

# Working with Earthquake Victims

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The Düzce Civic Association of Earthquake Victims is an association founded by earthquake survivors after the August 17 and November 12, 1999 earthquakes in Turkey. The association's objective is to represent the interests of survivors, build solidarity and find common solutions to problems affecting survivors.

The association engaged in activities related to various aspects of post-earthquake problems such as:

- Shelter
- Temporary and permanent residence areas
- Verification of loss and ownership
- Repair of damaged buildings
- Reconstruction planning.

The association has held public meetings with survivors as they make their way from temporary 'tent towns' to prefabricated housing units to new, but unsatisfactory, housing units. Meetings focus on increasing awareness of earthquake-related risks and undertaking activities of common interest. Programs are planned in consultation with earthquake survivors from other cities. The association's activities include sharing experiences with other provinces facing disaster risk, building cooperation with nongovernmental organizations engaged in similar activities, negotiating with authorities, attending joint meetings and panel discussions. The association also organizes meetings, signature campaigns, and rallies in Ankara to raise awareness about the problems earthquake survivors face and to convey requests and information to people in charge.

Establishment of an earthquake survivors' support network after the two major earthquakes was necessary because 1) officials had not been able to respond adequately and 2) the pre- and post-earthquake activities of the local

and central governments led to a lack of confidence in their ability to address the needs of earthquake survivors.

The activities of the association are based on the voluntary efforts of individuals and groups in the region. The association has become a model for other developing civic initiatives since it works efficiently and has been fair in its dealings with survivors and authorities.

Shortly after the earthquake, nongovernmental organizations and their representatives gradually went back to their normal lives. Activities to assist survivors, therefore, decreased. Though as time passed, problems became more complex. The relatively simple, immediate demands of earthquake survivors for food, water and shelter were replaced with more profound and comprehensive requirements such as finding permanent housing, relocating businesses and attending court hearings.

As requests for assistance rose, it became clear that government authorities were not able to handle the complex needs that arose. In part, this was because the earthquake-affected region was not declared a disaster area. Eligibility for loss compensation was defined narrowly, excluding the majority of people who lost homes. Property owners were considered earthquake victims but not tenants and occupants of prefabricated houses. Billions of dollars in earthquake relief was received to help earthquake victims but the amount was not put in a transparent fund open to public audit. Despite the association's persistent demand, aid was transferred directly to the state budget. Administrative decisions regarding the use of these funds were left outside official audit mechanisms. Authorities ignored all criticism regarding their decisions.

Earthquake survivors found themselves in the midst of a fight for their rights before they had time to mourn their losses. The Association of Earthquake Victims was established within these circumstances. Two years after the earthquake, the association is still dealing with problems such as housing for legal and illegal tenants, an unfair distribution of permanent housing which resulted in "basement victims," city development plans, increasing poverty and repairs to medium-damaged buildings.

The principles of The Earthquake Victims Association are based on the concept of volunteer work, shared problem-solving, and effectiveness. Decisions and implementation need broad participation. Availability of information must be ensured. Avoiding dependency upon aid, specialists and professionals should also be minimized. The organization was founded to establish partnerships with non-governmental organizations, local and central governments and to form mechanisms for interventions and

participation. With these measures, the organization tried to achieve common objectives by involving a wide range of people coming from different economic, social, cultural and political backgrounds.

With respect to international organizations, a deficiency in assistance provision has been that assistance was designed on the basis of projects and programs rather than on the priority requests of survivors. Such an approach made earthquake survivors passive recipients of aid and reduced their capacity to rebuild their lives.

The Turkish bureaucracy was ineffective in meeting earthquake survivors' rights, problem solving, and setting a path for the future. Among the guidance given was, "establish your own local organization" and "prepare your own project." Although this was perceived as harmless, in practice it created problems. Due to "*limited time*" for project preparation, earthquake survivors were not involved in project decision making. Their exclusion resulted in distancing survivors from programs that were supposed to benefit them and their future.

Activities and projects initiated behind closed doors became a waste of money and time. Decision making processes about service provision did not include all stakeholders. Project beneficiaries were excluded from discussions. Assistance and support went to undeserving groups and individuals rather than those most needy. The earthquake-affected region is full of such examples.

Issues involving money are not easy. Relations between assistance providers and beneficiaries can lead to guardianship and dependency. A community's culture should be reflected in the ways needs are addressed. Distribution and resource use should be participatory, otherwise vested interests can gain control of assistance and resources. Unfair aid distribution can create income inequalities greater than those existing prior to a disaster.

Based on the association's experience, the following can be suggested to resolve the above described problems:

Disaster preparations should be made before a disaster strikes. How should plans be prepared? Should public servants and members of the private sector be assigned to this task? Earthquake survivors say "no." Past experience shows that cities in Turkey were unprepared. Planning must be done and input from all people should be taken into consideration – ordinary citizens, elected officials, specialists such as architects and engineers, property owners and tenants. The best plan is the one that includes and considers everyone. Disaster events affect infrastructure and people.

The only way to be prepared is to have a disaster management system based on active community participation and a process that builds public confidence. The statement that “we came from Ankara, and we will heal your wounds” is not enough any more. Response in the first few minutes following a disaster is critical to save lives. In both earthquakes, neighbors rescued more people than the search and rescue teams from afar. Each city should establish its own search and rescue teams ready to provide assistance and first aid following a disaster. We also need well-trained volunteers. A register of buildings and accurate information regarding settlement patterns should be prepared and updated. The second earthquake on November 12 found people better prepared to respond than August 17. However, we cannot say that our potential was reached. In addition, after August 17, unlicensed repairs and damaged buildings caused people to lose confidence in reinforced concrete buildings. Few will trust an engineer’s words that a multi-storey building is safe. Many people have avoided reinforced concrete buildings since the earthquakes. Even the expression “medium-damaged building” causes concern.

Serious problems arise from inadequate site selection for development in all provinces vulnerable to earthquakes. Particularly important to highlight is the unplanned growth of industry and investment in cities and construction on arable land and swamps. Local and central officials have been providing construction waivers to satisfy vested interests. As a result, many people died in the recent earthquakes and numerous houses and businesses were lost. In one way or another, nearly all segments of society were impacted. The earthquake revealed that public services such as education, health and social security facilities were not prepared for a disaster event. Everyone learned a dire lesson in 45 seconds; however, we cannot say that we have turned this experience into action.

Central government alone cannot solve the problem of people who still live in prefabricated homes but want to move into permanent housing. These problems can be solved only in cooperation with the people who live in these temporary shelters. Strong local government with a commitment to responsibility and inclusiveness can do it, however.

During reconstruction, communities should be allowed to speak up. A formal mechanism should be established to involve communities in the reconstruction process, to make their voices heard so that their wishes can be heard and mistakes can be minimized.

The problem of medium-damaged buildings, a common problem in the region, was not resolved with regulations issued by the center. According to the new regulations, constructing a multi-storey building next to a medium-

damaged one is illegal. Responsibility for the repair of damaged buildings has not yet been agreed, so many development plans have not been implemented.

The most recent problem we have encountered is the evacuation of temporary shelters and the issue of permanent housing. To resolve the problem, our association mediated between local and central authorities since the central governor was not aware of what the local governor was doing. It was unclear who had issued evacuation and resettlement orders and both blamed the other. Management of the temporary settlements was also unclear. Authorities could not respond to questions about shelter. Therefore, seven hundred people, mostly earthquake survivors, went to Ankara to draw attention to the seriousness of the issue.

As an illustration, one issue that needed to be resolved involved heating. Boilers had to be changed and no one had assumed responsibility. When the earthquake survivors finally occupied the permanent dwellings, they discovered other construction-related problems. The new tenants had no one to whom they could turn to address these issues, however. Neither ministry representatives nor contractors attempted to resolve the problems. The new occupants were left with yet another earthquake impact.

On the anniversaries of the earthquakes, survivors hear, "Oh! The earthquake victims again!" Survivors should have their remaining difficulties resolved in cooperation with authorities and in a more positive attitude. Individuals should be encouraged to trust themselves and resolve their problems. In the cities we visited after the earthquake, we found several people engaged in activities aimed at solving their own problems. Unfortunately, we were not able to make this permanent. Some of these people succeeded, then stepped back. Others could not resolve their problems and withdrew with broken hearts. We should avoid situations that force people to withdraw from addressing their problems. Instead, we should encourage them to act on their own behalf.

The earthquake does not only damage buildings; it has lasting psychological effects on humans. These traumas cannot be solved with traditional rehabilitation methods. When asked, "What has The Earthquake Victims Association changed in your lives?" our members respond that the association gave them a new perspective, allowing them to forget about the earthquake. They say that they found the strength to deal with their problems with the association's help and support.

As a next step, the association is establishing its own housing cooperative with 2,500 members. The objective is to construct permanent dwellings and

provide basic health and safety conditions for those living in prefabricated housing and huts. Following the disaster, the construction plans for housing prepared by authorities were far from meeting these objectives. In addition, the newly selected housing areas were far from city centers and the work places of craftsmen and tradesmen. The selected building sites were not attractive and they lacked social and other infrastructure. The basic problem of site selection arose because survivors had not been part of the decision making process that had taken place at the central level. Earthquake survivors also suffer health problems during the winter due to heating deficiencies. They often must spend significant additional funds for heating since heat provision had not been included in survivor assistance.

It is hard to say that we have learned lessons from the past. In fact we should review our experience. There are many stories to tell. We would like to share them, specifically the work, that was initiated with women. Certainly, we will never forget the people we lost in the earthquakes. We will not forget the sensitivity and solidarity expressed by the world. Knowing that we were not alone was very important for us who had lost hopes for the future and buried the past in the debris.