SMALL PROJECTS ISTANBUL

“The Project: Strengthening the wellbeing of the refugee community through participatory mechanisms during COVID-19”

June 2021-2022

The Black Sea Trust
for Regional Cooperation

A PROJECT OF THE GERMAN MARSHALL FUND
“The Project: Strengthening the wellbeing of the refugee community through participatory mechanisms during COVID-19”

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population in Istanbul since its establishment in 2015. The community has been continuously growing, currently reaching more than 800 members. Through an online group, these members maintain communication, get information, share questions and have discussions with each other. Every weekend, a topic to be discussed in the “Weekend Discussions” coordinated by the Community Outreach team online sharing platform by the interests and recommendations of community members, encouraging active participation and sharing.

The strong communication between Small Projects Istanbul and its community, with the support of The Black Sea Trust Foundation, has continued active citizenship focus with practices involving Syrian and other refugees who are under Temporary Protection as “The Project of Strengthening the wellbeing of the Refugee Community through participatory mechanisms during Covid-19”. This project aims to tackle the services and rights of the SPI’s refugee community (including law, health, education, employment, social aid services, public health) from the perspective of the issues and hurdles raised by COVID-19. The Project will be implemented between June 2021-2022.

Activities Included in the Project

- Community Informing Activities
- Activities Involving the Preservation of Well-being
- Community Council Meetings
- Children Council Meetings
- Individual Protection Assistance
Within the scope of the project, following community informing activities and the preservation of well-being that began in July, the idea of the Small Projects Istanbul Community Council was introduced, then the applications for Community Council activities were opened. After interviewing the Community Council members who volunteered to take part in the activities, the first Community Council activity was created online in August.

**Community Council Studies**

The purpose of the Community Council is to strengthen solidarity and social mechanisms for the local refugee community by creating a shared space for them to intercommunicate their remarks and recommendations concerning the challenges they face. Within this space, community leaders volunteer their time to discuss and make visible the social issues and events concerning their community.

It is believed that there could be an improvement of the services provided by NGOs, public and other institutions regarding inclusiveness, thanks to the participatory processes and feedback opportunities of the Community Council work.

**What Was Achieved in the First Community Council Meeting?**

The first research on the Community Council started in August 2021. During the period until June 2022, council members held thirteen meetings.

Facilitated by the social worker and community focal points with Arabic-Turkish translation, topics such as non-governmental organizations, Community Councils and their purposes, advocacy, volunteerism, and democratic participation were discussed. Other Communities and Refugee Councils that do similar work in Turkey
were also studied. And the topics to be examined at each meeting were decided, with the participation of the council members. Lastly, Small Projects Istanbul Community Council research areas and the methods needed to increase the visibility of these studies were evaluated. It was decided that the results of the Community Council activities should be reported, including community informing activities, verbal and written feedback taken at the end of the activities (which involves the preservation of well-being) as well as the problems and suggested solutions faced by the Council members.
The outputs of the Community Council studies, which started in August 2021, were published as three reports. March was determined as the Community Solidarity Month, and the activities carried out during this month were managed by our community council members. In these activities, our council members conveyed the council's work, purpose and reports to the community, which were later held for discussion.

“How does it feel to be a member of the community council? What would be right for refugees to do in the future, both by the refugee councils in general and by Small Projects Istanbul’s Community Council?” questions were asked; The responses are listed below.

- “Being a member of the community council has increased our awareness of refugee issues. Our responsibility to make the voices of refugees heard has increased with the council; we ensured that our own problems and the problems of refugees were brought to the relevant authorities. Our awareness has increased with the knowledge of many laws. What I imagine or want about the role of councils is that every municipality has its own council, that the refugee can consult there when he encounters any situation or has a complaint. It can be like this in big cities, like every municipality has a council. In small cities, there may be fewer councils. I think that even if the councils in small cities are less in number, they can take a more active role and develop faster resolution mechanisms. Thank you so much for supporting us and giving us this opportunity.”

- “When I was a member of the community council, I felt that I had to convey the problems of refugees to the institutions working with refugees and make an effort to make the voice of the community members heard. For example, the reports we publish by participating in the community council are important for making new decisions for refugees. Refugee councils are very important in this sense. It is important to strengthen the representation of refugees.”
- “It has been about a year that we established the refugee council. We published reports. We have not yet received positive results regarding the ones in the report, we get discouraged from time to time, but I hope we will continue. We gained the ability to prepare and present presentations together with the council. We have learned about our rights. We want to meet more often as a council. We want events where our children also come together.”

- “My first purpose in attending the council was to do something useful for our community in general, to help. Another aim of ours is to advocate for our rights. Sometimes we see discrimination in schools, in public transport, everywhere. We want to announce what we are going through and make legal arrangements about it.”

- “Our aim is to make our voice heard correctly and clearly by participating in the council. Sometimes we see inaccurate news about Syrians, these news can have bad consequences for us or we can lose our rights. We have hopes that we can reduce this with the council.”
In August of 2021, the activities of the Zeytin Ağacı Derneği Children’s Council started. In the Children’s Council, the aim is for children to learn about their rights, have their skills developed and have their confidence and advocacy supported.

The Children’s Council Meeting count between August 2021 - May 2022: 16

Total Number of Kids who Attended the Children’s Council Meetings: 40

Distribution of the Children’s Council attenders by age and gender:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 39 attendees were Syrian; 1 was Iraqi (12-year-old boy).

Responses received from children, who participated voluntarily in the closure meeting, when they were asked "how does it feel to be a member of Children Council? What would you like the children's council to do in the future?"

- “Being a member of the children's council makes me feel powerful. I would like to publish books and magazines in the children's council in
the future. We write articles about children's rights, we take photos.” (12 years)
- “Being a member of the children's council and discussing children's rights and problems in the council made me feel responsible. In the coming period, I want to organize sports and game activities with children that care about child health. I want cultural events and competitions to be held, excursions and camps for children to have fun.” (11 years)
- “I feel special because I have rights in front of adults. I learned about children's rights, now I want to learn about human rights too. I want to know their benefits too. We can learn about human rights by organizing events in parks.” (13 years old)
- “I felt the importance of defending children's rights. In the future, we can make games that teach these to younger children.” (14 years)

The reports published as a result of the Community and Children's Council studies were prepared with the support of the Black Sea Trust Foundation within the scope of the “The Project of Strengthening the wellbeing of the Refugee Community through participatory mechanisms during Covid-19”. Although our councils continue their activities, this report is the last report prepared within the scope of the project.