

A view from the field in Istanbul

In Istanbul, there are close to 30 neighborhoods, or *mahalle*, with high concentrations of Roma communities. Some *mahalle* are more homogeneous and compact than others where other minority groups, incomers from the provinces and, more recently, refugees, have settled. Most of them are from the poorer, marginal parts of town. In August 2013, we visited the settlements of **Kuştepe and Gaziosmanpaşa** to see some of the challenges communities there were facing, and learn about some of the important ways in which people were mobilizing and taking steps to improve their situation.

We met and spoke with the leaders of four Roma associations representing the settlements of Kuştepe, Gazi Osman Paşa and Zeytinburnu in Istanbul.

All are members of the Turkish Roma Rights Forum (**ROMFO**), a prominent civil society network in Turkey established in 2012 and working on the issue of Roma inclusion and representation in local and national decision-making.

- ♦ Salih Metin Şenturk, president of the Kuştepe Roma Florist Association and Mr. Aydoğan Aywacıoğlu, Izet Paşa Association (Kuştepe)
- ♦ Halil Demir İşleyen, Gazi Osman Paşa Roma Association (Gaziosmanpaşa)
- ♦ Senol Küçükpazarçık and Tarık Tırnakkakan of two Roma Associations from Zeytin Burnu

The emphasis on cooperation was strong. In their own words:

“We are all like small parts of a machine — individual work is difficult, but as a team we are very strong.”

Kuştepe is a prominent Roma settlement in the Sisli municipality of Istanbul with 5,000 residents, the majority of whom are Roma. It is a vibrant community right behind the newly built Trump Tower, and home to the **Istanbul Roma Florists Association**. The Association was established in 1998 and has since been actively involved in the Roma community on issues such as employment and education, and Roma children and teens. Its president and community leader Salih Metin Şenturk insists that ***“All over Turkey, the Roma are seeking to make up for their lost 100 years — trying to fill in and close the gap in development.”***

He believes that it is through education that Roma should seek to fill development gaps, and goes on to add: ***“Working hard is very important. Roma need to work very hard to achieve the programme. And they can demand things only when they themselves are working hard.”***

The flower business provides income to approximately 600 families from the community who sell flowers outdoors nine months of the year. At present, they buy the flowers from the market, but the goal is to use the upcoming urban renewal project in Kuştepe and find a way to plant and grow the flowers locally. This is a powerful example of how one community is actively attempting to use to their benefit one of the most contested socio-economic transformations in Turkey today, the process of urban regeneration spanning the country since 2005.

A more recent challenge, however, is presented by new fines for informal selling on the street, introduced by the government in an attempt to regulate such businesses. The association and the

communities depending on the flower business recognize the importance of standing together to face this challenge.

The Kuştepe Children’s Study House was the product of a *common effort*, based on the belief that education is the most important resource to achieve the aim of filling the development gaps of Roma.

First, The Roma Florist Association became actively engaged in activities organized by the local Sisli government in the areas of education and other social issues. Its leaders showed their readiness to participate, and their desire to improve the conditions in their neighbourhood. They conducted meetings with local authorities to address the urgency of establishing an educational facility for Roma, especially in Kuştepe.

A good working relationship was established with the local municipality and its mayor, and eventually the Sisli Municipality decided to support the community by providing a space for a study centre and day care, while the Sisli governor’s office donated school supplies to the centre. The study centre then contacted Koc and Sabanci Universities and recruited a number of volunteers to teach at the centre; since then, others have followed. Five universities now send volunteer teachers to the Kuştepe Children’s Centre. These tutors and teachers have actively been involved at the centre since the summer of 2011. Local businesses in the area donated office furniture and a computer to the centre.

Picture of a member of the Istanbul Roma Florists Association, as he prepares for the market (left) and The Kuştepe Children’s Study House (right)



Gaziosmanpaşa was the second neighbourhood we visited. Located on the European side of Istanbul, it is one of the most populous districts of the city, with nearly 500,000 residents. Many are the descendants of Balkan immigrants from the 1950s and 1960s, and more recently from Anatolia and even Syria, making for a complex picture.

Around 3,000 to 5,000 Roma live in this area, most of them in one part of the neighbourhood. Collecting paper from waste is a major source of income for many families, though there are also florists and musicians. The representative of the Roma association, Halil Demir İşleyen, reiterated problems familiar in other settlements: poverty, lack of income, high social insecurity, poor education, and discrimination, including discrimination related to traditional styles of dressing. An urban building project has been taking place in Gaziosmanpaşa since 2010, with cranes laying the foundations of modern housing developments that will replace existing shacks. Strong protests and litigation strategies on the part of some Roma NGOs notwithstanding, this dynamic affects not just Roma but the overall development process in Turkey. As the events of the last year have vividly shown, current models of development and modernization are much debated in the country.

While locals continue to voice concerns over the dispersal of the community due to modernization and building, a major challenge for those still living there and seeking a living from collecting paper and metal scraps is the increased municipal regulation of recycling businesses. Often, the inability of people to pay the accumulating fines compounds their difficulties. For those who leave the area, the issue of compensation for relocation and the very structure of resettlement programmes have posed other challenges.

The Pictures below capture the urban renewal process in Gaziosmanpaşa as it unfolds, and the planned new development.



The Place for Everyone - "Area-Based Interventions for making the most of EU Fund for Sustainable Housing and Inclusion of disadvantaged Roma (explicitly but not exclusively targeted) in pilot areas in Romania & across the border to Serbia, FYR Macedonia and Turkey" implemented by UNDP Bratislava Regional Centre
<http://localdevelopmentforinclusion.org/>