and working areas in order to overcome the state of being closed to itself by the civil society, which we have identified as a result of research studies and observations we have made for many years. With the Meydan meetings we have developed as a civil society in Türkiye to overcome this isolation problem, which is a reflection of polarization; by enabling civil society in Türkiye to confront its contribution to polarization, we strive to create a democratic negotiation environment where the other can talk without claiming more rights than the other and without trying to emulate the other. In this sense, we organized Meydan meetings on many different themes such as coexistence, refugee issue, climate crisis, disaster, child-education, dialogue, access to rights of the disabled. At the Meydan meetings we held in 2022, we gathered this time to talk about ways to increase the impact of civil society, which is free from the themes we are working on. With nearly 100 civil society representatives from many provinces of Türkiye working in different fields and from different backgrounds; we came together for the decision-making world of Türkiye, especially politics, to get to know civil society, to see the problems experienced by civil society, and to hear the solution proposals developed by civil society for these problems.

We know that the capacity of civil society in Türkiye is limited, and it is experiencing divisions within itself. However, as much as we know that civil society is indispensable for democracy, we also need decision makers and the society to know. At the point we have reached after the change and transformation that took place in Türkiye, the lack of a common discourse addressing all decision makers including political parties, including the common problem areas experienced by civil society and the solutions it produces, is felt. In this context, in the Meydan meetings we held, we saw how much the civil society needed to talk about these problems and to come together and develop solutions. Of course, these problems cannot be solved by talking among ourselves, but civil society can come together around basic problems and issues, no matter how polarized it is. As much as we cannot ignore this fact, we cannot ignore that the importance of explaining the structural changes that need to be made on behalf of civil society, especially to politics, is increasing day by day to the entire decision-making world, which is far from civil society and has not discovered the importance of civil society participation until today. Therefore, we would like to state that, as an institution that has conducted research on a wide variety of issues and tries to ensure that civil society is in an effective dialogue, we have made it our mission to convey the problems we discussed with civil society and the solutions for them to the politicians of today and tomorrow.



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