

An Interview with Erbay Yucak about Bir Umut Association

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Can you please briefly tell us about the founding of Bir Umut [lit. One Hope] Association and the number of people involved?

Before the 1999 Marmara Earthquake we were individual people undertaking this sort of solidarity efforts. We had several though not major attempts of continuing this exercise of solidarity in the form of an association, foundation or a similar initiative. Attempts such as; starting a foundation of solidarity, collecting newspapers, running study halls in low-income neighborhoods for students preparing for the university exams, and going to Devrek after the flood, bringing an ambulance, a fellow doctor and the goods compiled here...Yet the process that intensified and in fact created, if you will, both the idea and the capacity of Bir Umut started with the 1999 earthquake.

After the 1999 earthquake we went to the earthquake zone like everyone else. Some of us were search and rescue people and some had gone there anxious to be of some use. An organization with a coordinative structure named Dayanışma Gönüllüleri [Solidarity Volunteers] was formed in Yalova, Halıdere, Gölcük, Adapazarı, Düzce and İzmit by people who knew each other from trade unions, vocational chambers and political parties. Teams working in different locations were autonomous; they would get together at weekly meetings and decide on matters like what is needed in which part of the earthquake zone etc.

After a while problems were encountered regarding the legality of this organization's activities. The procedures of both local official institutions and international relief organizations necessitated the foundation of an association. We did found the association but did not conduct an association-based activity. Both the organization and the operation of its activities were based on the principle of working groups; every field of activity was a working group.

Towards the end of the third month of solidarity activities in the earthquake zone, the Düzce earthquake happened, and every day for six months we undertook acts of solidarity in the earthquake zones. What did we do: we would go to the site of wreckage, put up tents, and try to run activities meeting the various needs of that specific area ranging from building laundromats to playgrounds for children in the tent-cities. Throughout this process we saw that the representatives of official institutions are not open to dialogue in terms of meeting the needs of the people, and that they do not listen or encourage the people who are seeking their rights. Thus after discussing it with the Solidarity Volunteers coordination committee, we started to work towards the establishment of associations called Depremzede Dernekleri [Earthquake Victims Associations] founded directly by the victims themselves. We did not assume any managerial positions in these associations. These were associations founded directly by the people living in these regions, whom we met in the tent-cities while distributing the relief items and in other places. After the Düzce earthquake the same association was also founded in Düzce.

In the next phase, in course of discussions regarding the future of Solidarity Volunteers Association and the Solidarity Volunteers, we encountered the issues of funding and projects. In these discussions we considered it essential to oversee the ongoing activities and efforts. As a matter of fact, at the time we were working collectively with a group of villagers to build 57 homes in three villages of Düzce; this was going to take quite a while. The state was constructing collective housing projects in the city but to those whose homes were demolished in the village the state was only giving out loans. It was impossible for the villagers to build homes with this money. Meanwhile we started thinking about how to use the relief budget created by people from Turkey living in Holland. We told the villagers, do not build prefabricate houses with this money, let the villagers get their loans from the state, add this money to that loan, let everyone work in the construction of each others' home, let's have a civil engineer and an assistant leading the work, and let's thus build the homes collectively. We had meetings about this for nearly a year, and the villagers were convinced, the constructions started. The foundation that provided us with the funds from Holland approached us with the classic project mindset. Prior the launch of the constructions we discussed this approach at length with the Solidarity Volunteers and we said: "This is not how we operate. You cannot put a price on our labor or our organization. You

give this budget to the villagers. If you'd like you can join this process with your own representatives and monitor the process from within. With a right to equal representation..."

Why exactly was this so important for you?

Firstly; if strangers come and do something in their favor, this society automatically assumes there is some sort of cunning. When there is money involved, then they assume: surely there is something in it for them or else they wouldn't do it. But this is our *raison d'être*, our truth. Thus a price cannot be set for it, it can't be compensated for; no sort of self-benefit or income can be expected. Secondly; we considered it essential to be committed to undertaking local and domestic work. Undertaking an activity manipulated or supported by forces outside these processes simply due to their financial means was, in our vision, going to affect our credibility. In fact this is still the case today. This allows you to speak your mind more freely, to carry out your plans with less gratitude to others. You carry out your activities allowing less space for speculation. If what you are carrying out is correct then it is, if it is not correct then it's not. We did not want anything to cast shadow on this simplicity, this sensitivity.

Surely we learned this through experience. We were strangers to this world, we were not familiar with projects etc. The considerations that made up our horizon were as follows: Firstly, as long as the victims do not come together and organize they do not have a chance of having their existence acknowledged; they don't have the chance of accessing and using information, or communicating and realizing their own demands. Secondly; they need to attain a democratic level of organization free of discrimination based on political inclinations, ethnic identities, religious affiliations, gender or age. Thus there is need for a ground where solidarity and struggle, solidarity and demanding rights will be side by side. This life can't be sustained with the solidarity of outsiders. It is necessary to build a communal and social ground paved by the solidarity of the local people. And the outsiders like ourselves should get out of the way; if people want to do things, acquire information etc, the democratic institutions of that very place should meet these demands. Thus we adopted a certain manner wherein we did not turn the developing social esteem that seemed to be favoring us, into a state of authority if you will, and did not channel this esteem to ourselves.

Surely it was not easy for us to attain this style, it was not easy holding all these discussions either, because there is also the issue of people's different backgrounds, personal histories, consciousnesses. Ultimately we can say that the sensitivities we've experienced, the principles and all that we have accumulated here at Bir Umut have been acquired within the intensity of this practice. The collective construction of homes realized as part of the Solidarity Volunteers activities lasted two years and was finally concluded. During that time we remained in the life of Earthquake Victims Associations as long as our knowledge was required. For instance had the local bar associations met their need for jurists, then we would not have remained in their lives. We acted in solidarity with them on issues of law. In cases when they required the use of a technical capacity they didn't have, for instance when they needed posters for the events they organized or public statements or similar designs, we took care to enable the development of that capacity there. We tried to do this without disrupting their way of operating. That is how our gradually diminishing role in the life of Earthquake Victims Associations has continued for the past 12 years. At first there were eight associations now there are two left. This is because the others could not be as committed to sustaining their links with the social problems at the local level. In fact, the conditions which kept these two associations up and running were present in all of them. We could have intervened from outside, rallied for this and organized it, but that's not what we did. If the association was already doing this on its own, then we were going to support it; three associations did this and we supported them: associations in Gölcük, İzmit and Düzce.

While this process was underway in the earthquake zone, we tried to come up with an answer to the question "what can be done for the 'probable' Istanbul earthquake?" After 2001, we discussed the probable Istanbul earthquake equipped with the experience acquired in the earthquake region, and a little with the sentimentality of having lived in that region. When there was talk about the probable Istanbul earthquake, our knowledge about Istanbul at various levels

was troubling us due to all that we had learned. We tried to develop a structure based mostly on district initiatives, called Afete Karşı İstanbul Koordinasyonu (AKİK) [Istanbul Coordination against Disaster]. With regards the issue of preparing for the earthquake, our actual aim was to put the emphasis on public responsibility, rather than more privatized solutions like strengthening the resistance of buildings resided by those who have money. The issue of preparation was supposed to be not limited to the search and rescue trainings because, though important, these will of use after the earthquake. We continued with district initiatives' activities focusing on what can be done before the earthquake takes place. We told them about the earthquake, about our rights, about the law... We also gave first-aid trainings etc. People were interested in our activities as long as there was talk of the earthquake. When it was no longer on the agenda, the interest disappeared. Furthermore, at the time there were interventions to the media coverage of the earthquake, for instance the Koç group intervened quite blatantly. This is because the people's consumption habits were changing. If you are thinking about the earthquake you are not going to renew your fridge or furniture, why would you... People also started not to like talking about the earthquake. Some preferred not to talk about it due to their destitution, and some because it might devalue what's hand, for instance their houses. So we didn't insist much either. It was not something that could run solely on our own capacity. It was an endeavor that could be updated only if more alternative efforts were undertaken in high earthquake risk places and in cooperation with vocational chambers like the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects. And we didn't have much of an opportunity to establish such relations.

But meanwhile they used the earthquake as an excuse for urban transformation...

Of course, this started with Zeytinburnu, now there is Fikirtepe, and it will continue expanding in the forthcoming processes. All in all, a year later we ended the Istanbul Coordination against Disaster. Meanwhile we continued to work with the homeless earthquake victims –those who didn't own property– in Düzce and İzmit; we were providing them with support as they worked to become a cooperative, wanted to build their own homes collectively and continued to demand their rights. We completed the collective construction of the houses. We accomplished this work together with hundreds of people. Later there were less and less people who believed in the genuineness of this work, wishing to continue it. As a group of 20 or so people and friends who had decided to commit themselves to this, we started to discuss what we can do. There, at the end of all those practices of solidarity and discussions addressing these experiences, we decided to found Bir Umut in Kartal.

Meanwhile, even before founding Bir Umut we had a projection on the issue of urban transformation. Among us there were friends who were urban planners and public infrastructure lawyers. At the time, urban transformation was not an issue talked about on such a general level –it's become so in the course of the past four years– but at the end of the day, the thing called urban transformation is indeed *de-securitization of space*. This de-securitization does not always take place through one project, sometimes they pass a highway through the area or place a crossroad, creating room for the unrightfully profit generating project of yet another capital group... The urban pressure thus created then starts to affect the adjacent vicinity: take the Pınar neighborhood near İstinye Park shopping mall became a problem for the power and capital holders. Yet residents of Pınar had assumed that the value of their neighborhood would increase with the arrival of İstinye Park. This is the sort of paradox; when they were building the skyscrapers on the Maslak axis, people living on this side of this axis or on the Ayazağa side had the feeling that they were going to have a share of the wealth. So for quite a long time, we had been trying to explain to people that this was not how it would go down. There were other friends as well; due to their expertise or sensitivity they expressed this approach too. What we did was more along our claim of not being in the position of merely mentioning these in panel discussions or in articles. It was reaffirmed by the fact that we must not assume the right to be offended by society's visible states.

Thus we decided to found Bir Umut Association six years ago. Our decision was affected by , the earthquake victims' movement, and the issues of urban transformation as well as the workers' issues. There is a widespread *precarization*; yet there are no organizations that will address the

states of being and victimization created by this lack, and act through the perspective of creating a process where workers will become subjects in the struggle against this. Furthermore there is no solidarity with these people on issues of rights or the law. The unions and the present union movement are not taking into account these needs. Thus we also talked about this when thinking about what we can do. Another topic of discussion was concerning product solidarity. An ecological sensitivity had been developing, which was leading towards an ecological banditry where people with money can buy chemical-free products while those without money are condemned to whatever is sold in cheap supermarkets like BiM etc. At first we launched product solidarity by opting for long lasting foods that don't go bad quickly. Then entered our lives a product solidarity that encourages the organizing of producers, takes the middleman and the merchant out of the equation where you include only the transport fees and handle your own distribution and accompany the production process.

Along with product solidarity we started efforts of solidarity on goods and employment information. The idea of employment information solidarity sprang from our observation that when a worker is laid off or quits a job s/he tells the people around, in the neighborhood or in the old workplace that s/he is looking for employment. Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) is not a well running, established mechanism. The more real and useful employment information that worker has in his/her life the more alternatives s/he will have. What does real information mean? It is the information that is not printed in the newspapers. Even hypothetically, an employed person passing on any sort of employment information to the association not knowing who will use it means that s/he has acted out of concern for somebody else. S/he does not have to be a member, this is a practice where a random passerby also walks in, gets his/her information recorded, passes on information about a job, or benefits from such information. Let's say s/he saw a job-ad posted on a random door, s/he will go in and ask "I see you have this ad here, so do they cover social security, overtime, transportation?" There will be a dialogue of at most five minutes, s/he will note down this dialogue too, and send the information to Bir Umut e-group. We brought the issue of secondhand goods into our lives because especially in big cities people are in the habit of changing their furniture, rearranging their closets to replace summer clothes with winter clothes etc.

All this constituted a sort of frame for the issues that Bir Umut tackles. Later we founded Bir Umut in Kartal and another in Şirinevler so that there was one on this side of Istanbul as well. This was four years ago. About two and a half years ago we decided to open an office in Taksim. Actually at first we had no intention to open an office in Taksim, but urban transformation and other issues we tackle with rather necessitated an office in the city center.

In fact the Davutpaşa explosion¹ had happened around then, killing 21 fellow workers. We worked for those worker families to come together and organize. We knew that in cases of workplace-homicides, a practice of drawing the families' attention to a common struggle for justice did not exist. Parties, unions, chambers or bars did not concern themselves with this. To be fair, let's put aside those that did care about these issues, but we didn't know about them. However the general situation was turning into a legal effort fixated on the lawsuit for damages. When the families managed to become organized, the criminal lawsuit that could not be opened for the past 2.5 years was finally started. They gathered together at the Taksim tram stop for about 40 weeks, making statements. A group of lawyers was mobilized. Meanwhile there were friends who wanted to run Bir Umut activities in Ankara, thus Bir Umut was founded in Ankara. We tried to organize the families of our fellow workers who lost their lives at the Ostim and İvedik² explosions. And we succeeded. It was the families from Davutpaşa who helped the families of victims of Ostim and İvedik explosions to organize. Gebze was a rather separate space. There were those who wanted to found Bir Umut in Gebze. We moved the Şirinevler office to Sefaköy, to support the Ayazma families who were victims of urban transformation. Ayazma

¹ On 31 January 2008 there was an explosion at an illegal fireworks factory in Davutpaşa, İstanbul that killed 21 workers and injured 117.

² On 3 February 2011, two explosions occurring in Ankara at Middle East Trade and Industry Center's (OSTİM) and İvedik Organized Industrial Zone respectively killed 17 people and injured many.

families' protests were continuing in front of the Küçükçekmece Municipality. They did not have any place to leave their stuff, and nowhere for the kids to go to. So we moved Şirinevler to Sefaköy, in order to contribute to that process.

According to our membership code, it is not enough to say "I want to be a member." Our statute requires all members to be part of a working group activity. Those who join us must say, "I will be in the ... solidarity working group, I'll be a volunteer..." Though we have our various established principles regarding the general style, the groups are autonomous in their working methods. Thus we don't have such a centralism, spokespeople or presidents. We have a common style and practice of work. The people who participate in the activities are the ones who explain what Bir Umut does. Even though the information on all these processes is shared equally, it is difficult for all of us to commit an equal amount of time due to "life's own rhythm." However everyone's opinions on all issues are equally valuable, whether they commit three hours or three days a week.

Don't you hold any general meetings?

We do. Each Bir Umut Association has its own assembly. Everything that needs to be talked about is addressed in that assembly and that assembly makes the decisions. But surely, though adopted by some of the people this structure is not a very common practice. Secondly –something we have recently been discussing among ourselves– we run our activities under different sorts of pressure. There are those who opt to discredit us at large, some view us, roughly speaking, as a Rotarian or an NGO activity. Then there are those who think that we have a hidden agenda and that we're trying to organize a type of political agency. So we experience both kinds of pressure. Yet this is because of the general habits of the country's social and political culture. This style itself is new, wherein we don't make our own propaganda and instead work to help those who are downtrodden or totally ignored to become self-organized. Let's say you go to a site where people are being wronged, unjustly treated, and act as a facilitator by gathering and defining the demands of the tenants and property owners... You do not forgo the concern for this effort to be manifested as an organization that comprises everyone and transforms into a process where everyone has the right to speak... And having an effective struggle to realize these demands... You can't just write out a prescription and be done with it. It is important that it reproduces itself at every level and based on these concerns. In the adoption of practical stances also, not working with acute movements of limited number of people... Let's say if there are a hundred people over there, it is about carrying this out in ways that enable the people in the very back to join as well, and not use a method preferred by a more excited group of five people, but with methods that allow the participation of all hundred. In order to be able to explain all this you should get to know their sensitivities, concerns. Learn what sort of connections and discriminations there are... Relations with the people known as the opinion leaders do not always guide you in the right direction; on the contrary it may reinforce yet another case of total neglect. Thus this process requires energy far more than it takes to hold a meeting, it requires one to try to attain a better understanding. Surely for some people it is incomprehensible not to expect something in return after such intense work and so much effort. This time what you get is another manifestation of what I explained regarding the issues of project and funding in the earthquake zone: the community then tests you. The elections for instance are important in this sense. People assume that you will be knocking on their door around election time. They figure, since you are now acquainted, you will come and tell them to support a certain party or boycott the elections etc. Even if we do have opinions on such issues of real politics, among all this work we adopt a stand that does not reflect the current polarization of real politics. At most, we try to develop processes wherein such atmospheres can be useful in terms of voicing their own demands. For example: We advise them to communicate their own demands to all political parties and make an evaluation among those that do accept their demands. This surely depends on how much this work has matured. This does not mean that we reject the tradition of political organizations, but we do not approve of familiar forms of political organization or representation.

It comes across as a structure developed through experience...

Actually of course when pondering on whether the action or the idea comes first, there is something created through our intellectual traditions and backgrounds and based on various undefined sensitivities and critical approaches. But was the idea we had in the beginning so “fully developed,” no it was not. Thus if you have ideas in the beginning, a corresponding climate is formed, that is if your sensitivities and focus are apt. So you must have the disposition and patience to further the inceptions you have noticed in your contact, and a consciousness open in mind and soul to interact with the people you have contacted.

There also seems to be a different needs assessment. Rather than meeting the previously established needs, what we have here is also the gradual transformation of these needs, right? For instance the process of deciding “what the neighborhood needs” is already important.

Let’s say there is a neighborhood, where there is no announced threat of urban transformation but potentially they are at risk “due to a lack of security.” If you are explaining something based on valor, you say: “Look here you are the working class, you are low-income people, they will not let you have this place to yourselves. The sovereigns, the big capital holders will take this place from you, so you must come together and organize.” Is that a statement that can solve their problem, no it is not. They know all this too; after all they’ve been living in İstanbul for the past 50 years. They’ve had some experience with the unions at the factories they worked, then there are the things they’ve seen before the 1980 coup... So when you make such statements, you end up not saying anything to them. Thus as you seek a way of saying something to them, you are not only trying to express yourself, but you are actually looking for ways to make the idea of organizing as a neighborhood relevant again. The analytical, critical ways that you are seeking through observation in order to express yourself are indeed useful things in their lives, also updating their lives. These processes are surely not easy; at that point they ask, who are you, what are you working for. Right then our own history comes in handy. After all you are not a political party, or the TMMOB (The Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects). Having a background, a CV if you will, with which you can better express yourself and your aims makes it somewhat easier to establish that bond over there...

You mentioned two different criticisms targeting your structure. These may be leftist groups, or parties; guess there have been moments when you had to confront them...

They mostly talk in our absence, not many speak to our face. Anyhow if we feel functionless in a certain place we don’t carry on. If our work there is not benefiting the people, then we kindly wish them well, give our blessing and ask for theirs. This is a true giving and receiving of blessings, not a Tayyip Erdoğan trip. In fact the conversation goes on like this: “We came into your lives to meet your such and such expectations, thinking we could be of use to fix your homes (for instance); together we went through this and that, but looking at the stage we’ve reached today it is evident that either you have taken a different path or you don’t need us. Whatever work we’ve done for you we’ve done willingly and may you benefit from it, if you’ve labored for us, hope you feel the same, and good luck to us all.” That is how we depart, of course we want the expectations to be met but we don’t think or say stuff like “were all those efforts in vain?” No labor ever goes wasted. We are not the people we were when we first started that work, and they are not where they were when they first started working with us.

Nevertheless all this becomes clear eventually when that community is solving a problem, when it is in motion. For instance it would be absurd to suddenly hold a discussion on discrimination, or on how s/he has made that discrimination visible in his/her life. Such a discussion can only emerge from a contradiction, a conflict or a problem. For instance let’s say 80 percent of the families or homeless people in Davutpaşa have a conservative disposition. There were documentary filmmaker friends who had been observing Davutpaşa since the beginning. They came by the other day saying they were almost done with the documentary and asked us to watch it. They had 70 hours of material to be used in the documentary. While watching that material it was important to observe how people talked, addressed the issue and behaved

towards each other at the very beginning, and how it all had changed three years later. That is what we believe in. It's not like we have a memorized idea, a creed that we follow. Our only creed is to stand by those who have are downtrodden, those whose existence has been ignored, and to have a "useful" role in their lives, and to make it possible that they attain their personalities. So the goal is not to lead or manipulate these people. For instance the method we follow our traditional evenings is that one of our friends goes up the stage for two minutes to welcome everyone, and then the stage belongs to anyone and everyone whose lives we have touched, and they say whatever they wish to say. This is what gives us confidence. The processes we've been through to this day did not make us feel like we've done some wrong, fruitless, useless or repetitive work. On the other hand, we do not go around introducing ourselves as people who believe in and work towards such and such because we think that's what the country needs today; we don't, if you will, take a public position with such a claim. For example we don't partake in platforms, we don't make press statements. The press statements of Davutpaşa families for instance are about the Davutpaşa families, and are undersigned in their own names. There is not a single statement signed by Bir Umut and sent to the press declaring we hold such and such an opinion on this or that matter etc.

The neighborhood residents do not constitute a homogeneous entity, and people may have different interests and needs, and there is more than one state of victimization, so when you come across such conflicts how do you move beyond them?

First of all, there is a specific reason that brings us to a place. In law there is something called the "well-known case," a case that does not require proof and is common knowledge for all. What here is the case known to all: that we have gone to that neighborhood. If we have not been invited by that community then we don't go; we don't say, here we are to tell you about stuff; we go there when there has been a problem. In all our practices to date, we've tried to get to know the members of the community, and as much as we can we've tried to communicate their problem to the extent that we've been able to understand them. We help them identify the problem. Once the problem is defined, when we reach the point of taking a stance, we try to help them understand the advantages and disadvantages of various stances that can be adopted. And sure enough that's how we also get to understand the so-called social reality. At the end they make their own decision.

When you are dealing with such a community, your definition of victimization and the problem may not overlap with theirs. Since you are going there due to a specific subject matter, if you fail to present a holistic sociological analysis and observation addressing the reasons that brought you there in the first place, then the most you can do is to explain what you know and leave. But we are not trying to transfer our knowledge. When you try to turn this knowledge and the existing problem into a means through which the neighborhood can create its own organization, then you should proceed taking into account all these details. Ensuring sustainability, and regeneration is something else entirely. You must first observe, understand and embrace the various sensitivities of that life. If, for instance, your meeting venue is next to the mosque and you hear the call to prayer then you will take a break from the meeting. You will assume that there are religious people who will go to prayer. There should be room for those people to have the courtesy to decide whether they will postpone their prayer or not. Even if you don't take a break, no one would reproach you; you are an outsider. It is not simple like a spectacle of giving up your seat to an elderly person. Just like you said, within that heterogeneity there are tens of different layers and your intimacy with the people grows to the extent you can see this and establish, reflect and convey its link with your reasons of being there.

The extent of our words' reach depends on how much we are able to do this. Not everything is totally related to you, it is related to the characteristics of the problem, to the historical background of the place; but we are doing this at the very least also due to a mutual respect. Naturally a person wants other people to understand what s/he is talking about. In order to create this understanding, one should try to understand what s/he is thinking, and how s/he perceives things.

You mean, there is also an objective of transformation with regards the future as well, right, or an objective to assist in the transformation?

Anyhow, if there is a continuity and regeneration and if you too have put your mind and heart into that matter, then that process offers an activity of regeneration for everyone. It depends on your value formation and discernment of regeneration. It becomes something collectively accomplished depending on the extent it has been embraced. You don't do things assuming if you carry out a specific thing it will change things in a certain way. But surely there is content to the things you do. And this you declare candidly. You say, that path takes one to selfishness, this path feeds this and that, the other path deepens social and class divisions whereas if we carry this out in that way it will lead to this... This is already something intrinsic to you but also depends on your ability to regenerate. It depends on your ability to present it as a problem. Since what you describe as a problem may not be recognized as such by him/her, we don't experience it so openly and nakedly, it is experienced somewhat more indirectly. If there is a "change" it is the process itself. Thus we try to anchor ourselves to the idea of regeneration and process. Meanwhile no thought that does not nurture itself and its voice with the practice of life has any value. That is, if our thoughts and concerns belong to the future of humankind.

Are there such striking cases where the process leads to an entirely different point?

They all have such cases in their history. For example, when you first go to the neighborhood, you've spoken to five people at the meeting, then those five people become 55 people, then those 55 become 155... First there were no women, then women came... At first there were only leftists, and then it turned into a crowd including supporters of rightist parties alongside leftists. At first the right wing supporters did not talk to you, then they did... There are many such examples among those practices.

For example the victims of earthquake who were not property owners... Eighty percent of this group is comprised of women that we we still call aunt or sister. On the one hand, a representation mechanism has been established in this group and they hold group meetings. On the other hand, women have social circles that are made up of people like themselves. We are not part of those. The fact that our dialogue continued; they embraced our dialogue with love, respect and veneration; they do not badmouth us behind our backs, all of these indicate change on various levels.

And also we respect the idea of process. This is actually our response to the debate around spontaneism and voluntarism in the framework of efforts towards "social politics." And we believe that the processes that determine politics should also be developed accordingly, based on the maturity of the process itself. The ideal would be for the democratic organization of the neighborhood dealing with urban transformation to reach a stage where they could nominate their own candidate for the municipal council at the local elections. Therefore we are not shortsighted, but even if we succeeded in such an effort, nothing will be over. That's why we talk about the idea of a process. We don't limit ourselves to the meeting of one single demand. The capacity to persist will also accumulate within that process. Voluntarism, re-production and having the skills to form a mutual relationship and communication with that social nature go hand in hand.

For instance, earthquake victims in İzmit who did not own property and became homeless after the earthquake were able to move to their homes following an eight year-long struggle. So we could say now, yes our struggle is over, the tenant earthquake survivor can also be a homeowner, and take our leave. Yet when you convey the following idea, that's where you witness change the most: "Okay, you've taken the house, but life does not end there. What will happen in terms of organizing life itself? Among you there will be people who will be unemployed, who will be sick... There is the issue of transportation; the model developed by the municipality will not suffice... See also, so much pesticides, chemicals are used in the food you eat, are you not going to devise your own solution to this?" If they say, yes we should, be it a hundred people or five, when you see that determination, something has changed. You see this during practices of devising

collective solutions. For instance now, water heaters will be bought for 574 of them. They established a commission, the commission went and got an offer and presented it to the committee of representatives. Seven of them can come together and do this as a temporary board of directors. There is no longer the suspicion is one of these seven people going to take advantage of this purchase, be paid off by the seller. You see the ideological hegemony of capitalism in social life just like that, blatantly. If three people are coming together, and one of them is representing this group, it is presumed that there is a scheme going on, there will be exploitation. The society has lost faith in acting collectively. Perhaps this confirms the most authoritative character of the system. The collective acts of the past are not remembered with enthusiasm or excitement. Thus, what you are actually doing is to rekindle this sense of acting collectively that is waning, beginning to disappear. For example it's no small thing that three or five people undertake the shopping with money on behalf of everyone and they are not suspect in any way.

When we say what sort of changes are we talking about, issues like them making peace with your religious views, attitude, you being influenced by them and vice versa, things like that. For instance, we discussed capitalism with these people in İzmit through a popular TV series. Because we don't organize a meeting with the agenda "then why do all of these happen to us?"; our work is problem based. Yet in terms of the whys, how comes, you reflect, you share what you believe in or make of the matter not to force anyone, shove it in their face or make them think like you, but because there is such a need emerging. Of course, they also share their opinions. Then, you know, wherever the conversation goes, however much it unfolds... And this does not happen as it does with us, around an agenda, it happens with more current, popular things. That's why we discuss justice over popular TV series, we discuss the rich and the poor and their modes of existence in social life. As long as your existence does not sustain itself along such a line in such a fundamental matter, you might become history after a while. That is, nothing but a pleasant melody.

What kind of line?

For example if we had not built those houses in the villages in the earthquake zone collectively, now these 17 villages would not have the opportunity to come together around the hydroelectric power plants (HES) issue in Düzce Aksu. Why? Because there is a relationship based on trust formed as a result of these collective houses. Otherwise, when those people in the village were thinking about what to do about this HES trouble, they would not call you, even if you were a lawyer or a judge. They call you because of this history. When such a thing happens, they say let's also hear them out. Even if the other villages don't know you, they tell them about you, before you have to. They say, these people are like this, they think like this, act like this, and value this. Thus you meet with 17 villages that have already come together, there is a road already open and you continue.

In terms of sustainability and re-production: option a. the capacity and maturity of that community itself can ensure this, option b, might necessitate bringing in various levels of energy from the outside. For example, one of the discussion headings on our agenda actually is: Can we accompany the process in which these social organizations can become "life organizations" that can reproduce themselves? And where will this begin and end? While all of these may seem like good things from the outside, they can't happen only with our energy and there are others in this country who will understand this style, who have this concern and want the energy they spend to be useful for something more substantial. Here, things move beyond our grasp. Why?

Let's say in one location you are going to work on drying out plants with women. It is not enough for them to merely think I'll dry and sell the plant, make some money. It is also important for them to have an ecological awareness. Moreover, it is important that they have an ecological awareness which will enable them to sustain their life practice with more ecological methods within something that resembles an urban setting without reviewing the whole ecological literature, amidst that simplicity. There is a need for the reproduction of this, the creation of certain opportunities, the flow of such energies. Thus, when we think can the experience and

know-how we have respond to needs on this level, the answer is no. If we are to follow this path, then an energy that will address all these needs has to be generated.

And perhaps this is something more political?

Of course it is political, but not in the traditional sense. It depends on how you define being political. Rendering of a *state* more understandable and popular with all these sensitivities and awareness. Without confining these into a narrow discussion, or as would be said, without approaching these under the headings how will the revolution come about in this country, how will capitalism be destroyed, how will the left expand, yet simultaneously exploring all the aspects of the issue... You know, just like you said when you were explaining why you are publishin this journal, people have found one way to resolve a problem in Armenia, another way elsewhere. That is, we regard the perception of the self as the beginning and end of any idea or experience as flawed from the outset; if we think that experiences in other geographies might be useful and even generate outcomes that transcend merely abstract ideas... Yet this depends on your effort to accompany those communities in these life processes. That is to say, the process is not solely comprised of you, but it does depend on your effort to sustain your energy flow without violating the principles we talked about in the beginning, that is without being engrossed in the aura of “look, how much respect, reverence” we have.

Are there other initiatives you would think of as allies?

Depending on the issue, we do encounter some. For example in Sefaköy, İstanbul, friends decided to start planting crops as per the ecological product issue. They planted a 1000 square meter field. They set out by saying let’s not just be consumers, be so alienated from what we eat, adults and children all together. They had eighteen meetings on agriculture and farming. Whatever group was out there working on agriculture, whoever had a say, they tried to reach them, invited them and listened to them. In this respect, we don’t have the feeling that we know the best. Let’s say you’re working on an urban problem. You can get in touch with other groups, initiatives working on the issue. When you are working with workplace-homicides for example, you get in contact with worker-work safety groups. You don’t shut yourself off. But the problem is: all of these groups relate to the given topic through either a political entity, saying “this is how I see this county, this is how I work to change this and that;” or there is actually an opinion he supports, but he has limited himself to that subject due to his vocational formation. Therefore they don’t have methods focusing on “life,” “different aspects of life”; and they don’t say, “let’s start from the root of the matter.” We are not closed to interaction for more practical needs, but we are also aware that this is an endless and futile thing due to the current atmosphere. For example there is a solidarity initiative for ecological products. Who else is in this field? There is the GDO’ya Hayır Platformu (Say No to GMO Platform), Çiftçi-Sen (Farmer’s Union), the Köy-Sen (Village Union). One the other hand there are those who are trying to invent the experience of production cooperatives, develop location-based practices. We know about these, and follow them as well. Or there are chambers working on urban issues and urban groups that define themselves directly through urban and space issues. We also follow them. When there is an opportunity for collaboration, sectarianism is anyway not our style, yet just as we don’t assume a position to dominate these processes, we don’t take a position insisting on collaboration. Because this kind of maturity doesn’t exist. This is also a practical thing. The rest is an aspiration, but for that aspiration to become real there should be practices taking action on their opinions, so one can follow one of those practices. Plus the issue is not our interaction with those who undertake those practices. What is important is that one community interacts with another community. And for this interaction to take place, there must be familiar practical processes that enable collaboration. Otherwise we’ll sit and talk, and understand each other there and then, but the issue is, beyond understanding each other, to increase the opportunities for the acquaintance of social practices that we are a part of and reflect our choices, opinions, sensitivities on. It is the flourishing of the desire to unite as one force and to think together. And this state cannot be created through commissioned “opposition coalition” meetings. These will only be meaningful in the sense that they are informative. Because such meetings are representative and these representations do not reflect the reality of the social struggles, they

may lead to another illusion.

During our first conversation you made the following observation: mass housing settlements will be the dominant urban form at least for a certain period of time in the future. And you mentioned that the current intellectual debates proceeded without an awareness of this fact. How can resistance or solidarity practices assume a stance in face of this? Can there be an alternative to mass housing settlements developed by the (TOKİ) or how can it be possible to change certain things within the framework of TOKİ?

First of all, why are we discussing this issue? Because the choice of capital to grow spatially will continue in İstanbul and Ankara and also explode in İzmir in the upcoming days unless there is a serious economic crisis, and it will continue to increase in a manner to expand to other big cities and rural areas deemed profitable. This process will continue including the more international Islamist capital that has been providing the hot money flow for many years and this capital inventing various life spaces for itself, exchanging hands etc. Even if a crisis breaks out, it may lose momentum but it will still continue. What does this mean? Since we are not realtors, if we look from social perspective, what can we say? We can say this space does not have to change in such an insolent manner, it can also change in a way that would make sense to urban planners, architects. This transformation is our reality because it generates profit. Old residents will be evicted. Actually those in charge do have a solution to this and they implement it. They build a mass housing settlement somewhere and tell people: “this has become a state council ruling, am I giving you a house you can live in; I am, am I giving you wreckage money; I am. So I am fulfilling my obligation.” TOKİ builds these settlements in İstanbul and before TOKİ, for example in the Kurtköy and Kağıthane projects, KIPTAS³ built them. Secondly, migration to the city continues. Those who come to the city get by on rent for a while but being a homeowner is an important thing in our society. This is probably due to two factors: One, the issue of having to deal with landlords, and the abrasive situations created by this. Second, the idea that as long as I have a house, even if I have to work for a day’s wage, I’ll still find something to eat. Thus these processes devised by TOKİ correspond to this tendency in people.

If this tendency is continuing as such, there can’t be only one single mode of struggle against such processes. That is to say, one side of the struggle is focused on keeping your place and safeguarding your right. Secondly, if you accept to move to a housing settlement there is a different struggle at stake. Mass housing settlements are spatial designs that segregate people as much as possible, fragment the public space and relationships between people; they are places where people can't find the space or opportunity to meet or relate to each other. Thus it is not a good thing for such a significant majority of a society –and a majority who cannot express themselves socially or as a class– to be so segregated. This is also not good in terms of the struggle for equality and freedom, neither is it good for the society’s capacity to resolve its own problems collectively. The physical and social opportunities for imagining a common future gradually shrink in mass housing settlements.

In terms of mass housing developments, perhaps the closest case of having a contrived arrangement with TOKİ was the Homeless case in İzmit. When, at the end of our struggle, the state gave us land where residences for victims of the earthquake who did not own the houses they lived in could be built, JDP officials proposed that TOKİ built these residences. We were actually going to collectively build the houses ourselves, but the community could not imagine how this would turn out, what it would take. They decided to have TOKİ build them under the condition of payment after delivery. This was not our idea. Our idea was not to sign a protocol before getting the plot. We wanted them to first give over the land to us, then to assert our own conditions. But because of our general approach we did not push too hard. We said, fine, let it be this way, at least we have succeeded at one level of the struggle. We gave TOKİ eight demands. We said, first, we want to collaborate with sociologists in doing a survey about the architectural design of these residences in order to address the needs of all the residents. We are not asking you to do this, we will do it. Secondly, since all of these people have survived the earthquake, for

³ <http://www.kiptas.com.tr/EN/INDEX/default.asp>

this survey we will also get the support of psychologists. Third, it is not good for the residents to be alienated from the construction process, it is necessary for them not to be alienated, even if it is only to know what's where when there is a problem somewhere later. That is why we would like to find a way to accompany the construction process on some level. There should be a committee working in our name. We will pay the fees of the civil engineer and others in this committee. They can come, look, take pictures, and explain things to us. The rest of the demands pertained to public spaces and other issues. TOKİ rejected all of them, even though there was an JDP parliamentarian acting as a spokesperson.

Therefore, even to begin discussing TOKİ's anti-democratic, authoritarian, "take it or leave it" approach, these people who engage in a relationship with TOKİ need to be able to define their demands. That's the only way they can push them. Otherwise, people like us can't go beyond criticizing TOKİ. In processes involving TOKİ, if TOKİ is to be influenced and changed, such a struggle is necessary. TOKİ is a public institution, it uses public resources. Therefore if they ask me, TOKİ or the free market, I'll say TOKİ. The issue is to devise creative instruments to influence it. For instance, working on the administration plans of the housing developments. To ensure that rather than being handed over to small professional companies, the administration plans are undertaken by the residents.

But there is another problem. If there is not an already existent cohesion and solidarity in that community, housing development administrators will use this to their advantage and there is no guarantee that there won't be exploitation. In housing development processes, there is no structure for people to organize before entering lotteries individually or investing money. This is why social organization levels are essential in neighborhoods, in places that will be evacuated, or places like Fikirtepe that will undergo transformation due to the earthquake threat. Whatever you do today, you will face it tomorrow. What you do will either contribute to creating an opportunity to act together, or it will obstruct collective action. If a struggle you engage in today to claim a right can simultaneously create an added value for the future and if certain principles become internalized in the process, that is what is valuable. I mean tomorrow, when there is a big problem, if they sit around a table, reason together and decide. And if they do not discriminate against each other when they are coming together around the table. This is how such a democratic capacity grows in a society. And a true struggle for democratization is made through such existences in social life. And to the extent that this is possible, it is yet another step moving away from representative democracy and the state in favor of the truth of the existence of members of society.

Public housing development spaces will be sites of more intense tensions due to both the Kurdish issue and the nationalist conservative tendencies. In the neighborhood there is something called the street, everybody knows each other on the streets, it is also a public space at the same time. In these settlements this won't be the case. Residents will leave their houses, take the bus or minibus... When you are sitting on the sidewalk of this space called the street, holding your engagement or circumcision ceremony there, there are many opportunities for different encounters. With the removal of the street there won't be any positive additions to this community's life, only a negative impact. Spaces providing the opportunity to people to come together in their differences and think collective are decreasing. Thus being concerned with this does not only pertain to the present, it also has great significance in terms of the future. In these spaces where workers, people with limited income are being congregated, certain security concerns also become an important issue. And the state tries to solve this problem by building a couple of police lodgings in the complex.

We have to do our best to increase the ways in which we can build on the accumulation necessary to attain a more equal, more free, more humane, more democratic social life in the future. Each contradiction, each conflict, each problem also bears in itself aspects that will pave the way for this. That is to say, they do not merely bear negativities. One has to see those cracks, intervals, seep through and make use of them. For example the hydroelectric power plants were such an opportunity missed. I mean even though the power plant processes seemed like such a popular climate of struggle did this turn into an ecological awareness in society? No. Was it able

to transform society's way of relating to space towards a more peaceful approach challenging humanity's domination over nature? No. Well, did it lead to the organization of rather heterogeneous local initiatives foregrounding such sensitivities? No. Thus each problem, each intervention cracks open a door and when that door is opened, one must sneak in. The stimulating tensions between the imagined future and the present must be experienced as deserved. We feel that not just ours but also society's own paths pertaining to the future can be formed as such.

In the context of urban transformation, if a struggle is undertaken today at the site that is threatened with eviction, and if it is carried out on a democratic level, then even if they all leave that site tomorrow, all of this will be carried with them to a large extent, alongside the culture they've developed. Whatever's in your pocket, it will be defining the new place one goes to and the new life there. For example, being able to resist when TOKİ pushes them for payments or wants to evacuate them; when there are problems in the residences; or –since the planning authority has been transferred to TOKİ– when they reduce public spaces by building an additional seven blocks. Or let's say that's not the case, to create processes in which they succeed in staying where they are, devising collective solutions... Something to do with mutual accumulation.

Before the 1980 military coup, there were efforts in different places to build a neighborhood collectively and to organize a life together. The language used there was very different. The language you employ now is different; instruments such as associations, platforms, cooperatives that you mention, and all these forms of struggle denote a different language. What sort of a continuity or breaks are there between the past and the present, for instance in terms of neighborhoods and also in terms of the work you do? Finally, how would you define hope and what would you like to say about it?

First of all, the issue of building squatter houses did not start with the leftist movement; it started in the 1950s. Being on the side of the workers, the left has made this an issue for itself in its political fields of influence after 1977. However, the left has approached this issue in terms of resolving a problem of the worker, therefore there has not been much thought given to the sustainability, continuity of it. Thus, many of the historical readings on such squatter neighborhoods in the academia are flawed. This is an official history, an official history confined to the left. For example when you think about 1 Mayıs neighborhood, you shouldn't start out with the foundation of 1 Mayıs neighborhood. You should take the building of Esat Paşa mosque into consideration, which dates back to the 1950s. So what the left did back then was to ensure that the population's housing solution practices were undertaken in solidarity as much as possible and to remove middlemen and profiteers. At the same time, due to factors such as the polarization and security issues in society, these neighborhoods were founded as places where people could live with those like themselves to the extent possible within the confines of the language and conditions of the time.

In the processes after the 1980s, those who were engaged in the struggle for equality, freedom and justice were not able to renew themselves. If you are not able to devise opportunities of regeneration appropriate to the conditions of the time and the issue at hand, and work solely with what you have memorized, your practice will fade out. And afterwards layers will accumulate on it because the values asserted by the system are more dominant and prevalent. We face this problem in the neighborhoods. When they see us they recall that time to an extent in their minds, but this does not excite them. After all this society does not forget. The problem is how you have carried and passed on your quest, struggle for equality, justice and freedom and how you've been able to regenerate it based on today's needs.

You look at those who are continuing with what they have memorized, they say we built neighborhoods for them, we did this and that form them... But they did not promise you a revolution, did they! They were downtrodden and you gave a hand, you acted in solidarity. They ask us, for example, okay, fine, you're doing this but so what? So damn what, what else! Isn't it better for these people to be strong and to work together rather than be helpless in face of these? These are the outcomes of perceiving the majority of society as those under rule and

yourself as the ruler, and internalizing such a frame of mind. The causes of this can vary from thinking life begins and ends with yourself to various political, psychological and ideological reasons.

So society does not forget behavior it respects and esteems. When do they recall it? When they see a resemblance. When it is recalled, this does not generate excitement, a boost or collision of energy, but society has not forgotten, they see your affinity with those practices. For example, when people they don't know tell them stuff without waiting for something in return, or when they don't discriminate against women, they spot a resemblance and act with respect.

I don't think this society forgets anything. Yet what leaves a trace is another matter. And does this trace conflict with what you are doing today or does it nourish it? One has to dig back a little. Because sometimes it can also recall a trauma. We anyway do our best to understand the history of those places. We also try to understand what changed and why it changed. Even if they don't communicate it we try to do this, to go back. And in the end this is what we see: Society does not forget practices that are undertaken with more humane, more democratically structured relations, efforts that are to its own benefit and that define society itself as the subject. It preserves them somewhere in its memory and recalls them when it encounters similar new practices. Therefore the issue of forgetting in discussions about the 1980 coup itself is too hierarchical, exaggerated, very unnecessary... First go rejuvenate yourself in that social life, then see if it's been forgotten or not. This issue of forgetting depends on where and how you regenerate yourself today.

So this is where it leads to hope...

Our choice of a crow for our logo is based on the following metaphor: Go out in the morning and on the street you'll see either workers whose shifts are starting or the crows. You don't see anyone else. There are those who leave to go to the mosque with the morning prayer call, older people, but that's more of a local thing. That's why workers and crows resemble each other. And also crows are many but they are not considered birds. Workers are also many but they are not considered people.... And the reason why we say "One Hope" instead of "Hope" is: Let's say somebody has a problem. To solve it he has gone to the Ministry of Public Work; if he is a supporter of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), he has gone to their provincial directorate; then to a person of influence, then to another, and to another. And finally he has said, "Well, apparently there are also some people who will try to help without asking for anything in return, let's also go try them." As if going to a preacher, he doesn't really think you can solve his problem, but there is no place left for him to go, so one last hope, let me go there, he says.

If there is no hope for the future, there is no struggle. This is the case for society, and also the case for us. And to be able to hope you need to have an imagination pertaining to hope... We reconstruct both the language and truth of hope when we realize we can apply all these values we've been embracing for a long time when we encounter a bigger problem. This is a time when we have to be re-creators of the movement for conscience, justice and solidarity.

The word downtrodden [*mağdur*] has a connotation of being helpless but it seems to imply something else when you use it...

We usually call it being ignored, neglected. We directly use downtrodden in the scope of comprehensible, everyday language. Actually what we understand by it is being neglected rather than an expression that renders the state of victimhood permanent, our efforts are geared towards strengthening the resistance to processes that generate injustice and violations with solidarity. Not being able to do so creates another insolvency. And it is only meaningful to the extent that it serves a practice whereby they emerge as subjects of this struggle. That's why the first newsletter we published in titled "We Exist" [*Varız*]. We exist despite being neglected, discounted.

We did not speak in terms of the actual political forces. That's not to say one doesn't hurt in face

of the given situation... For example, there is an explosion at Ostim. You go make a statement at the explosion site, then why don't you go visit a worker's family? A member of their household has passed away, why don't you ask if they have enough to eat... Or, for instance, the group from Davutpaşa stood at the Taksim tram stop for 35 weeks. Neither an intellectual came to visit them, nor a union. This is no ordinary matter! 21 people have lost their lives, all 21 from neglect. This is also covered in the press somewhat, but all this information does not lead to an action. Let's say you are a conscientious, educated person... And anyway the families no longer need your leadership, you do not need to do work on their behalf, they reflect their own awareness and fight. Even the natural instinct that makes one say "let me go and give them support, affirm their struggle" is lost... And this is something that's deeper than speaking in big words. To recreate this... To use a metaphor, the soil has become stabilized; it desperately needs to be hoed. You'll ho it, aerate it, maybe its minerals are depleted, you won't carry ready seeds in your pocket, you'll look, you'll try to understand... When we attempt to explain it to ourselves, that's where we start out. This is what motivates us. It is necessary to return to a different rationality and spirituality, if we are in the quest for equality, justice and freedom and want to make it possible. We don't stand a chance, unless we create such oasis in society's own seam, or one could say, create underground springs to nourish society. Otherwise we will be fooling ourselves, stalling, rocking the train. If we are not able to do anything else, we should at least be able to live with creating a different kind of life together with people in a village, a neighborhood, the smallest settlement unit. In the name of humanity's ideals of freedom, justice and equality. What we have accumulated through social practices guide us; they generate hope and are also functional in terms of solving the problem of credibility. If it weren't for the collective houses in the villages, there would not be the homeless movement, I mean the fact that something was done there catalyzed the homeless movement. If it was not for the homeless movement, we couldn't so readily relate to urban transformation issues; the cooperative model that can be utilized by neighborhoods under threat of urban transformation could not have been established. Our ideas and intentions for society's future cannot be realized in the name of or despite society, with platitudes or symbolic routines. History has sufficiently revealed this. Today, more than ever, there is a burning need for the truth of paving our way together with society, by trying to understand society and interacting with it.

How does the membership fee system work?

Each member determines his/her own membership dues based on their income. Everyone who contacts us knows this. We don't hide that we are financially weak. We rent our place. Actually, we do want to move to a larger building we can share with other organizations and groups. With a common living room and offices for everybody, it would be cheaper and would provide the opportunity to join forces in different ways.

Thank you very much...

You're welcome... We thank you for your interest and effort.

Translated from Turkish by Liz Amado