Itir Akdogan: You are the leader of youth work and youth social development in the local democracy field in Turkey. In recent years, information and communication technologies (ICT) have become central in your projects. Can you explain why?

Mr. Hazir: When we first founded Habitat Center for Development and Governance in 1996, our aim was to create a “communication bridge” between young people in Turkey and young people in the world. ICT were not as wide spread in Turkey; many didn’t understand what we intended to accomplish. Back then, there was no youth work as such. You cannot expect young people to demand their rights or to benefit from participatory mechanisms unless you raise awareness on these concepts. This is why we first focused our work on awareness raising and capacity building.

Our association is at the same time part of a global youth network. Our access to global processes and information helped us learn about social responsibility projects of the international ICT companies. We started partnering with companies like Cisco and Microsoft to bridge their projects with our projects for increasing awareness and for helping build that communication bridge. The projects were focused on vocational training and youth employment. As the
use and skills of ICT increased among our young people, we decided to leverage the technologies for participatory democracy and for helping young people in Turkey establish partnerships with young people around the world. Thus, ICT have become central in our overall policy, crosscutting all our projects. We also integrated ICT in the implementation of our projects because we found that efficient use of ICT increases project success and long-term sustainability.

Itir Akdogan: Can you describe your projects in some more detail?

Mr. Hazir: We are working in three main areas. The first area is ICT literacy. This is a very important area because none of the digital democratic applications or changes in legislation would matter if people do not know how to use the technology. Therefore we have an extensive ICT literacy campaign for increasing online access to information and access to and interaction with national and international networks. We have trained 150 thousand people in 78 (out of all the 81) cities in Turkey and we have opened 24 ICT academies. The second is the entrepreneurship oriented women’s empowerment with ICT area. We are training women so that they can use ICT to create their own businesses. The third area is the social networking and social media arena. We have created a 58 hour curricula for young people about learning how to efficiently use social media and develop social networks. We have also established local democracy watch platforms.

Itir Akdogan: What are the concrete results for young people and for local democracy in Turkey?

Mr. Hazir: Citizens can vote when they are 18 years old. Previously the age for eligibility was 30, leaving young people under this age out of the democratic process. This age has now been lowered to 25 years as a result of our social media supported campaign. Furthermore, all political parties now have quotas for young people. Following the first parliamentary elections after our campaign, there are currently about 20 parliamentarians under the age of 30. Surely, it is not enough but I think it is a big step forward for youth participation. Moreover, the youth councils that we have initiated are now members of city councils by law.

Itir Akdogan: Despite socio-economic inequalities and digital divide issues; your work is nation-wide and reaches every (geographically determined) region. Are there groups who particularly benefit from your projects?

Mr. Hazir: We are an Istanbul based organization but we oppose the idea of implementing this kind of projects in the more developed western regions of the country. We aim at reaching disadvantaged people who may not benefit from such capacity building projects and who live in the less developed eastern parts of the country. Disadvantaged does not necessarily mean financially disadvantaged. There are also other disadvantages. For example, women have a limited place in society in Turkey, 10% of the population is handicapped but there is no planning or support services for the handicapped, and, of course, young people are not involved in decision-making processes as they should be. Moreover, different groups are disadvantaged because the policies and politics in general are based on one ethnic identity (Turkish) and one religious affiliation (Islam, Sunnis) which excludes, for instance, Kurds, Alevi, non-Muslims, and Roma people. We are working for all these different and disadvantaged groups. Our goal is to offer equal access to all sub-groups irrespective of their political role in society. There are very few civil rights organizations in Turkey at this time.
and most of them are engaged in politics. We are not a political organization and we cannot pick and choose who we support. Therefore, people who may not express themselves politically in society join our work and become enabled and empowered as a result of the technologies that we make available to them. Recently, homosexuals, for instance, have joined our work and benefitted from our projects.

Based on the social impact evaluations that we make at the end of each project, it appears that 50% of the beneficiaries from our projects are young people who studied at high school, who are financially challenged, and who wouldn’t otherwise be able to access the kind of training that we offer. The other half is women. When we evaluate what has changed in the lives of the people who benefitted from our services, we see that thanks to our projects, there are local associations in each one of the cities and there are youth houses even in the south-eastern part of Turkey. Now the youth in these communities are enabled to create their own local projects and they follow national and global processes. We reached our aim of connecting young people in remote areas of Turkey with young people in other parts of the world. People have not believed in us years ago when we told them about this goal, but today this communication has become part of their lives.

Itir Akdogan: What are the challenges and limitations that you face in these projects and how do you cope with them?

Mr. Hazir: The biggest challenge is the traditional social perceptions. This perception is based on the concept of “othering.” I mean the religious is the “other” for the secular; the Alevi is the “other” for the Sunni and vice versa. There have been serious problems in the past that resulted from these differences. Political conflicts created deep scars in Turkey and engaging in traditional politics did not improve the situation. The challenge is to change the mutual hostile perceptions. There are also legal challenges. We still have the military coup constitution in force. Therefore it is difficult to fit the projects with the legal system. Finally, there is no culture of co-working between civil society, the private sector, and local and national authorities. What we need is to keep resources in a common pool and concert them to public policy. I think the process of making a public policy is more important than the policy itself. We believe in the interaction between the various stakeholders because we believe that the process of communication between stakeholders has the potential to reduce hostilities and transform the stakeholders. We are also still struggling with prejudices towards international processes. The perception of some in Turkey is that the world “wants to divide our country.” Our projects have the potential to overcome such fears. Finally, an important set of challenges have to do with the limitations in our educational system. No matter how much we try to change hostile perceptions, we still need to deal with a society educated through rote learning. This too is an obstacle that needs to be overcome.

As for how we cope with these challenges, we partner with local authorities and the United Nations. We are trying to transform public policies by coupling the local policies with international rights and processes. We prefer consensus to conflict. We have partnered with the public sector for a long time and have established a level of mutual trust with members of this sector. We have partnered with many cabinets since we started our work and with all political parties. We, however, set our own rules and we strongly stand by our values and aims. We started small but now, with our experiences, knowledge, and skills and after 16 years of hard work, our proposals have become policies of many institutions in the public sector.
sector, as well as, in the private sector. We, for instance are advisors to TOBB (Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey) on creating a network for young entrepreneurs. They took our advice and now they have a 20 thousand member network. As I mentioned before, we initiated the change in the voting eligibility law, lowering the age from 30 to 25 years old. The more we develop such policies, the easier is to cope with challenges.

**Itir Akdogan:** What do you think has been the impact of your projects on the relationship between the secular and religious sectors in Turkey?

**Mr. Hazir:** The use of ICT is still rather limited in Turkey especially with a gender divide of 58% versus 20% in favor of men. There is still a considerable number of people who think that ICT are unhealthy or that using them is a waste of time. Moreover, the majority of the population does not use ICT for a positive change. The latest surveys suggest that those who use ICT the most and most efficiently in Turkey are the educated and economically developed sectors of the population who identify themselves as secular. The group that uses ICT the least is the conservatives that choose a religious lifestyle, except for the intellectual conservatives. I think that communication between the two groups depends on a change in the level of hostility in the political discourse between them. This will take time because at the moment, all groups using ICT are doing it primarily to communicate within their own network rather than for interacting with other networks of other political or religious views.

**Itir Akdogan:** How does the Erdogan regime use ICT? How does that affect your projects?

**Mr. Hazir:** The Erdogan government seems to emphasize technology. The government has founded a Ministry of Sciences, Industry, and Technology. They aim at making Turkey a globally attractive site for technology, a kind of Silicon Valley. The goal of the Minister of Transportation’s is that there will not be one computer illiterate person in the country. He says that they will establish technology highways. The Erdogan regime interacts with international networks, and uses social media efficiently. The President uses technology very well. We increased the number of our social development with ICT projects in recent years. We received support from the Erdogan government for this. The Ministry of Development has accepted creating a social transformation program based on our proposal. We will partner with them in the development of that program. The principles of the governors are good, but as I mentioned earlier, the important thing is what people think and do. When we check the use of e-government applications, for instance, it is still quite limited even though there is a positive development when compared to the past.

**Itir Akdogan:** Do you think that ICT have the potential to help the opposition regain some traction in Turkey?

**Mr. Hazir:** Young people who use ICT cannot be politically manipulated anymore. They can self-organize on social networks for immediate reaction. They may not be able to gather in the streets but they can do so on Facebook or Twitter. I don’t believe Turkey can progress with traditional politics and traditional discourses. If young people can keep their new and alternative ways of organizing, they may initiate the development of new discourses, which I think would develop Turkey.
CHP (Republican People’s Party, the opposition party) appears as the party that uses ICT the most. They, however, do not seem to be concerned with creating new discourses, or for developing themselves. Technology alone cannot help them be more powerful. It is not enough to use the technology. When you use ICT, you start accessing and interacting with the world. Language is a big barrier in that access and interaction. Those who, despite limitations, use ICT and open up to the world are not “buying” the traditional political discourses and old school politics anymore. I am in this group. This is why we expect new discourses both from the government and from the opposition.

Itir Akdogan: The relationship between Turkey and the Middle-east is at this time very interesting with a change in Turkey’s foreign policy in the recent years and with the Arab Spring. How does this reflect on the relationship between young people in Turkey and their counterparts in the Middle-eastern countries? What is the impact of ICT on what young people in Turkey think of young people in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Israel?

Mr. Hazir: I believe that Turkey needs to transform. She needs to confront her history in this transformation in order to find ways to reconcile the differences in society. I don’t think it would be sincere to expect Turkey to be a serious actor in the global level or a model in the Middle-East democratization without this process. The current trend is to give this role to Turkey. Global business supports the idea by, for instance, opening up Middle-east offices in Istanbul, but Turkey cannot play such a role without a democratic constitution, without participatory democracy, and without guaranteeing freedom of expression of all the groups and identities.

The uprisings in the Arab world used ICT and social media very extensively. I think it was also a bit of an intervention of the global capital. Today the markets of the global capital are the Middle-east and Africa. Global business needs new policies and new tools to operate in these regions. We will see if the Arab spring will bring democratization or not. The results of the uprisings in Egypt, for instance, brought in a regime that is not very different than the previous one. There is a danger that those who couldn’t benefit from the system previously may bring in their own system rather than democracy. Those movements may manifest themselves as revenge rather than democratization, with religious discourses and intolerance to differences. This is a serious challenge.

I think Turkey needs to take developed democracies and developed countries as a reference for its own democratization process. In this sense, I think it would be wrong to refer to or to side with Middle-eastern countries. You should not compare your democracy with the worse models but rather with the better ones. Turkey has gained popularity in the Arab countries after the anti-Israeli statements of the Prime Minister. This is good and bad. Good because it is the first time Arab Street approaches Turkey positively, they take the Turkish model as a reference. If Turkey manages to democratize its own society and politics, then it can be a role model and contribute to the democratization in the region. And it is bad, because Turkey may not be a model if it struggles with its own democratic challenges.

As for young people, they are not a homogenous group. Youth groups engaged in politics interact with the likeminded. All groups look at the Middle-east from their political identity perspective. Some, including myself, see how much some of these countries value democracy, participation, and inclusion no matter who is in power.

The good thing is that young people can now think freely. Those who use social
media efficiently can think beyond the frameworks of traditional politics. They can react immediately. There has been, for instance, big pressure on the President in Turkey through social media, over the issue of raising the parliamentarians’ salaries. Among this active and engaged youth, there were young people who interacted with young people in the Middle-east with their ICT and language skills. Even though this was a small group, it has the potential to grow bigger.

One of our projects, MyTecc, gathered high school students from Israel, Palestine, Portugal, Greece, and Turkey; countries in conflict at the government level. We gathered them in two high schools in Istanbul. A young participant from Israel said that he was full of prejudices when he arrived and that he would have never thought that he could agree with a person from Palestine. The Palestinian participant shared the same opinion from his perspective. That is because the problem is not at the people level but at the government level. Communication and interaction among people help them get to know, understand better, and ultimately perceive the other differently. That is what I value. The only way to think and act beyond traditional politics is to spread the use of ICT and make it part of youth’s daily life. The more I go beyond the traditional discourse, the more I discover that there is an Israeli who thinks like me. When we augment the number of these kind of experiences, we can make a change.

**Itir Akdogan**: Do ICT have a potential impact on Turkey’s relationship with Europe?

**Mr. Hazir**: Turkish society does not perceive one Europe but three: there is a group that perceives it only as a Christian community, another group takes it as a geographically defined territory, and the third perception of Europe is as a union of values. I am in the third group. I see Europe as a set of values united to create livable societies that value human rights. Therefore, I believe that Turkey should also be there. The higher level relations between Turkey and the European Union, however, are blocked due to the double standards of the EU despite Turkey’s initial enthusiasm. Turkey has lost her enthusiasm and does not take serious steps towards its membership, while at the same time the EU does not show a sincere approach towards Turkey.

The grants for youth exchanges from the European Commission are crucial for young people in Turkey to interact with young people in Europe. Exchange activities are very important in fighting prejudices between the two sides. The old prejudice in Turkey used to be that Europe wishes to dissolve Turkey. This prejudice to the most part is lost among the younger generation and I think this is a good development. Regarding ICT and Europe, I think the most important thing is the flow of information about best practices and about how we can adapt these practices to our lives to improve our democracy.

**Itir Akdogan holds a PhD from the University of Helsinki, Finland, in media, communication, and democracy studies. She has been teaching both offline and online innovative courses on e-democracy and digital citizenship at the same university. Besides her academic career, she is an international consultant for e-democracy projects focusing on youth participation. She is an invited speaker to various international policy conferences and events.**
Sezai Hazir, engineer by education, is a leading figure in the development of civil society and local democracy in Turkey with his focus on youth capacity building and youth participation. He started his civil society activist career in 1995 as the coordinator of the committee of host NGOs during the preparations of UN Habitat City Summit in Istanbul. He then established Youth Association for Habitat to implement the decisions made during the summit. From 1997 to 2011 he was the president of the association and ran several programs for the follow up of the Local Agenda 21 program in partnership with the UNDP, Ministry of Interior and UCLG-MEWA. He’s been the civil society representative of Turkey in UN and EU processes. Hazir currently sits in the board of several national and local initiatives in Turkey with both national and international public, private, and civil society stakeholders. Mr. Sezai Hazir is a key civil society consultant for several ministries and other public bodies as well as private initiatives that aim to develop youth participation in democratic life. Lastly, Hazir founded the Habitat Center for Development and Governance.