



BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: COALITION BUILDING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN ISTANBUL, 2016–2020

Leon Schreiber and Gordon LaForge drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in Istanbul in June and July 2020. Case published November 2020.

SYNOPSIS

By the mid-2010s, Istanbul, the biggest city in Turkey, had developed a reputation as a bustling concrete jungle notoriously unfriendly to the 1.2 million children aged four years and younger who lived there. As part of a decade-long construction boom, multistory skyscrapers increasingly replaced green spaces and parks throughout the city. But such insufficient consideration for the developmental needs of young children was not confined to the design of public and urban spaces: in many Istanbul homes, parents worked hard to put food on the table and had little time to consider how to give their young children the best possible start in life. In February 2016, a coalition of policy research organizations and private enterprises launched an ambitious effort to persuade officials in Istanbul’s 39 districts to begin taking the needs of young children seriously. The group drew on help from a network of prominent Turkish universities and partnered with four district municipalities that agreed to join a program called Istanbul95, supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, a Dutch foundation. The group created a digital-mapping tool to help locate vulnerable children, conducted regular home visits to support hundreds of families, and designed new prototypes for child-friendly public spaces. This effort to embed principles of early childhood development into the work of Turkish local governments passed a milestone when, in 2019, the major metropolitan area governments of Istanbul and İzmir also agreed to join, a key step toward reaching many more children.

INTRODUCTION

On June 23, 2019, Ekrem İmamoğlu was elected mayor of Istanbul, Turkey's most populous metropolitan area and its economic heart. İmamoğlu, a member of the secular opposition party and relatively young, at 50 years old, won a landslide, with 54% of the vote. A former construction company boss and incumbent district mayor who had built a reputation for competent administration, İmamoğlu had campaigned on a promise to work across political, class, and cultural divides to solve problems of urban poverty. His platform included a pledge to build 150 new day care centers in Istanbul and to provide other support for families with children younger than three years old.

Such a concrete promise from a high-level politician to meet the challenges affecting families with young children was unprecedented in Turkey. Yet the seeds of İmamoğlu's early childhood development policy had been planted in the city years earlier by other municipal officials and civil society partners. Under a program called Istanbul95, 4 of the city's 39 districts had already taken significant steps to improve services for families with young children and to reshape public spaces with infants and toddlers in mind.

Designed with the help of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, a Dutch nonprofit with decades of experience in improving early childhood development around the world, Istanbul95 launched in 2016 as a collaboration between reformers from four district municipalities and experts from both academia and civil society. The program was premised on a seemingly simple question: If you could experience the city from an elevation of 95 centimeters—the average height of a three-year-old—what would you do differently?¹

Prior to İmamoğlu's high-profile campaign for mayor, it was an unusual question to pose in Istanbul, a city of 15 million people. Throughout the metropolitan area, which is divided by the Bosphorus strait between Europe and Asia, a decade-long construction boom had meant that parks and child-friendly spaces had not been priorities for the city government.

But it was not only urban designers and local officials who generally ignored the needs of the very young. Many Turkish families, especially those in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, did not have the information and basic resources—even things as simple as toys—required to support the cognitive, emotional, and physical development of young children. In some instances, cultural factors and parenting styles limited the amount of time parents and caregivers spent playing and interacting with their young children.

In 2016, the Turkish office of the Bernard van Leer Foundation extended a helping hand. Program director Cecilia Vaca Jones and new country director Yiğit Aksakoğlu tapped into the foundation's network of experts and activists to devise ways of enabling the youngest residents to thrive. A civil engineer with a graduate degree in the management of nongovernmental organizations and international cooperation and development, Aksakoğlu had worked with various research firms and universities—including the widely respected and independent Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (*Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı*, or TESEV)—before joining the Bernard van Leer Foundation in

September 2014. He knew Istanbul's communities well, and he championed the three components that underlay the foundation's Urban95 initiative: data-driven decision making, use of behavioral science to guide interventions, and engagement of the municipal workforce to incorporate early childhood development needs into design thinking.²

The foundation's immediate goal was to help partners from Istanbul's municipal districts, civic organizations, and universities adapt the Urban95 principles to local needs and then sustain the initiative on their own, scaling it to other parts of the city and beyond. The idea also included embedding early childhood development principles into the strategic planning of government and the generation of enough support and awareness to ensure that the program would outlive any funding provided by the foundation. "We wanted the focus on early childhood development to become part of the essential services delivered by municipalities," Aksakoğlu said.

The foundation's role was to facilitate initial conversations and pilot programs. "We had to create a network," said Neslihan Öztürk, the foundation's program coordinator in Turkey. "We wanted to be a part of a team in which content is created by knowledge partners, and municipalities are implementers. Our job was to link the two," Öztürk said.

THE CHALLENGE

Winning the trust of municipal officials, citizens, and civil society partners would be a tall order in a civic culture permeated with suspicion and hyperpartisan politics. Turkey's political situation was intensely polarized. Bipartisan cooperation, even at the municipal level, was extremely rare. Although the concept of improving early childhood development was not itself controversial, there was the constant danger that Istanbul95 would become politicized if it became associated with municipalities run by a particular political party, thereby undermining the goal of building a broad coalition to sustainably scale up the program.

The people of Turkey—and, specifically, Istanbul—were politically deeply divided between those who supported the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP) of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and partisans of the country's major opposition, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, or CHP). The tensions had increased significantly during the preceding decade.

Prior to the 2019 election of İmamoğlu—a member of the CHP—the AKP had controlled the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, the umbrella government for a city with 39 separate district municipalities, each of which had its own elected leadership. The AKP ran 25 of the districts, which were mandated to directly deliver basic services, including social services, to residents. The CHP governed the remaining 14.

To avoid the program's becoming politically tainted, the partners had to persuade leaders of municipalities governed by different political parties to sign up. Given that the tense political environment extended to suspicion about the

motives of certain international organizations operating in Turkey, the involvement of the Bernard van Leer Foundation—which was founded in 1949 by a Jewish businessman—could draw political and religious scrutiny.

In addition to overcoming potential political pitfalls, the program's sustainability depended on building—and maintaining—a reform coalition between different groups of people who were not accustomed to working together. One of the central aims was to create a link between Istanbul's municipal governments and the expertises and resources of universities, research firms, and private companies. The ambition also involved forging ties that would continue beyond the life of a single project, which was no easy task because the knowledge partners from universities, research firms, and private companies did not always recognize the procedural, technical, and political constraints elected and municipal officials faced. Bridging those differences in cultures and processes between the implementing partners and the knowledge partners would be essential for building a sustainable coalition. Moreover, promoting sustained engagement and commitment ran counter to the existing organizational culture in government. “Turkey had become a place where lots of money got dumped for one-off projects by international organizations like the European Commission,” Aksakoğlu said. Municipalities were used to receiving funding grants to implement isolated interventions over a set period of time, and they rarely maintained interaction with people outside the public sector after projects ended.

Because the program aimed at socioeconomically disadvantaged families, an additional challenge arose from a lack of readily available—and reliable—data with regard to the extent of the need for early childhood interventions and what kinds of services were already being offered by different levels of government. The Turkish national government did not collect neighborhood or household-level income data, which meant that there were no readily available data sources or maps for use in the identification of beneficiaries most in need.

Early childhood development was also a subject few public servants—and even few parents—had given much thought to. Most were unaware of research that showed the significant, positive impacts of adequate interaction and adequate nutrition in the first three years of life on school performance, employability, and lifetime earnings, even though the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 had set early childhood development targets for all countries to try to reach. Lack of awareness meant that certain cultural norms and parenting styles persisted, even though they deprived young children of the physical and emotional attention science said young children needed. Allowing outsiders to interfere with something as personal and sensitive as raising children could trigger opposition. Resistance to changing child-rearing practices would likely be especially high among poorer, multigenerational, conservative, and less-educated households.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

In collaboration with the Bernard van Leer Foundation's central office in the Hague and based on preliminary conversations with municipal officials, Aksakoğlu and Öztürk identified a need for four key interventions: (1) the creation of detailed maps of as many city districts as possible, so as to show where early childhood development facilities existed and which families were most in need; (2) the training of municipal officials in the area of early childhood development policy; (3) the support of families in need through regular visits by trained municipal staff to the homes of new and expectant parents to teach parenting skills; and (4) the building and redesign of public spaces, including parks, that would meet the needs of children younger than three years of age and their caregivers. The design of such interventions and their implementation would be the work of municipal, academic, private, and civil society partners, however. The first steps were to recruit those partners, connect them into a network, and introduce them to the resources of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's publicly available Urban95 starter kit so that the partners could customize the Istanbul95 program to suit local needs and contexts.³

Aksakoğlu and Öztürk began to float the project idea in 2016, tapping into their local networks. A prime partner candidate was Boğaziçi University, a prestigious and respected institution whose active participation would produce valuable research and help generate interest and trust in the program. Aksakoğlu and Öztürk's outreach to Boğaziçi psychology professor Serra Müderrisoğlu—who had previously worked with the foundation on a project involving domestic violence against children—drew a favorable response. “We then held several meetings with university deans and professors to explain our vision, and from there they created their own project teams,” Öztürk said.

The involvement of leading academics from the university, led by psychology professor Feyza Çorapçı, was important because they could help design and administer appropriate training to home visitors for new and expectant mothers, and also because they could conduct rigorous research on the impact of the home visits. Those research findings would be vitally important to any future efforts to build support for the scaling up of early childhood interventions at other levels of government.

With the Boğaziçi psychology department on board, the Bernard van Leer team turned to several early childhood development experts, including Christine Powell, a lecturer from the University of the West Indies, who had previously partnered with the foundation. Powell agreed to help design the training of home visitors based on her experience with rolling out a home visitation program called Reach Up and Learn in other countries.

For the component of the program focused on expanding and improving the availability of public spaces in the city, the program teamed up with Selva Gürdoğan and Gregers Thomsen from Superpool, a private architecture firm based in Istanbul with a background of participation in public improvement projects. Öztürk explained that “Superpool was very interested in mobility and child-friendly public spaces. Although it is a private company, it has a lot of

experience as a facilitator in the architecture area. The firm has done lots of nonprofit projects.”

Finally, to collect and analyze data for the digital maps, the program invited Professor Murat Güvenç of the Istanbul Studies Center at Kadir Has University, as well as Özge Aktaş Mazman and Bürge Elvan Erginli from TESEV, to play central roles.

With a wide range of knowledge partners on board by early 2017, Aksakoğlu and Öztürk began the task of trying to persuade district municipal officials to join them as implementers. Not surprisingly, their initial efforts ran into skepticism. Some officials were dubious about the political value of the program, and others were suspicious of a foreign foundation named after a Jewish businessman. The team realized they needed a well-connected intermediary to help win municipal leaders’ trust.

In early 2017, the team turned to Fikret Toksöz, a veteran civic leader who had been director for good governance at TESEV before retiring. Most important, prior to joining TESEV, Toksöz had served as secretary-general of the Marmara Region Municipalities Union, an association of local governments. The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and its 39 districts were part of the Marmara Region, and the union served as the primary coordinating body among the different local authorities. With his broad network and long career, Toksöz was widely respected by people both inside and outside government, and because of his lengthy experience at the union, he was uniquely positioned to help persuade the different local authorities to join the program as implementing partners.

Toksöz joined the team. He said he had known Aksakoğlu personally for almost 20 years and had earlier helped him find municipal partners for an early childhood development project focused on migrant children in one of Turkey’s main cotton-producing regions. Toksöz emphasized the need for municipalities to be full partners willing to invest significant time, money, and other resources for project success.

During talks with prospective partner municipalities, Toksöz said: “We made it clear that this is not a gift. If you’re prepared to make early childhood development part of mainstream policy, we’re ready to help you.” The team of Aksakoğlu, Öztürk, and Toksöz initially made contact with 15 district municipalities and recruited what Toksöz called “four really willing municipalities” to participate in the program.

Halil Ibrahim Akıncı, director of social support in the municipality of Sultanbeyli, said he agreed to join the program after the foundation team’s “very thrilling and informative” presentation. “We saw that most of a child’s brain development happened during the birth to three-years-of-age period,” he said. “And in addition, that 80% of brain development took place in that age-group and that only 20% could take place later.”

Akıncı said they were alarmed to hear about research that had found that “during the first 48 months of life, the children of low-income families hear 13 million words, children in middle-income families hear 26 million, and children

from high-income families hear 45 million words.”⁴ Moreover, he said, they took special note of the team’s discussion about the return on investment produced by early childhood development programs: “Every dollar you spend on early childhood development has a return of US\$7 to US\$10 later in life. These were amazing facts that made a big impression.”

Aksakoğlu did not shy away from hard-hitting arguments during the foundation’s presentations, and he tailored his arguments to suit the individual contexts of the different municipalities. In one instance, “I looked at the metropolitan municipal budget of the previous metropolitan mayor and saw an expenditure item of US\$77 million on funeral services but nothing for early childhood development,” he said. “Given that approximately 200 people die every day and 600 babies are born every day [in Istanbul], I asked if this was a city where you want to give birth and live, or is it one where you want to die?”

The other three municipalities that eventually decided to join the program as implementing partners were Beyoğlu, Sarıyer, and Maltepe. It was important that the four represented an even division between Istanbul’s two main political parties and the city’s geography. Beyoğlu and Sultanbeyli were governed by the ruling AKP, and Maltepe and Sarıyer by the opposition CHP.

Öztürk said the municipalities had different reasons for signing up: Sultanbeyli decided to join because it had no other coordinated services aimed at children; Beyoğlu had enjoyed success in working with the foundation on a past project and was willing to expand the scope of the services focused on children; Maltepe had invested in 11 day care centers and wanted to open 15 more; and Sarıyer offered some services to children but wanted to include young parents.

With the four district municipalities on board, there were also promising signs that the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality was interested in joining the program, but the government’s interest ended in March 2017, when the Dutch government prevented incumbent President Erdoğan from holding political rallies for the large number of Turkish expatriates living in the Netherlands. As a result of the heightened diplomatic tensions, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality abruptly dropped its interest in joining a program run by a Dutch foundation.

Nonetheless, by mid-2017, the diverse reform coalition of nongovernmental organizations, civil society, academics, a research firm, a private company, and four district municipalities were ready to begin pooling their expertises and resources to implement Istanbul95. The challenge lay in keeping the coalition together and ensuring that families in need reaped the benefits of the program.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Istanbul95 centered on four key interventions rolled out in two distinct phases. First, during the preparation phase, TESEV and Kadir Has University would create detailed maps to show where needy families with young children lived and where parks, early childhood development centers, and other facilities were located throughout Istanbul. At the same time, Boğaziçi University would

design and conduct preparatory training programs for home visitors at the four partner municipalities. In the implementation phase, trained home visitors would identify target families and try to persuade them to participate in the program. Meanwhile, Superpool would work with district municipalities to build child-friendly parks and other facilities.

Mapping vulnerability

Murat Güvenç, a professor of urban planning and geography and director of Kadir Has University's Istanbul Studies Center, said Aksakoğlu and Toksöz had pitched him an exciting but challenging idea. "They wanted a digital map depicting two things: a high-resolution picture of the distribution of age cohorts in the Istanbul metropolitan area alongside a detailed visual representation of income distribution across the city's neighborhoods," Güvenç recalled. Although the first part would be fairly easy, the second would be difficult because the Turkish government did not collect information on distribution of income.

Güvenç contrasted the lack of income data with the situation in the United States, where the Internal Revenue Service could provide precise numbers down to street level. But in Turkey, "there's an undeclared war between the revenue service and households. People don't want to talk about their incomes," he said. Although the government did collect national-level data about income through random sample surveys, it did not have information at regional, city, district, or neighborhood levels. Güvenç said that during previous attempts by the government to collect income information, respondents would lie about their birthplaces or educational backgrounds to "make themselves invisible. It is a sensitive question not to be asked in Middle Eastern countries."

Unable to gather the data directly, Güvenç devised an alternative approach that used property values as proxies for household incomes. Turkish municipalities did collect and publish street-level data about property values, as measured by square meter. Güvenç reasoned that "if you own a very valuable property, your wages may be low but you have an asset that can be converted into high income. If you're a tenant on that property, it means you're in a position to afford high rent. So, the assessed land price can be used as a proxy" for wealth.

Güvenç worked with a three-person team at Kadir Has University to produce sample maps for some Istanbul neighborhoods. Once the first maps were ready, Toksöz arranged a meeting with the Marmara Region Municipalities Union, where Güvenç presented the maps to municipal officials. And although the maps were not finalized, no one at the meeting challenged their accuracy.

It was an important sign that the innovative approach could work. Over the years, Güvenç had learned that "if maps work, people don't speak. But if something is not right, you will immediately get lots of comments, and you cannot correct a mistake on a map by talking about it. It is a visual device, and if it does not work, it is impossible to convince people." Confident that property value was indeed an accurate proxy for income, Güvenç's team completed the

income map for the entirety of Istanbul. It took the team a full year to map the hundred thousand streets in a city of over 15 million people.

At the same time, the team built a digital map of the distribution of age cohorts across the city. In that case, the information was easily obtainable from the Turkish Statistical Institute in Ankara, Turkey's capital city. As in many European countries, Turkey required residents to register at their local government office, and as a result, the government had an accurate database of the home address and age of every registered person in the country.

In the next step, the Kadir Has team overlaid the two maps so that the team could view the correlation between household income and age cohorts across Istanbul. The maps confirmed that highly educated, well-off residents lived in specific enclaves and had relatively small families, Güvenç said. Poorer residents with low levels of education and blue-collar jobs concentrated in other neighborhoods and tended to have large families.

While the Kadir Has team worked on the map's technical aspects, Mazman, executive director of TESEV, led a team of researchers at TESEV in collecting data on child care services from Istanbul municipalities. Working through Toksöz and the Marmara municipalities union, 27 of Istanbul's 39 district municipalities agreed to share information for the mapping project. It was uncertain why the remaining 12 did not join the process, but Erginli of TESEV speculated that the reasons likely involved political considerations and concerns that participation would potentially reveal their failure to provide many social services.

The data collection itself was tedious work. Erginli visited each municipality and submitted a questionnaire containing more than 150 questions that covered topics ranging from services directed at children to physical infrastructure and capacities. She pointed out that "the survey changed a couple of times as it became clearer what types of information were available and what weren't." Another big challenge involved the standardization of data across municipalities. For example, Erginli said that some municipalities classified aid-program data on a household basis, whereas others classified it on an individual basis, and yet others on a financial basis.

Although the process of developing the maps was filled with "many trials and tribulations, the maps were very popular and played a big role in the success" of Istanbul95, Güvenç pointed out.

Training home visitors

Armed with a tool to identify both families for home visitations and suitable sites for the construction of parks, the next crucial steps were to recruit and train municipal workers to become home visitors capable of supporting and educating both pregnant women and families with young children about early childhood development. The job entailed visiting new and expectant parents at their homes twice a week for 18 months to counsel the parents and teach them parenting skills and strategies.

While the municipality of Beyoğlu was reassigning staff members from other departments to become part-time home visitors, Maltepe and Sarıyer were turning staff into full-time home visitors, and Sultanbeyli was hiring new staffers specifically for the program. The Bernard van Leer Foundation assumed the costs of program supervisors, and municipalities paid the salaries of their home visitors.

By late 2017, the implementing partners had reassigned or recruited 18 home visitors and four supervisors to work across the four districts. All of the home visitors and supervisors were college-educated women.

The next step was to create an intensive training course for the home visitors and supervisors. Hande Sart, a professor of educational science at Boğaziçi University, said the course had had to be built from scratch for the Turkish context. First, the team of academics assembled at the university consulted with Powell from the University of the West Indies, who provided advice and literature on home visitation programs like Reach Up and Learn in Jamaica and Boston Basics in the United States. In addition to selecting and translating relevant information into Turkish, Sart said, “We had to make it culturally appropriate. [For example], we adapted songs that Turkish mothers already knew.”

In addition to drawing on examples from around the world, the academics conducted a series of focus groups comprising mothers from low-income households in different areas of Istanbul. “We used the focus groups to learn about their needs and problems,” said Hande Benveniste, who coordinated Boğaziçi’s role in the program. The team was struck by the ways economic and social problems meant that “playing with their children was the last thing on their minds. In Turkey, people often say, ‘It’s a baby; she won’t understand,’ as a reason for not paying attention to a child,” Benveniste added. The idea that talking to an infant or young toddler to help build skills that would be important later—and the notion that play was a pathway to future development—was unfamiliar.

The second important finding was that many mothers were severely depressed. Among other things, the focus groups identified loneliness and poor nutrition as reasons for maternal depression. “Although nutrition had been, traditionally, very good in Turkey, the new generation of mothers in the city preferred to buy snacks instead of nutritious food,” said Benveniste.

Based on focus group results and on examples from abroad, the content of the training materials focused on four key themes: nutrition, childhood development, maternal mental health, and mother and child interaction. Role playing was a critical component of both the training program and the planned home visits. In addition to the 10-day training course Boğaziçi provided, the team created a resource book for home visitors that covered the four key themes.

Conducting home visits

The next obstacle the team of 18 home visitors confronted was the recruitment of families into the program. The aim was to enroll 120 families from each of the four districts in the program, along with an additional 120 families from each district—the latter of which the Boğaziçi team would study as a control group.

But getting families to join a program premised on letting strangers into their homes was no small task. “In the first months, we couldn’t get many families,” Benveniste said. “They didn’t want someone in their house, they didn’t trust us, and they were scared of crime. They were also sometimes conservative families in which, even if the mother wanted it, the mother-in-law refused.”

In each of the four municipalities, home visitors found innovative ways to locate, contact, and persuade pregnant women or families with young children to participate. After using the digital maps to locate vulnerable families, home visitors drew on existing systems in the different municipalities to track down participants.

Recruitment was easiest in Beyoğlu, which was already running a food bank program with 60,000 beneficiaries. As a result, home visitors could go through the database to look for families receiving food aid for children. Beyoğlu provided an extra sign-up incentive for families by offering baby baskets containing toys and other materials. Benveniste said some mothers later told her they had initially joined the program only to get the baby basket, expecting Istanbul95 to peter out after a few months like many other social projects had done in the past.

In Maltepe and Sarıyer, home visitors set up desks at local bazaars and handed out brochures. They also tapped into local women’s associations, using their networks to send text messages encouraging pregnant women or couples with newborns to join the program.

Recruitment was most difficult in Sultanbeyli, the poorest and most conservative of the four districts. Öztürk said, “Citizens were really not familiar with the idea of getting early childhood services from the municipality” because no existing services aimed at children. And because most residents failed to respond to phone calls, home visitors had to knock on doors to speak with people. To reach families, home visitors used family physicians to track down participants. They also used the local marriage registry to identify couples who had gotten married within the previous nine months. Home visitors also asked schools to explain the program to parents, nongovernmental organizations to explain the program to those in their networks, and religious leaders of local mosques to explain the program to their congregations.

Benveniste said the difficulty of recruiting families was not surprising because “we don’t have any other such programs in Turkey. The important thing was that once families learned about the program, they wanted it more and more.”

Another challenge for home visitors, especially in Sultanbeyli, arose when poor families appealed for help that went beyond the scope of the program, such as asking for money or employment. As mothers grew to trust the home visitors, some also sought help with personal matters, such as problems with their husbands or mothers-in-law. Benveniste said such requests clearly disturbed some of the home visitors, who felt an obligation to personally help the families. In response, Benveniste and the program supervisors met with municipal officials from other departments to set up a system that enabled home visitors to refer families to other municipal departments that could offer families help for problems beyond the scope of the program.

Although the knowledge partners provided home visitors with extensive training, the process of learning and refining did not end there. Benveniste emphasized that because this was the first program of its kind in Turkey, flexibility was key. As coordinator between the supervisors and home visitors on one hand and Boğaziçi University on the other, Benveniste met with the home visitation teams every week to hear new challenges and figure out ways to adapt the process.

Although home visitors “were great at doing what they were told, they couldn’t always think outside the box,” Benveniste said. For example, the university team had taught the home visitors to play a game in which a mother would show her baby how to pack into an empty yogurt cup a bunch of cubes scattered onto the floor. The purpose was to build spatial skills and teach children how to put things in the right places, but the home visitors needed coaching to understand that and how to transfer that principle to daily life. “Once we helped them understand the goal behind the activity, they started using other things in the house to teach the same principle. And once the mothers also understood, they, too, transferred the game to the kitchen, for example, where they would show the child how to pack fruits into a bowl,” Benveniste said. “Once they understood the reason, they wanted to keep doing it.”

The visits eventually settled into a stable pattern. The team enrolled mothers before the births of their babies and built relationships with those mothers. They began regular, biweekly visits lasting about 30 or 40 minutes each. Listening and understanding were key elements, and Benveniste said that the first two or three visits focused on building trust with the mothers. “The mothers were in a fragile moment, and we encouraged home visitors to listen to them, be with them, and make them feel important,” Benveniste pointed out. “Trust usually came earlier than we expected, and soon the mothers were calling home visitors to confirm that they were coming to the next visit. For many mothers, it was their only chance for social interaction.”

Rethinking playgrounds

As the home visitation program got under way, the team’s focus shifted to making the city itself more child friendly. The Bernard van Leer team began working with Gürdoğan and Thomsen from architecture firm Superpool to

develop playground designs that both suited the needs of children younger than three years of age and were scalable citywide—that is, that were affordable and met safety standards. Gürdoğan and Thomsen had learned firsthand how difficult that would be because previously, Superpool had designed a playground for the city of Aksaray, that featured equipment not found in the procurement catalogs that Turkish municipal officials typically used. Unable to cost and conduct procurement for the playground by their typical method, the municipality abandoned the design.

Working with Istanbul95, Superpool's first step was to create an ideas book that explained and illustrated early childhood development principles, playground designs, procurement options, and relevant safety codes.⁵ Turkey had signed up to the European safety code standards for playgrounds—although Gürdoğan and Thomsen quickly found that few municipal officials knew what the standards entailed.

The program contracted Superpool to pilot in each of the four districts the design and construction of one new playground specifically designed to suit the needs of children younger than three years. Thomsen explained that traditionally, playgrounds in Istanbul consisted of “a level piece of land with a plastic or metal playground on top of it, with standard equipment like a swing, a slide, and maybe a rocking horse. Usually, the ground is covered in rubber surfacing. That's it.”

To gain support from municipal officials who would build and maintain the playgrounds, Superpool helped design study trips to Copenhagen and Amsterdam, where strategic-planning directors and coordinators could see for themselves the playground designs in reality. The playgrounds were simple and low-cost, but kids were playing actively. In addition to demonstrating the feasibility of the playground designs, the study trips helped Gürdoğan and Thomsen build strong personal relationships with officials. Whereas in past engagements with municipalities Superpool had been just a company offering services, now the architects were providers of technical support.

Superpool and the municipalities consulted the Kadir Has University maps to select suitable locations for the new playgrounds in the four districts. In May 2019, Superpool opened its first park in Sarıyer; in the following September, Sultanbeyli municipality opened its. By the time the coronavirus pandemic interrupted construction work in early 2020, the two remaining parks were nearing completion.

The Superpool parks were completely different from anything else that had been built in Istanbul. Whenever possible, sand and grass replaced rubberized surfaces, and logs, trampolines, and wooden slides replaced plastic contraptions. Instead of level surfaces, the new parks featured small hills, valleys, steps, and other obstacles to challenge young children as they navigated the environment.

To further raise awareness about the need for urban spaces built to accommodate children younger than three years, Superpool and partner municipalities arranged a series of pop-up playground events that temporarily transformed busy intersections and other public spaces into play areas. They also

arranged so-called stroller audits in the partner municipalities,⁶ where local political leaders and senior officials were encouraged to develop local, small-scale solutions after they physically pushed a stroller through the neighborhood so they could experience the difficulties caregivers faced in navigating urban environments that lacked pavements and child-friendly streets.

At the same time, Superpool worked with the Kadir Has Faculty of Art and Design to develop a studio course that grew into a stand-alone master's degree program in urban and childhood studies. The Bernard van Leer Foundation offered scholarships to public servants so that they could attend and thereby expand their skills.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

In late 2018, a new risk threatened to derail the program's rollout and the nascent reform coalition. On November 17, the police arrested Aksakoğlu on allegations that he was part of an attempt “to overthrow the government or to [impede], partially or entirely, its performance.”⁷ The charges stemmed from Aksakoğlu's attendance at the 2013 Gezi Park protests against the demolition of one of the few remaining green spaces on the European side of Istanbul. That arrest of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's country director in Turkey amid a highly charged political context had the potential to throw the program into disarray. If the ruling AKP linked the allegations against Aksakoğlu with the work of the foundation, there was a real risk that the initiative would become politically tainted, leading some of its existing partners—including AKP-led municipalities—to withdraw and dissuading potential new partners from signing up.

The ensuing months stress-tested the nonpartisan nature of the program as well as the commitments of the reform coalition of knowledge partners and the four implementing municipalities.

In a testament to the strength of the network, all of the partners continued their work with little disruption. Superpool principal Gürdoğan helped maintain ties and move work forward—a sign that the program was domestically owned and sustainable and not something propped up from outside.

Aksakoğlu stayed involved while in jail. “I saw [Aksakoğlu] every Wednesday in prison,” Öztürk said. “I gave him all the documents about what had happened that week and what the challenges were. He then did his homework and returned the paperwork on the following Sunday.” Plus, to help partner municipalities sustain the program's momentum, “We created opportunities for them to publicize the impact of the program, reminding them that this [is positive for] their own public relations, too,” Öztürk said.

Even with the team's best efforts to maintain the program's momentum and to prevent Istanbul95 from becoming politically tainted, the program could not have survived if the knowledge partners and implementing partners did not think it was yielding tangible results. “One mayor even said that the crisis between the Netherlands and Turkey was a high-level issue, and we are not involved in high-level issues,” Toksöz recalled. “That mayor said this project is

good, and we want to continue running it in the belief that the project was really making a positive change.”

The partner municipalities remained in the program. Their reaction was a testament to the partners’ commitment to the program. “Unlike what I was expecting, the people from AKP municipalities showed solidarity with me,” Aksakoğlu said.

The court released Aksakoğlu in June 2019, acquitting him of all charges on February 18, 2020.⁸ He said he was proud that the reform program partners had held together and continued to implement Istanbul95 during his incarceration and that the partners “didn’t really need our intervention much anymore.”

ASSESSING RESULTS

In addition to directly benefiting participating families and proving the efficacy of home visits and public investments in child-friendly infrastructure, the overarching aim of Istanbul95 was to entrench the program’s main elements into the work of participating municipalities as an ongoing service. The team succeeded in three of the four initial partner municipalities as well as in the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality—all of them having made home visitation and parks for children parts of their five-year strategic plans.

But perhaps the greatest positive result from the program was indirect and unforeseen: At the beginning of the Istanbul95 project, Aksakoğlu and others on the team had preached to many Istanbul municipality officials about the value of investments in early childhood. At the time, their words often fell on deaf ears. But later, after some of the listeners had gone on to become key staffers in İmamoğlu’s mayoral campaign, they persuaded the candidate to include early childhood development in his campaign platform.

İmamoğlu’s June 2019 election victory constituted a big step forward for Istanbul95 because it created the possibility of the scaling of early childhood development reforms across the city. “Although districts have powerful networks and are closer to the people, budgets and the human resources capacity of the metropolitan municipality are far bigger,” said Zelal Yalçın, a woman-and-youth activist who served as İmamoğlu’s social policy coordinator during the campaign and who became social policy coordinator on his team after the election.

Benveniste said the decisions made by the initial four partner municipalities—to begin regarding early childhood development as part of their essential services—was heavily influenced by the popularity of the program among participating families. The program had succeeded in building a powerful constituency in support of early childhood development. “The mothers couldn’t get enough of it. In the focus group comments, they say they want [home visits] every week, and they want them to start as soon as they become pregnant. They want more and more,” Benveniste said. “These comments went straight to the municipal administration, and now the administration is trying to build the systems.”

The program was similarly embedded into the work of Boğaziçi University, where the academics who worked on Istanbul95 established an early childhood development center to help scale up the program in other municipalities. The continued involvement of the Boğaziçi team was especially important for the home visitation component after the Bernard van Leer Foundation announced it would be closing its country office in Turkey at the end of 2020.

The home visitation component initially aimed to enroll 120 families with young children in the program—as well as another 120 in the control group—in each of the four participating municipalities. The team hit or exceeded the target in Sultanbeyli and Beyoğlu but managed to keep only around 50 families to the end of the program in Sarıyer and Maltepe. Benveniste said the figure was low in Maltepe due mainly to a big construction project that dramatically increased property values in the area and saw many families sell their properties and move to other districts.

After three years, 279 families in the intervention group had remained enrolled throughout, as had 249 in the control group. Preliminary findings from the Boğaziçi team’s impact evaluation suggested that children who participated in the program had better-developed spoken-language skills and played more games with their caregivers than did children in the control group.⁹ In addition, the evaluation said that based on the World Health Organization’s indicators of Infant and Young Child Development, the “development scores of the intervention children were statistically higher than the scores of children from the control group.”¹⁰

A survey of how often mothers engaged in six types of parenting practices that boosted child development showed that caregivers in the program engaged more often in reading, singing, conversation, play, and praising the child than did mothers in the control group. The finding was confirmed by in-depth observational assessments carried out by Boğaziçi students in Sultanbeyli and Maltepe.¹¹

The observational assessments “suggested that intervention mothers were more likely to talk to their children while doing household work, provide and encourage their children to play with developmentally challenging toys, and structure their play time. Furthermore, the home visitation program provided a buffering effect for intervention mothers such that they remained involved in their child’s learning despite high levels of chaos in their home setting.”¹²

The Boğaziçi evaluation also measured the impact of the program on maternal mental health. The results of periodic surveys revealed that negative thinking decreased significantly among mothers involved in Istanbul95 compared with mothers in the control group.¹³

The playground component of the program yielded two new completed parks in Sultanbeyli and Sarıyer, with two more playgrounds nearing completion. Following the breakthrough that came when the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality joined the program in mid-2019, Superpool and the foundation teamed up to support the development of playgrounds for the new day care centers. By mid-2020, Superpool had already designed 20 new playgrounds.

Given the scale of the construction work, Thomsen said he was optimistic that the concept had proved successful and “that the municipality would be able to learn from the 20 designs and to work with a new mind-set at other locations.”

Even though only four district municipalities fully participated in the program, the reform team’s decision to disaggregate Istanbul95 into different components meant that an additional 23 districts shared data and participated in the mapping part of the project even though they did not sign up for the home visits and playground components.

The creation of digital maps that covered a large part of Istanbul produced wide-ranging benefits. In addition to guiding decisions about where to invest in home visitation and child-friendly playgrounds, Öztürk said, the maps became “an essential tool . . . Decision makers didn’t feel caught out by the information [being made public]. In most cases, it was very helpful and motivating for them.” Erginli of TESEV said: “The municipalities were very happy with the result. No one was expecting the maps to be so good.” A few months after she initially collected the data, Erginli interviewed representatives of the four Istanbul95 partner municipalities to find out whether they were continuing to use the maps. “They said they were, and some even said it’s easier to look at the data on the website rather than asking another department for information. Given the problems with coordination between different departments in different municipalities, this is a tool for seeing what other departments and neighboring municipalities are doing.”

Armed with the results of the impact assessment of the home visits and with other evidence of the utility of the maps and playground upgrades, the coalition behind improving access to services for families with young children was finally in a position to reach for what Öztürk had earlier described as the “dream”: using evidence from the partner municipalities to persuade the national government to embed early childhood development as an essential government function. Benveniste was optimistic: “I’m expecting the results will show a difference. Our hopes are that we will be able to take the results to the national government and that the government will embrace them. Getting to the scale we want will ultimately become possible if the central government also believes in it.”

REFLECTIONS

In early 2020, the arrival of the novel coronavirus in Turkey brought an abrupt pause to most aspects of the Istanbul95 program, including home visits. As with most other government programs, the impacts of the coronavirus and of the associated need for physical distancing forced municipal officials to rethink implementation of the program. The financial and economic costs of government actions to contain the virus also raised the specter of budget cuts to early childhood development programs. However, given the way the program had survived—and even expanded—during the seven months that its director, Yiğit Aksakoğlu, was kept in detention, municipal officials were confident it would survive. In most cases, partner municipalities had already included the

initiatives in their five-year strategic plans, and Aksakoğlu said he was confident that the districts as well as the Istanbul and İzmir metropolitan municipalities would continue the program.

Zelal Yalçın, social policy coordinator in the Istanbul metro, said: “The pandemic is the main problem, but we need to find other ways now. The program relies on things like home visits, where physical distancing is difficult, so we are exploring whether a guidance hotline for mothers could be part of a solution.” Yalçın nonetheless said that the enthusiastic participation of the metro held the key to scaling up the program: “What makes us different is that we have the power to take the mainstreaming of early childhood development policy to another level.”

Nihal Yeniad of Bogaziçi University’s department of educational sciences added that even in the absence of the coronavirus pandemic, the scaling up of individual home visits would have posed a challenge. “The target group is very large . . . so we are now looking to develop a curriculum for group training,” Yeniad said, adding that “getting the training in groups can also be more effective because mothers can learn a lot from interactions with one another.”

Yalçın confirmed that the Istanbul metro was “working on a plan with Bogaziçi. We want individual home visits to start in the seventh or eighth month of pregnancy and to continue for the first year after birth. After the first year, once mothers become more mobile with the child, they can gather in groups at the child care centers” the municipality was constructing.

Hande Benveniste, a childhood development specialist at Bogaziçi, said the Istanbul metro was key to massively scaling up early childhood interventions to eventually reach the 1.2 million families in the city. Compared with the 279 families that completed the three-year program in the four districts, the metro planned to reach 1,200 families in 2020 alone, “and it is planning to get more home visitors for the other years, so it will increase,” she said.

Despite the fresh financial and practical obstacles posed by the coronavirus pandemic—in addition to the sheer difficulty of scaling up the program—Aksakoğlu took heart from the way the reform coalition had taken ownership of the program. Even while he was incarcerated, he said, the program did not miss a beat “because we let the partners innovate from the start. We told them what we wanted to achieve together, but the rest was their own know-how and innovation. Despite the ‘unfortunate event,’ they could go on because it was their own product and effort and not something imposed by someone else.” But the program also thrived because of the Bernard van Leer team’s ability to assemble a broad reform coalition and then navigate the choppy waters of Turkish politics.

The team sold the program to knowledge partners (1) as an opportunity to directly contribute to the ways municipalities supported young children and—by building rigorous monitoring and evaluation into the program from the start—(2) as a unique opportunity to collect data and study the impact of early childhood development interventions in the Turkish environment.

The Bernard van Leer team persuaded political decision makers by showing how the program enabled them to reach their constituents at home while directly delivering a service that would yield a significant return on investment for both beneficiaries and the government. The role of the knowledge partners in nurturing a nonpartisan reform ecosystem was especially important given the political divisions between and across various levels of government in Turkey.

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