

# 6 The Development Workshop Cooperative Giving Voice to the Voiceless

## Advocating for Seasonal Agricultural Workers in Turkey

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Non-governmental organizations (hereafter NGOs) are called upon to tackle social and development related challenges in developing countries where governments may be dealing with social, political, and financial constraints instead of addressing needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged communities or bringing about positive social change. Since the 1990s, NGOs have been expected to mobilize their supporters and stakeholders at the global level, especially by International NGOs (INGOs), which have achieved substantial gains in areas such as “women’s rights, the environment, HIV/AIDS, and the banning of landmines” through effective programs and advocacy (Hortsch, 2010, p. 130). The main goal of development-focused NGOs is to articulate and advocate for the interests and concerns of disadvantaged groups. “Development NGOs have become regular participants in discussions of popular participation and social sector projects, areas in which they are considered to have special expertise or delivery capacity that makes it necessary to listen to their concerns” (Nelson, 2000, p. 479). Yet, NGO advocacy for social change can remain “hidden” without much public recognition or scholarly attention.

NGOs have developed a deep understanding of the importance of information and communication tools in advocacy, targeting not only key policymakers but also media discourse as well as public opinion (Jordan & van Tuijil, 1998). Engaging in constructive and supportive relationships with media institutions and effectively using traditional and digital media is also considered to be another major challenge for NGOs. Ihlen et al. (2015) note additional challenges such as the availability of financial and human resources, understanding shifting target audiences, and strategizing political goals (whether to advocate or remain neutral). In addition, effective advocacy for increased awareness and policy change has been another major challenge for NGOs. Sogge (1996) underlines lack of reflexivity and being self-critical in assessing the significance and impact of their own advocacy efforts, and Nelson (2000) suggests that such criticisms “should prompt NGOs to a more deliberate and consistent assessment of advocacy projects” (p. 486).

NGO advocacy has also followed a similar pattern in Turkey. One NGO established in Turkey specifically focusing on marginalized communities is the *Development Workshop Cooperative* (DWC). The DWC develops and implements programs and projects in the field of governance, social development, education, and children and youth for and together with public, civil, and private sector as well as academics. Areas of interest and strength of the DWC include the following: seasonal labor migration with a focus on migrants and disadvantaged populations; elimination of child labor; gender-balanced local development; inclusive education; and aging. In addition, the DWC can be considered one of few local NGOs in Turkey working to provide a voice to the most disadvantaged populations—nomadic and seminomadic groups, specifically the Syrian Doms and Abdals, whose members are typically ignored by the Turkish and Syrian communities alike and tend to fall under the radar of most mainstream media due to the lack of access to this specific ethnic group.

Turkey has housed a large population of various Roma communities, Doms, Roms, and Loms, due to being a transition point in their migration routes from Northern India. The *Doms* living in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey constitute the Roma communities in the Middle East today. The *Roms* starting from India and Pakistan and following the course of Anatolia and the Black Sea to reach Europe and Russia, and then to North America, constitute only one branch of Roma in Turkey. The *Loms* crossing the Caucasus Mountains to reach Azerbaijan, Iran, Armenia, and Turkey constitute the rest of the Roma communities living in northern Turkey (Kalkınma Atölyesi, 2020). Abdals, on the other hand, are non-Sunni Turkish-speaking Muslims with an itinerant lifestyle and are known for their talents and abilities in Music. The DWC team makes a point of ensuring that these groups are seen as disadvantaged and vulnerable instead of being referred to as marginalized as this implies more marginal and politicized communities.

With these suggestions in mind, the overarching questions we try to address in this qualitative case study is the interplay of one specific NGO not only with the communities they work closely with but also the relationship dynamics with other NGOs, government institutions, corporations, and mass media to develop a deeper understanding of different levels and components of NGO advocacy to bring about social change. Over the last decade, NGOs have occupied the front pages of mainstream newspapers and have been the focus of academic; yet “only very few publications research the interplay of (different) TSOs [Third sector organizations], particularly with regard to cooperation and possible competition among the organizations” (Garkisch et al., 2017, p. 1870). Thus, the capacities and capabilities of the DWC are examined in detail to provide much needed NGO advocacy context and reveal a network of relationships NGOs are involved in.

Consequently, this chapter focuses on (1) investigating the advocacy efforts of the DWC and (2) evaluating their effectiveness in giving a voice to

the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups among Syrian migrants and their causes. Thus, the main goal of the chapter is to reveal the communication and advocacy efforts of this innovative NGO to help create awareness about disadvantaged communities in Turkey and to foster social change and development. Approaching the issue from a qualitative perspective to develop a deeper understanding of the work they conduct and possibly the challenges they face, this case study is supported with in-depth interviews with NGO officials to understand their impact on social change and development within the Turkish context. The case study presented in this chapter, however, can be transferred to other contexts at similar stages of political and economic development who are trying to better integrate disadvantaged groups and create a strong and more diverse civil society presence.

### **The Importance of NGOs in Turkish Civil Society**

As a critical component of civil society, NGOs establish, manage, and sustain relationships with mainstream media institutions as well as government institutions, other NGOs, and international/ supranational organizations such as the European Union or the United Nations. Their main goals usually fall under several areas, such as understanding and addressing the concerns and challenges faced by disadvantaged populations (Jordan & van Tuijil, 1998), raising awareness and lobbying (Ihlen, Figenschou, & Larsen, 2015), engaging in legal and community activism and mobilization (Paker 2019), and implementing advocacy activities on behalf of their beneficiaries. Although we may know their activities and projects in the already mentioned areas, the literature lacks studies reflecting the perspectives and voices of the NGOs themselves. Indeed, Ihlen et al. (2015) have pointed out the need to study how civil society actors practice advocacy by discussing strategies they use and challenges they face. Garkish, Heidingsfelder, and Beckmann (2017) also corroborate that investigating the relationships in the third sector and interdependencies between different actors is a worthwhile area of research.

Since the 1980s, the civil society scene in Turkey has become more vibrant partly due to increasing civic activism among the population as well as civil society expansion, which has its roots in the 1920s with the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Currently, Turkey fosters an active NGO scene, especially since the arrival of Syrian migrants in 2011, that focuses on issues such as “ecological sustainability, climate change, gender inequality, human rights, education, democratic participation, identity articulation, coexistence, and refugees” (Paker, 2019, p. 10). Although the AKP government’s post-2016 coup attempt purges have negatively impacted oppositional civil society voices, NGOs still strive to create social change despite political and social pressures. Recent statistics by the Turkish Ministry of Interior show that there are 119,731 active NGOs that are currently operating within the country (Ministry of Interior, n.d.).

The arrival of Syrian migrants has resulted in many service-based and rights-based organizations actively engaging in various projects aimed at helping disadvantaged populations in Turkey. One of the challenges for NGOs in Turkey has been the competition for resources—especially since 2015, when the Syrian refugee initiatives received funds from the European Union and turned the NGO scene in Turkey into a lively beehive. Despite being not-for-profit establishments, NGOs are increasingly forced to fight for limited resources, resulting in their corporatization. While NGOs constantly express their openness to cooperate, competition stifles the potential for collaborative communication and information sharing. “There is a general reluctance of organizations to share information, especially information that is considered proprietary or of significant value to organizations typically competing for funding from the same sources” (Maiers, Reynolds & Haselkorn, 2005, p. 89).

Many civil society organizations strive to take on an advocacy role. Beck (1997) states that effective advocacy needs to influence the worldviews of people to potentially change/reinforce governmental or corporate policies in their favor. It is about coming together and combining your forces to influence policymaking processes by bringing an issue to the national agenda (Ortmann, 2012). But advocacy is not merely about changing corporate or government policies. Advocacy starts with empowering a community. According to Jordan and Van Tuijl (2000), “The underlying function of advocacy is often to enhance the self-respect of weaker communities, to improve their self-confidence, constitute integrity and promote mutual trust: all essential ingredients to develop a healthy community” (p. 2052). We strive to understand whether the DWC is able to enhance community-building through advocacy.

### **The Development Workshop Cooperative**

The DWC was founded as a not-for-profit cooperative by a visionary group of young professionals in 2004 to work on social development projects in Turkey. The organization was established to fill a gap in Turkey’s development policies and to contribute to the sustainability, implementation, and success of projects of all sizes. Their structure as a cooperative is unique for an NGO as this is not a common choice for an organization in the area of social change and development in Turkey or in the world. Their work structure envisages the establishment of a tradition that produces shared experiences and consists of workshops instead of programs, where each workshop has a thematic focus integrating a human rights and child rights based, gender equality focused social development approach. All initiatives abide by the organization’s mission and vision statement as well as rules and procedures required for a social enterprise cooperative.

Over time, the organization has also embraced the concept of sustainable development and the fact that social, economic, and environmental

sustainability should be included in general development policies and projects of all sizes. Starting with the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit held in Rio in 1992, international efforts to ensure sustainability in all areas continue since the announcement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. These objectives include elimination of extreme poverty, hunger, and gender discrimination, improving maternal and child health, increasing women's effectiveness, ensuring environmental sustainability, and global cooperation for development. Thus, the main objectives of the DWC overlap with the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations.

To achieve these goals, the DWC has a working group of professionals with specific areas of expertise such as social anthropologists, sociologists, physical anthropologists, international relations specialists, biologists, and forestry experts. Relying on this group expertise, the DWC develops and implements programs in various fields such as governance, social development, education, and children and youth for and with non-governmental organizations NGOs and relevant producer unions based on field research, face-to-face interaction with beneficiaries and responsible institutions, and experts of the subject. Additionally, the DWC conducts awareness-raising and partnership-building activities with the participation of local actors (other civil society organizations, public agencies, decision-makers, leaders, affected groups, etc.). Their goal is to empower youth, women, educational actors, producers, community members and leaders, and disadvantaged groups to participate in decision-making processes, to learn their rights, and possibly initiate their own solutions.

Over the past 20 years, DWC's agenda in Turkey focused on private, rural, and urban development as well as international integration. In this context, DWC planned and implemented a series of development projects with international aid:

- *Project on International Seasonal Agricultural Migration in Turkey* (June 2015–May 2016) with financial support from the Embassy of Netherlands
- *Mitigating Child Labor Risks in Cotton* (October 2015–November 2016), an action-based collaborative with the Fair Labor Association to investigate child labor issues in upstream cotton supply chains in Turkey, with financial support from the Embassy of Netherlands
- *Improving the Health and Protection of Vulnerable Syrian and Marginalized Migrant in Southern Turkey Project* (May–November 2016), in cooperation with the international non-government organization GOAL, with financial support from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection- European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and the EU Humanitarian Assistance Fund
- *Reducing Legal and Institutional Gaps in Prevention of Child Labor in Seasonal Agriculture Project* (September 2017–August 2018), with

financial support from the Embassy of Netherlands, the *UNICEF Program Cooperation Agreement*, and the *UNICEF Program on Elimination of Child Labor*.

As these projects demonstrate, the DWC has worked closely with various entities, including other NGOs, governmental agencies, foundations, international aid agencies (e.g., UNICEF or the International Labor Organization), but also with for-profit corporations (undisclosed due to confidentiality agreements). The NGO's work mainly falls under local development programs, research and capacity-building, promoting the cooperative movement, apiculture, seasonal labor migration, and tackling child labor. Partnering with local leaders and community-based organizations is a good model for encouraging active participation in a democratic manner that contributes to developing new approaches in the area of social development, not only in Turkey but also globally.

Focusing on a specific NGO, this research tries to uncover the communication and advocacy efforts of the DWC working with disadvantaged and vulnerable communities in Turkey by understanding the specific strategies they employ and the main challenges they face in fostering social change. In this chapter, we investigate the following research questions:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What strategies does the Development Workshop Cooperative employ in order to advocate and communicate on behalf of disadvantaged communities such as seasonal agricultural workers in Turkey?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the main challenges the Development Workshop Cooperative faces within Turkey's sociocultural context?

## **Method**

This qualitative case study focuses on the advocacy strategies and challenges of one particular NGO, the DWC, within the Turkish context. Facilitating the comprehension of a specific phenomenon, a case study includes the detailed study of its processes and actors involved to describe, explain, predict, or control components at an individual, group, or organizational level (Farquhar, 2012; Gagnon, 2010; Woodside & Wilson, 2013). Case study findings provide in-depth insights about context studied, answering how, when, and why questions (Yin, 2009). This study utilizes the single case study method to understand how NGO advocacy is conducted in Turkey and the challenges the DWC faces. We analyzed secondary data about the DWC and all the activities and projects they have been involved in since its establishment in 2004. However, we believe that the secondary data needs to be supported and complemented with primary data to allow for the discovery of rich data. We conducted semistructured interviews due to their flexible nature (Britten, 1999), which allowed participants to freely and openly reflect on their perspectives and meanings (Denzin & Lincoln 2005), reveal points of view

(Kvale, 1996), and shed light to areas that have not been initially thought of by the researcher(s) (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008).

The interviews were scheduled and conducted with key DWC personnel: one of the co-founders and social development expert, Ertan Karabiyık, and child rights expert, Sinem Sefa Bayraktar. Originally a forest engineer by training and previously a full-time consultant for UNICEF Turkey Country Office, Ertan, who is the coordinator of the DWC, has over 30 years of experience in social development studies, specifically focusing on education of migrant children, seasonal agricultural workers or other vulnerable migrant populations, and the Roma and Syrian Dom communities in Turkey. Sinem also has 15 years of UNICEF Country Office experience in Turkey working on child protection and youth development projects and has been actively working for the DWC for the last 5 years as a project manager and consultant. She also works as a consultant for various EU technical projects. Both informants define themselves as human rights activists and advocates. In terms of contractual agreement, they are both expert consultants as their position in the NGO is project budget dependent due to the cooperative structure of the NGO, which does not allow for the hiring of many full-time staff. The interviewing process started in the NGO offices to ensure that we get to see their working environment and have access to all the reports and research that they have. We also collected a set of their publicity materials and reports for later examination.

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*Interview Participants*

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<b>Ertan Karabiyık</b>	DWC Co-founder, Coordinator and Social Development expert
<b>Sinem Sefa Bayraktar</b>	DWC Project Manager and Child Rights expert

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The interview questions were approved by the ethics committees and review boards of the researchers' institutions before conducting the interview to ensure confidentiality of participants and ethical research procedures (Beck & Manuel 2008). The initial interview with the two key informants was conducted in English (with some Turkish translations to ensure smooth translations) in September 2019 and lasted about two and a half hours. As suggested by Britten (1999), we started with simpler questions such as asking about their experience in the field and how they decided to be a part of the NGO in order to build rapport, and slowly moved to more sensitive topics such as the challenges they face and how they view working with other organizations/institutions. The participants were also asked to introduce themselves and describe their roles and responsibilities and later asked to define the specific populations they work with and share what they consider to be their major achievements. Other questions asked were about specific projects the organization has implemented and description of an ongoing project as well as

their advice for newcomers in the field. Participants were also asked about their relationships with media organizations and to describe their communication and advocacy efforts in more detail. A two-person research team also proved to be instrumental in ensuring that comprehensive and representative data were collected (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). The follow-up and fact-checking interview was organized in March 2020 and this also lasted about two hours. Here, a draft was shared with both interviewees and given the opportunity to provide feedback and add details.

## Findings

### *Mission and Experience*

Both Sinem and Ertan define the DWC as a “rights”-based NGO—not a service-based one. Both are primarily interested in evidence-based advocacy, awareness-raising, capacity-building, training, and policy development. So, they do not engage directly with refugee populations or other vulnerable communities for service provision, only when they are in the field doing research or working on piloting programs or initiatives. DWC’s unique social cooperative structure makes them different from other local NGOs. As a not-for-profit cooperative, and consistent with their mission, DWC focuses on doing research and engaging in evidence-based advocacy to help improve the lives of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities living in Turkey (Figure 6.1).



*Figure 6.1* Seasonal migratory agricultural workers’ temporary tent settlement beside the pepper field in Adana Province, Turkey.

*Source:* Courtesy of DWC (2018).



Although Syrian refugees arrived in Turkey in 2011, the DWC started working with this population four years later. At the time, the Turkish government was not yet focusing on refugees only, so the initial projects in these areas focused on migrants as a unified group. Around the same time, they also started seeing a change in the makeup of agricultural workers in Turkey as Syrians were replacing Turkish citizens in seasonal agricultural work. DWC says that currently most of the labor force in seasonal agricultural work has been increasingly undertaken by migrant communities because these jobs involve very hard work and “no one really wants to do it.” They define seasonal agricultural work as the bottom of the pit in terms of labor. Ertan states that “the easiest jobs to integrate and find are the informal market, so they integrate easily in these areas. These jobs are invisible, uninspected, dynamic, temporary and are high in demand.”

Today, migrants have largely replaced seasonal agricultural work in Turkey. In 2016, Turkey made a deal with the EU to support Syrian refugees locally, releasing funds by ECHO. In order to implement projects supported by this funding scheme, international organizations had to work with local NGOs. Ertan complains about the unbalanced working agreements, “We were doing the work, but we were considered only to be suppliers,” which created many authority, identity, and visibility challenges for most of the smaller local and national NGOs working as implementing partners of large international organizations in Turkey.

## **Communication Strategies**

The DWC is well known for producing exemplary advocacy materials and lots of publications such as reports, maps, newsletters, and booklets. After 2016, they have been involved in many platforms not only at the national but also at the global level. For example, they participated in the *Global Compact for Migration Summit* in 2018 to showcase Turkey’s experience, to create visibility around seasonal workers and child labor among the migrant community in Turkey, which consists primarily of Syrians, Georgians, Afghan, Azeri, Iranians, and Iraqis. More recently, the DWC team also attended the *Regional Civil Society Consultation on the implementation of global frameworks on migration in the MENA region*, organized by CCRM (Cross-Regional Center for Refugees and Migrants) in Istanbul, Turkey, in December 2019 to talk about the challenges faced by disadvantaged migrant communities. The meeting brought together actors from various sectors, including migrant organizations, trade unions, women’s organizations, faith-based organizations, and media organizations from the Middle East and North Africa who support the implementation of global frameworks on migration. The other recent event that DWC attended was the Civil Society Day of the *Global Forum on Migration and Development* in January 2020 in Quito, Ecuador, to showcase the situation of migrants and Syrian communities in Turkey.

The interviewees stress that Syrian workers and especially Doms—the Roma population of Syria—are the most disadvantaged and the most closed and scared community among all vulnerable populations. They are discriminated against by almost all other groups, including Syrian nationals. The Doms are even afraid of being murdered. But despite all these challenges and the support needed to aid them, it is very hard to communicate with these communities as they are afraid to open up to outsiders, and also have a language barrier as they speak a very narrow dialect that is used only by their community. Ertan believes that knowledge of language and their cultural characteristics can be a major challenge for organizations that want to support these seasonal agricultural workers and nomadic communities:

Some organizations that work for these disadvantaged communities need to improve how to communicate with these people, how to act near them, or what to say exactly. They feel alien, they feel distant, they freeze. They don't receive any supervision or training about relationship building and communication abilities.

To give an example of the DWC's approach, the organization does not use translators when they are in the field. They work together with people who speak Arabic and/or Kurdish to communicate with these groups. Going there with a translator has a different effect. Trust is a very important factor for the DWC to be successful in the field. Even Sinem, who has worked in this field for more than 15 years says, "These people are testing you all the time, if they feel like you don't understand them or how they live, they shut down, they don't speak to you, share details or even tell the truth." The DWC team highlights the need to learn these skills, methods, and tactics to communicate with these communities in order to engage with them.

They believe that advocacy tools need to be developed to help support these disadvantaged communities. One of the things they do is to communicate in the language of the populations in need. They produced information booklets in Arabic and Kurdish for the Syrian agricultural workers. "However, the Kurdish speaking community within Syrian worker groups don't know how to read Kurdish texts. They said, give us the Arabic brochure so we can ask our neighbor to read it for us." Hence, one of the accomplishments of the DWC was to first create awareness about the reality of Dom communities, to show that typical bureaucracy does not apply to them and to organize information sessions with community members about basic services, social rights, health, education, disability rights, and humanitarian aid. They also advocated for the setting up of public information phone lines in different languages to provide information for these communities. Ertan is very passionate about this achievement:

We were successful in making the authorities understand the reality of these people. We believe in face to face communication, in real effects.

This is why we go to panels, we talk with people, and others call and invite us to participate in meetings and events, we even go as speakers and give lectures in universities.

For Sinem, “an organization’s role is not just highlighting the problems, because then you are exhausting people. Creating awareness about problems is not enough. People need models, they want to see solutions.” They say that they are too small for large-scale communication campaigns and instead they focus on advocacy with the relevant groups and authorities. Therefore, publicity materials have been crucial for the Development Workshop since they were first established, and they put a lot of thought and effort in producing high-quality and relevant advocacy materials. These reports also help create visibility for their initiatives and about them as social development experts. They say that they get contacted by other organizations quite regularly, as a result of word of mouth networking, which is very effective for them. Also, smartphones and WhatsApp groups have proven useful for networking and keeping in touch. Ertan says, “we need to learn and be more effective in info sharing and dissemination.”

The DWC also has a unique approach when it comes to its publications. Their publications do not contain logos on the cover but only a small one on the back. Sinem explains the rationale behind this decision:

It is about the target groups and the cause—we don’t want our logo, we don’t want visibility for DWC or the experts. We want others to use the information, tools, methods. For example, we highlight major themes such as decent work in seasonal agriculture, child rights, school climate, etc.

Quite simply but also unconventionally, they do not want to showcase ownership of these advocacy materials that they produce. For the NGO, the contents of the report, the research, and field experiences are important. In addition, and again very unconventionally, their publications are not copyrighted, they become public property once published. This decision itself is a key advocacy strategy as they want other organizations to use the information from the reports and share their research, “and perhaps take our approach as a role model for information sharing,” Sinem says smiling hopefully. For her, “you have to think outside of the box and resist the system if you want real change.”

Figure 6.2 shows a map targeted to render the deprivation and discrimination migrant seasonal agricultural workers face every day visible in order to build a sustainable, participatory, democratic, and transparent social development that respects and protects human rights of all habitants of Turkey. This map was used not just by the DWC, but also by various UN agencies, international organizations, including ECHO, Goal Global, rights-based and humanitarian-assistant NGOs in Turkey, and academicians to stimulate



action with evidence-based advocacy and result-oriented policy tools to prevent violation of migrants' basic human rights and improve their living and working conditions.

We also discussed the role of media relations with Ertan and Sinem. According to them, the lack of independence of traditional media outlets in the country has been a challenge in recent years. However, social media and digital platforms are increasingly becoming more important and effective. Yet, although they realize the power of these platforms, they remain weak at using social media strategically because of the lack of human resources—relevant staff that would be required to manage these accounts. Sinem explains:

We can't really pay for this person, plus we don't have permanent staff—it is not our model. Sometimes we hire communication or advocacy experts as part of short projects, we specifically write that as a budget item. We also hire a graphic designer for data visualization.

In addition, they are critical of others who only post about what they do, about the ongoing projects or processes. Sinem says, "Sometimes they only post 'we organized that, our ambassador said that, and such. But how did you impact the lives of people with your actions?'" For them, publishing information about tangible results, what their specific projects have achieved, is what is truly important. They argue that people in the field need to have the skills, capacity, qualifications, and specializations to understand what the vulnerable communities need, do meaningful work, and achieve change. Sinem, especially, is quite critical of using social media for the sake of keeping an active Facebook account. "Post whatever you want on social media, but you won't have meaningful results." That points to the fact that social media needs to be used strategically and has to be managed by a dedicated person who has digital media qualifications.

## **Main Challenges and Recommendations**

When asked to list the challenges they face, one of the first things they mention is the need to provide education for the children of these disadvantaged groups. However, they warn against simply relying on traditional solutions. Ertan says, "If you don't develop models for the real and everyday needs of the community—it doesn't make a difference." He suggests that organizations need to develop local level solutions to build capacity of local actors (such as governmental officials, local administrators, NGOs, academicians, etc.) in order to impact the lives of the community.

Another point Sinem highlights, is not to feel pity. "Don't pity these kids or people—you don't want to foster victimization, this is their life, their situation, and life goes on." They immediately mention an international news story about child labor in hazelnut agriculture work in Turkey on the BBC,

which was also published in the *New York Times* where they were also asked to comment. “The question we asked is, if there is news about this in an international newspaper does it help the children or not? Will it bring about change, will they go back to school? These are the questions we ask,” Ertan says when deciding to go public or not. They try to use such opportunities to engage in advocacy. And Sinem adds, “we also ask, ‘if we don’t do it who else will do it?’ We feel the responsibility. Even if we can change one life!” Therefore, they say they will never go back to their jobs in international organizations. It is hard to impact lives so directly there.

An issue Sinem and Ertan underline as a challenge is the lack of cooperation between civil society organizations. Both find NGOs in Turkey to be too territorial—with collaboration between NGOs or between NGOs and other organizations becoming challenging. They know from personal experience that large international organizations may be hard to work with due to their strict guidelines, detail-oriented procedures, and sometimes too much bureaucracy and paperwork needed. Ertan says, “Our common goals should lead us to work together, to have the same perspective and common sense to cooperate. We need to put aside our institutional identities and focus on the common mission.”

When asked about their recommendations for civil society organizations working in social development areas, Ertan is quick to answer. “Pay more attention to Doms and learn how to work with them,” is the first recommendation he has as someone who knows the challenges working with the most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. Sinem jumps in next and underlines the need for increased collaboration:

Partnerships with other organizations is required for increased impact. We need to combine our strengths and know-how to gain new skills. It should not be limited to just project- or activity-based partnerships, where we implement a training or produce a research report for them.

Ertan and Sinem believe that they should work together starting from the beginning of the process or engage in effective teamwork based on their respective expertise or terms of reference. Another point they highlight is the need for stronger relations with the government. DWC has slowly started to work with the government because the government has not been very keen on working with the civil society and Ertan believes that this needs to change. He also states that it is starting to change as the government has begun collaborating with civil society organizations at the local level, where they do municipality level info sharing and collaborations. He hopes to see this change in the next couple of years. Ertan says:

At the end of the day, public institutions have the roles and responsibilities for provision of human rights and service delivery. For any changes needed you have to either work together with or influence the

governmental authorities at the central or local levels. What is critical is that civil society institutions should protect their independency, integrity, and authenticity during such collaborations.

A key point we asked Sinem and Ertan about concerned their motivation to keep on working with and for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities despite the plethora of systematic challenges and social problems in Turkey. When we asked them how they do self-motivate, the answer was short and simple: “It’s a calling.” Ertan explains, “going grassroots, being on the field, touching their lives, and being together with local people, NGOs, governments, university students is what feeds us.” The most important point here is that he loves his job, and he feels a responsibility toward these people. Passion and perseverance seem to provide the foundation for this very rewarding work. Sinem feels as passionate about her role:

We have a human rights-based role—you feel like you *have* to do it. We can’t close our eyes to these people. We have to go to the field. We must be with these people. We are traumatized in the field—but it is the most fulfilling moments of our lives.

One of the main issues the DWC team highlighted is the notion of feeling at home in the field. They refer to this as: “*Gönüllü olmak değil—gönlünü koymak*,” the direct translation reads as “not just being a volunteer but putting your heart into it”; although so much is lost in translation. DWC team members know the topics, the challenges, the populations, but they place the most value on the trust they have established in their community-building—both sides know what each can deliver. While not always the ideal, these solutions reflect the reality of NGO work and transparency remains crucial for sustainable relationships.

Another important point highlighted by the DWC was their inclination for collective production and solidarity—creating together with no hierarchical structure or position-based authority. They stress that NGOs need to highlight the issues, not the institutions—especially not themselves. However, they see this as an area that requires further collaboration as they argue that as a local and relatively smaller NGO in comparison to international civil society organization monoliths, they should not be just seen as the implementing partner but should be involved in project planning and development from the beginning as they have extensive experience and deeper knowledge of the field. DWC team members feel like the need for cooperation should outweigh the competition for resources and sharing and advocating what is learned from the field should make up the core of the collaboration processes.

However, one of the challenges that come with that is the competition between NGOs regarding ownership and management of projects and for limited funds available. In a study on civil society organizations in Turkey,

Mackreath and Sagnic (2017) underline that competition mainly stems from political differences or struggle for funds. This political dimension and proximity to government officials has also been mentioned in our study, but the solution to this challenge could only be a willingness to put aside differences and focus on the needs of these vulnerable communities to bring about change. As stated by Akar and Erdoğan (2019), especially the issue of refugee settlement and integration requires a unified front with comprehensive and rigorous efforts and strengthened cooperation between policymakers, implementers, and CSOs in various areas, including employment, education, and health.

Another key area for further development and cooperation they highlighted is the need for strengthened government relations for effective advocacy. When it comes to effecting existing policies, working closely with the local actors and decision-makers is critical. Thus, ensuring good relations with the local authorities is important for effective NGO work. Additionally, increasing the visibility of ethnic minorities in the media and creating positive publicity for their target populations emerge as important considerations for nonprofits to bring about social change. When it comes to raising awareness about disadvantaged groups and increasing their acceptance in society, impacting public opinion, in addition to policymakers, is critically important. Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Ihlen et al., 2015,), we also conclude that NGOs are more effective when they engage local media and strategically use various forms of information subsidies, such as targeted press releases and providing striking visuals to facilitate positive media coverage. In addition, the DWC utilizes its communication materials as an advocacy tool by forfeiting copyrights of their materials and making their resources free to share.

## **Concluding Remarks**

While there are many theoretical definitions of advocacy and step by step how-to guidelines, understanding how advocacy functions in a specific national context by a particular civil society organization working with some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities can provide important lessons, both for academics and practitioners. Our research focused on understanding the communication and advocacy efforts of the DWC to support disadvantaged populations in Turkey. We discussed their main strategies and tried to identify challenges they face in engaging in advocacy and fostering social change.

Both interviewees stated that having a deep understanding of the characteristics and context of the community you work with is critical for success in communication and advocacy. You need to be aware of what their concerns are, what they are afraid of, and what is most important to them. Especially, communicating with them in their native language is critical to establishing trust. Also, sharing research results and advocacy materials with



all other organizations is important for creating awareness and highlighting issues that need to be addressed, which our interviewees see as the core of advocacy. The DWC believes in communicating about the impact they create, not merely listing the project outputs, and providing models or solution-based recommendations.

When it comes to the challenges they face, communication management, media relations, and human resources issues are major ones. Because the DWC staff is limited, having someone specifically focused on communicating with media or effectively managing social media accounts is a challenge for them. Any time a communication or visibility opportunity arises, the DWC aims to use it for advocacy to foster change. In addition, providing local and community- or context-specific solutions is something they mention for success and sustainability of programs. Local know-how is valuable, and it needs to be used in advocacy work and communication. Another main challenge is working and collaborating with the government or other international organizations. The DWC team complains about noncollaborative partnerships and not being involved in projects from the planning phase. One solution they suggest is being involved in the project writing phase as they bring in extensive experience and contextual information from the field and thus can provide a realistic snapshot of the needs of these communities.

While we focused on one particular NGO—the Development Workshop Cooperative—that has a unique structure and engages in advocacy on behalf of the most vulnerable migrant populations in Turkey, including the Syrian Dom, we believe the findings of this research are applicable to other similar contexts. Thus, the case study may serve as an inspiration for other similar NGOs but also highlight that despite the many successful projects that the cooperative has implemented in the past, it still faces many challenges in bringing about social change and has areas for further development.

The case study offers in-depth understanding of advocacy work on behalf of disadvantaged and vulnerable populations in Turkey but also cautions against treating all social development NGOs as homogeneous entities. As Sangar and Meyer (2018) stated, “most of the literature only talks about large International NGOs (INGOs) based in the Global North without paying enough attention to other NGOs as well as to the differences between these INGOs” (p. 192). This is why this study highlights a unique NGO formed in a different cooperative structure, which permits the NGO to work effectively for disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. Learning from the experiences of NGOs working with disadvantaged communities contributes to the growing body of literature on advocacy and communication in the third sector. Examining how an NGO has been successful in engaging in community relations and advocacy may also help shed light on challenges and opportunities in the NGO scene in Turkey, as well as provide lessons that might be transferred to other national contexts.

## Acknowledgments

This project was supported by a Page Legacy Scholar Grant from the Arthur W. Page Center at the Bellisario College of Communications at the Pennsylvania State University, USA. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Pennsylvania State University.

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