Community centres for social cohesion

Community centres in Turkey provide services for refugees and locals. They promote mutual learning and intercultural exchange.

The challenge

The civil war in Syria has been ongoing since 2011, forcing millions of Syrians to flee to Turkey. The country is currently home to more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees, in addition to more than 300,000 refugees from other countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. More than 93 per cent of refugees have found shelter in cities, outside of camps.

Despite huge efforts by the Turkish government to provide basic services such as education and livelihood opportunities, many refugees still struggle to access quality services and meeting their specific needs. Many refugees haven’t yet been able to learn sufficient Turkish to access services or interact and exchange with their neighbours. Both refugees and members of Turkish host communities face economic, psychosocial and educational challenges. Especially the most disadvantaged persons amongst both groups, such as persons with disabilities or child labourers, may not yet find adequate support. There are still few opportunities for Turkish persons and refugees to interact. Language barriers, competition for jobs and prejudices may lead to tension between refugees and the local community.

To address some of these challenges, community centres have been established throughout Turkey. At these centres, refugees and members of Turkish host communities find a safe space, can interact and learn about each other, and get access to social services such as legal advice, psychosocial assistance or language courses.

GIZ has been supporting the establishment and improvement of community centres for refugees and host communities since 2015. Major progress has been made to expand their range of services. Demand for the community centres and their services remains high. In addition, the centres need to be better connected to and integrated with state services to increase sustainability. Services require continuous and lasting improvement of quality.

Our approach

The main objective of the project is to improve the social services, including intercultural exchange, provided by community centres to refugees and host communities.

The project works in three action fields:

1. Support the work of community centres and community initiatives
2. Harmonisation of services with governmental standards
3. Capacity Development

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<th>Project name</th>
<th>Improving social services of community centres for refugees and host communities in Turkey – Community Centre Project</th>
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<tr>
<td>Commissioned by</td>
<td>German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project region</td>
<td>Turkey (Istanbul, Ankara, Mersin, Hatay, Kilis, Şanlıurfa, Mardin)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lead executing agency</td>
<td>T.C. Başbakanlık</td>
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<td>Duration</td>
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The first action field provides financial means and technical support to up to 12 community centres and small-scale community initiatives across Turkey. The project cooperates with various implementing partners such as Turkish or international NGOs, municipalities, and state-run service centres and institutions. In the second action field, harmonization, GIZ supports the development of networking structures between community centres and other state institutions in the environment. Exchange formats facilitate alignment with the requirements of state institutions and help clarify and formalise the roles of each actor.

The last action field provides specific capacity development to partners working in or with community centres. Each community centre is supported to develop a staff care system. Through measures on organisational development, project management or psychosocial support, professionalization of staff is enhanced.

Language classes help refugees and host communities to better communicate and break down boundaries.

Capacity building activities lead to improved services provided by Community Centres.
The benefits

Refugees and Turkish host community members gain access to needs-based services such as advisory and information services, education and skills development activities, psychosocial support and counselling, and cultural and other social cohesion activities. The activities help refugees to find their way around in Turkey. Both refugees and Turkish users develop skills required for the labour market. They also get to know each other and break down barriers and prejudices.

Through the improvement of services provided by the community centres more disadvantaged persons can be reached. Gender equality measures such as women’s committees or awareness raising on gender-based violence are implemented in all centres. Intercultural activities like drama or music workshops promote exchange between refugees and members of host communities, leading to social cohesion. The harmonization of standards of social services at community centres with those of public institutions fosters sustainability. Developing capacities at individual and organizational level in the community centres and selected public institutions contributes to improved quality of services and efficiency. The project aims to reach 200.000 participants in two years; at least 90% of whom shall report high satisfaction with the quality of the services.

Success factors

The project builds upon the structures and lessons learnt from the previous project “Strengthening social cohesion in Turkish host communities – Multi-Service Centres” that ran from October 2015 to January 2018. Successful approaches, such as regular coordination meetings between GIZ and community centres, peer-learning mechanisms and providing context-specific and needs-based services are being continued and further developed. The Community Centre Project puts a strong emphasis on implementing community-oriented participatory approaches such as refugee councils who are involved in planning and implementation of activities. The project brings together diverse partners, such as state and non-state, local, national and international, and newly emerged and more experienced actors, which enables them to exchange and adopt best practices, and develop common solutions to common problems. This leads to better and more efficient service provision for refugees and host communities, and creates more sustainable structures. The project thus contributes to strengthening refugees’ resilience, developing their prospects, and increasing social cohesion between refugees and members of the host communities in the long run.

An example from the field

It is taking time for 60-year-old Zain to feel at home in Turkey: “I miss my home, my neighbours, my family in Aleppo”. Soon after arriving in the south-eastern province of Hatay, her neighbours told her about the YUVA Community Centre in Kırıkhan. She has been participating in its activities ever since.

With the knitting and sewing skills she developed at the centre, Zain can now support her household with making clothes and repairing things – a small step towards more independence. When Zain first came to Turkey, she felt very isolated: “It was rough because of the communication problems”. At the centre, the language barrier that she faces in daily life can be overcome. She has formed friendships with Syrian and Turkish women: “We share our food and our sorrows.”

Back in Syria, Zain used to work as a teacher. She now wants to teach Arabic classes at the Community Centre, building new hopes and dreams for herself and her family: “I started to feel like I belong in this neighbourhood.”