

Bringing together stakeholders to identify major urban problems in Rize

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We are about to launch a new project entitled ‘RIZE 2053: What kind of city do we want to live in?’. We know that 37 years, from 2016 to 2053, is quite a long time interval for urban planning. However, we want to introduce a new understanding to urban development and our desire is to create a change in the ongoing practices by letting all stakeholders construct this long-term process from the initial stage to the end. It took me quite a long time to write this project proposal, mostly due to my lack of knowledge in this field. I am also struggling to convince most of the internal staff to collaborate on this project. I would be grateful if we can integrate your research into our project and benefit from your experiences in this field (Coordinator of the RIZE 2053 Project, the Municipality of Rize).

This is an extract from a conversation I had with an architect when I was conducting a set of in-depth interviews with municipal actors, with the aim of exploring the socio-political challenges of climate-responsive urban development in the city of Rize. The intersection of my research and the municipality’s intention of developing a ‘2053 urban development vision’ for the city led to the organisation of a participatory analysis workshop, which, in turn, has triggered the start of a new participatory planning process in the municipality.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Turkey has been oriented towards sustainable development, conservation and environmental protection through participation and collaboration via many agreements and international reports.

Examples include the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, which linked cities to sustainability for the first time (WCED 1987), the European Union’s Green Paper on the urban environment (Commission of the European Communities 1990) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s *Environmental Policies for Cities in the 1990s* (OECD Urban Affairs Group 1990). All fields of the Turkish national system have certainly taken their share from these notions affecting the global discourse. Planning policies have quickly embraced the notion of sustainability through participation; however, only a few authorities have adopted it in practice.

The current urban development system in Turkey represents a mechanical process mostly based on technical determinism (i.e. planning based on zoning) that underestimates the significance of the variations in different localities across the country (i.e. climatic factors, local values and socio-ecological concerns). Only a few municipalities, such as that of Rize in the Black Sea region, clearly intend to break this conventional planning approach by seeking alternative approaches that could generate truly sustainable urban living settings. However, although there is the intention at the municipal level, a lack of human resources and also a lack of knowledge in terms of the methods and techniques required to achieve this change stand as major challenges in the current climate.

In the Rize case, following the aim of bringing stakeholders together to construct a ‘city vision’ for 2053, representatives of the municipality invited me to embed my research in their planning agenda so as to implement the recommendations derived from my research findings. In collaboration with the municipality staff and senior academic advisors, a long-term participatory process design was proposed to the municipality. The process is composed of six major steps: (1) understand the existing problem areas and



Rize is a coastal town built on a narrow strip of flat land between the mountains and the Black Sea.

the potential solutions; (2) conduct scientific research and data collection on the identified problem areas; (3) define the 'city vision' for 2053; (4) determine strategies to achieve the identified vision; (5) define projects and action steps; and (6) confirm the commitment of actors to take action.

The first step of this participatory planning process was co-organised by the British Institute at Ankara and the Rize municipality, with generous funding from the BIAA. In order to understand the existing problems in the city, a participatory workshop, that brought together all stakeholders onto a shared platform, was organised. The workshop was hosted by the Rize Commodity Exchange Office on 13 May 2017.

Ten parallel focus groups were conducted involving 108 participants representing different stakeholder groups, such as local authorities (for example district municipalities, special provincial administrations), central authorities (for example the Ministry of Urbanisation), local technical staff (i.e. planners, architects and engineers), academics, non-governmental organisations, political parties and members of the county council and professional organisations.

The workshop aimed first to explore the local values that differentiate Rize from other cities at both the regional and national scales (i.e. climate, geography) and then to understand the problems prompted by these specific circumstances. It was concluded that the major unique values that differentiate Rize from other cities are its geomorphologic structure, topography and local climatic conditions. Rize has developed on a narrow strip of flat land between the mountains and the Black Sea. The limited availability of land and its sloping nature towards the skirts of the mountains are significant challenges in terms of urban development. In addition, Rize has a wet and humid climate that leads to climate-related challenges for the city.

The second stage of the workshop was designed to elaborate these problems, not only in terms of the physical development of the city but also from socio-cultural and economic perspectives. Focus-group studies revealed that the most commonly mentioned problematic areas are clustered around three major themes. The first relates to urbanisation issues such as vertical housing types (i.e. high-rise apartment blocks) which don't respond to the local/traditional urban fabric, devastate green spaces and natural areas, and prompt climate-driven problems caused by inappropriate urban development. The second problem area defined by participants focuses on more human-related issues such as individualism among citizens, a lack of collaborative working skills, limited education and a lack of qualified service workers for different sectors such as tourism and industry. The last problem area was identified as tea-plant production in Rize. Tea-plant production presents a number of challenges for the city, such as a continuous reduction in its economic benefit due to the division of land between inheritors, a dissociation of people from tea production and soil failure.



No doubt, these three major problem areas are defined with reference to the participants' professional knowledge and individual experiences. Although this locally generated knowledge carries a great deal of significance, it is essential to harmonise these findings with scientific research and analyses concentrating on the identified problem areas. Therefore, the second stage of the proposed participatory process will continue with scientific and statistical research on three main issues, namely: (1) urbanisation; (2) human-related issues; and (3) tea production.

Success in these types of participatory decision-making processes, as A. Ataov concludes (2007), depends on three major factors: (1) the presence of an institutional structure that allows participation; (2) an active citizenship; and (3) management of the participatory planning process in line with democratic principles. The first two factors emerge and continuously evolve naturally in historical processes. However, the third factor requires a level of awareness and knowledge of participatory methods and techniques.

The willingness of the municipality to collaborate with the BIAA and to accept support in order to produce knowledge in a collective way, clearly confirm its desire to change the current robust planning system that has been implemented for many years in the city. To ensure that the project outcomes will be translated truly into the next planning phases, the municipal team plans to conduct a series of feedback meetings in which the shared knowledge will be re-evaluated and reformulated before taking action.

References

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