

**Council of Disabled People as an Application of Participatory  
Democracy [The Case of Bursa, Turkey]**

*Bir Katılımcı Demokrasi Uygulama Alanı Olarak Özürlüler Meclisi  
[Bursa, Türkiye Örneęi]*

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## Council of Disabled People as an Application of Participatory Democracy [The Case of Bursa, Turkey]<sup>1</sup>

### *Bir Katılımcı Demokrasi Uygulama Alanı Olarak Özürlüler Meclisi* *[Bursa, Türkiye Örneği]*

Serhat Özgökçeler<sup>2</sup>

*“The Council of Disabled People;  
is a democratic platform encouraging the citizens to take care of their own problems  
improving participation, sustainability, livability, urban rights;  
in the light of the principles of tolerance and reconciliation;  
to be able to express one’s thoughts freely and generate solutions,  
enabling to improve the mechanisms of decision making and implementing.”<sup>3</sup>*

#### **Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to emphasize that the Council of Disabled People that become meaningful under the perspective of the conception of participatory democracy is a tool of social inclusion and equality policies for the disabled people. The method of in-depth interview was utilized in the study. The findings obtained from the interview with active members from the Administrative Board of Council of Disabled People designate that the disabled people have a say in the fields such as business, politics, culture, education, health etc., that they help the disabled people to improve their sense of participation into urban life and their feeling of belongingness to the city, that whatever required is done to make sure that the rights and benefits of the disabled are protected, that a public opinion is forged through the means of communication for the solution of the problems of the disabled people, and that based on the needs and problems of the disabled people, demands are determined and it is ensured that they play an active role in the production of solutions and projects. The interviews have been made face to face with the disabled people who are the members of the Council of Disabled People of the Bursa City Council within the body of the Metropolitan Municipality of Bursa and the names of the interviewees are to stay anonymous.*

**Keywords:** *Participatory democracy, Council of Disabled People, social inclusion, social exclusion, local governments.*

#### **Özet**

*Bu çalışmanın amacı, katılımcı demokrasi anlayışı perspektifinde anlam kazanan Özürlüler/Engelliler Meclisi’nin, özürlü insanlar için sosyal içermenin ve eşitlik politikalarının bir aracı olduğunu vurgulamaktır. Çalışmada derinlemesine görüşme metodu uygulanmıştır. Görüşmelerde elde edilen bulgular, özürlülerin iş, siyaset, kültür, eğitim, sağlık vb. alanlarda söz sahibi olduğuna; özürlülerin kentsel hayata katılma ve kente ait olma duygularını geliştirdiğine; özürlü insanların hak ve menfaatlerinin korunması için gerekli çalışmaların yapıldığına; iletişim araçları yoluyla özürlü*

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was presented at the “Industrial Relations in Europe Conference [IREC]” hosted by FAFO in Oslo, Norway on September 8–10, 2010. My thanks to *Quimi Sugrañes* (Raleigh, North Carolina) for providing insightful suggestions for revisions.

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<sup>3</sup>The Work Directory of Bursa City Council, the Council of Disabled People, Part II.

*insanların sorunlarının çözümü için kamuoyunun oluşturulduğuna; özürülülerin ihtiyaç ve sorunlarından yola çıkılarak, taleplerinin belirlendiğine ve çözümler ve proje üretiminde aktif rol almalarının sağlandığına işaret etmektedir. Görüşmeler, Bursa Büyükşehir Belediyesi'ne bağlı Bursa Kent Konseyi'ndeki Engelliler Meclisi'ne üye olan özürülüler ile yüz yüze görüşülerek gerçekleştirilmiştir.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Katılımcı demokrasi, Özürülüler/Engelliler Meclisi, sosyal içerme, sosyal dışlanma, yerel yönetimler.

## Introduction

It is crucially important that problems related to the provision of efficient and productive services should be resolved. The existence of the principles related to the institutionalization of *democracy, participation* and a *transparency* of the local government appearing in the international texts to which Turkey is a party has required the developments in this subject to be carried over to a more institutional structure. Turkey, being a part of the international structure, has demonstrated her efforts to integrate many of her EU-oriented developments into her own institutional structure within the local government legislation.

Many municipal laws have been passed on this issue within the framework of the local government reform on which a lot of effort has been exerted and which has been on the agenda of many governments. In this study, the unit of the Council of Disabled People subordinates to the Municipal Council/City Council, which is the most important arrangement of the Municipal Law numbered 5393 (Belediyeler Kanunu) in terms of participation, is to be examined, regarding specifically the case of Bursa, in terms of participatory democracy.

### 1. The Perception / Notion of Participatory Democracy

As it is commonly known, the concept of democracy signifies "governing the people" in its simplest sense. Therefore, it has been established by the people and necessitated a vision, thought, speech and action. Democracy associated together with the rules and practices established by the individuals and empowered by the public is also a model requiring self-respect as well as respect to others (Öner, 2005).

The public within the existing democratic system, in other words in representative democracies, tries to get themselves governed by the representatives elected through balloting cast at certain intervals. On the other hand, the representative democracy, as far as the current situation is concerned, has turned into a disorganized system in which "*the public are governed by the representatives are actually elected by themselves*", they are only remembered during the election times, and they have no impact or effect on the government of the country at other times. Representative democracy, in other words, has turned into a "meditative", "indirect" democracy in which the public are governed by mediators. In this connection, what can the solution be? The concept of "participatory democracy" has been a matter of a hot debate in the Western literature for a long time and is specified as a new alternative in a bid to resolve the problems and constraints of the representative democracy.

Even though the concept of participatory democracy applicable at any level of the government became a current issue between 1960s and 970s, it is in fact not a new concept. And its roots date back to 18th century. According to Mansbridge, the concept in question

was invented in 1960 by Kaufman. And it emerged as a result of the students' demands during a demonstration at Michigan University in USA to take part in the affairs at their university (Cunningham, 2001).

In that case, "*what is participatory democracy?*" From a theoretical point of view, participatory democracy can be regarded both as a continuation of representative democracy and as a paradigm that can be presented as an alternative to it. However, consequently, representative democracy both as an independent concept and the relationship between the concepts of participatory democracy-representative and democracy has not been resolved theoretically. Despite all this theoretical *uncertainty* and the fact that the concept of representative democracy has meant *different concepts* to different people, participatory democracy in the political practices refers to some significant points (Catt, 1999; Sartori, 1996).

### **1.1. The Responsibility Constituted by the Public Masses**

Primarily, a new model that can be functionalized on the responsibility of sharing domain constituted by the public masses is envisaged. The parties to this issue in this new model are regarded equal and the decision making process is shaped up as a product of a mutual effort. This process shaped up through mutual efforts has become more meaningful through political, economical, social and culture-oriented efforts. Especially with some of the NGO together with the some parts of the society including the politicians, this model will be realized in regards of the needs and objectives at local, regional and national levels. All these efforts will be able to keep both the politics/politicians within this process and integrate the public into it. Nonetheless, the new community leaders who will have the ability to directly represent the public view and also have institutional tools such as NGOs -local development institutions, in order to achieve it. They will be described as the representatives of the public and their community in terms of the subject concerned at a regional level.

Participatory democracy, getting one step ahead of the democratic representative, provides an opportunity to the public to directly express their opinions and views through the self-made tools [NGOs-local development agencies, *new* social movements or protest groups, lobbies etc.] without any mediator. It generates, by going beyond it, the chances of producing projects and finding solution to problems thanks to these tools.

### **1.2. Institutional Representation Mechanism**

In participatory democracies, the concept of "*representation*" has to maintain its existence. The above-mentioned formations/organization will emerge on the basis of the principle of representing the public and their opinions as well as views. In this day and age, it is vital to have the mechanism of institutional representation. However, the basic difference between the representation in question and the representative meditative democracies is that the public establish the institutions themselves that will govern them and that the representatives of these institutions come from within. These "*new leaders*" that will emerge from the heart of the public without any appointment will be able to represent the opinions and views of the public without any mediator in the decision making processes. In this sense, it is possible to describe participatory democracy as a new model or democracy in which "*direct democracy*" or "*unmediated representation*" is made possible.

### 1.3. The Social Resources of Participatory Democracy

The establishment and fictionalization of participatory democracy as a new political and social model have some prerequisites in the society today. These prerequisites may be shaped up by the existing political culture in the society today. It is clear that participatory democracy is not a cure-all “model” that has a “secret” formula. Participatory democracy should stem from a political culture that strives “in the minds of the public” and manifest itself in various manners within the every life. If this particular culture stops the participatory democracy to be implemented with all its dimensions, it has to be functionalized through a change of permanent mindset. The social resources of participatory democracy are in the following:

#### 1.3.1. A Powerful Civil Society

One of the prerequisites of participatory democracy is the existence of a very powerful civil perception in the society. In those societies in which civil awareness is not very high, it is not possible for the participatory democracy to be implemented. It is because participatory democracy should have a sufficient amount of awareness and civil consciousness in order to defend its statutory rights in the face of events and cases. Moreover, there is a need for the culture of civil institution-institutionalization that will mobilize this awareness. And eventually, there is a need for information based on civil society formations [such as NGOs, *new social movements*, civil society institutions, protest groups etc.] that will carry our all these activities.

#### 1.3.2. The Culture of Participation-Debate-Reconciliation

In order for the participatory democracy to strive and be established, there has to be a culture of debate and reconciliation in the society. Participatory democracy, unlike representative democracy, is a new concept model-system that comprises the assessment of the problem, the assessment of the roots of the problem, the assessment of the parties to the problem and requires all the parties concerned to take actively part in the process. Temporary or permanent collaborations are the significant dimensions of participatory democracy.

#### 1.3.3. Transition from Individual Awareness to Social Awareness

The modern society was a structure in which the individuality of a person came to the forefront, and the individual was sanctified and fetishized. Another dimension of the classical democracy, on the other hand, was shaped by protecting the rights of the individuals. This individuality caused the social responsibility and individuals' responsibilities to the society to be pushed aside. Participatory democracy requires the social awareness to be brought to the forefront again by emphasizing the notion of individuality. The civil formations such as NGOs, civil society organization or new-social movements as mentioned in participatory democracy have a mutual awareness about an issue that concerns either the whole or only a part of the society. In this context, the “individual”, in participatory democracy, turns into a “citizen”.

According to Sartori (1996), it is not correct to consider “*taking part in elections*” as a real kind of participation. Besides, regarding casting a vote as participation does not actually reflect the true meaning of participation either. In this connection, if we are to talk about a true and acceptable sense of participation, participation should mean the solitary and voluntary participation of an individual. Therefore, participation does not only mean being

a party to an event or being involuntarily made a party to an event or being mobilized to take an action by somebody else's volition. In the fundamental theory of democracy, it is emphasized that participation is not ignored as an act of getting involved in an action. The fact that organizations and unions established voluntarily by individuals are regarded as important, and issues such as the theory of multi-group society and in-party democracy point out the existence of a large participation literature that increases the significance of participation within democracy.

While the theories of participatory democracy are classified according to normative society-politics and empirical-analytical tendencies, they are also distinguished from one another depending on the strength of the politicization advocated. What is required in the normative school is examined in terms of form, conditions and effects. An example of this can be taking part in public affairs as much as possible, and additionally, making the interests compatible, interaction, consensus, and the type of the peaceful agreement amongst those who have a right to vote. While the theory of participatory democracy wishes to broaden the field established by those who have rights to vote, it also wishes to popularize their speeches on public affairs, formation of volition and participation in decision making (Schmidt, 2001). For instance, politics in "Powerful Democracy", one of the approaches of participatory democracy, is something done for the citizens, not something the citizens themselves do. Besides, attention, commitment, liability, mutual debate and cooperation are the distinguishing aspects (Barber, 1995).

As far as the citizen model of the theory of participatory democracy is concerned, it is claimed that an average citizen has the capacity for more and better participation. This model is criticized because of its aspects of overrating the citizens' competence and the fact that an individual is ignored; in reality, there is someone who tries to maximize his/her own interests. Despite this commonly agreed-upon criticism, the results of the studies done on participation are equally remarkable.

The empirical type of this theory has been considered in studies related to political participation and the following results have been obtained. In Western countries, there has been a great demand for the opportunities of political participation. Inclination to participation, opportunities in certain groups that have a right to vote, exceeds the existing available institutional opportunities of participation.

This particular situation becomes prominent especially in those who are young and well educated. According to the theory of participatory democracy, taking advantage of the education system by those who have not had the chance of doing so before, the increment of information and knowledge of the citizens since the 1960s have become an important *factor* that has increased the demands of active participation (Schmidt, 2001).

The intrinsic features of participatory democracy can be arranged as in the following (Sarıbay, [http://www.birikimdergisi.com/birikim/dergiyazi.aspx?did=1&dsid=32&dyid=1219&yazi=Yurttaşlık\\_ve\\_Katılcı\\_Demokrasi](http://www.birikimdergisi.com/birikim/dergiyazi.aspx?did=1&dsid=32&dyid=1219&yazi=Yurttaşlık_ve_Katılcı_Demokrasi), 11.07.2011):

*a. All the individuals should have the opportunities to allow them to comprehensively participate in the relative collective decision making.*

*b. Participation in collective decision making should not be limited to casting a vote and should encompass many other activities too.*

c. The responsibility in collective decision making should be distributed equally; it should not be limited only to official and/or experts; should encompass all those concerned as well.

d. Participation in collective decision making should not be limited to political systems; it should be spread across all spheres of the social life.

e. Participation in collective decisions in the collective spheres in the non-political spheres should teach the political skills and norms to the individuals and encourage them to participate in more comprehensive political debates.

Based on all these features, the following are requirements participatory democracy: There has to be a change of mindset in the citizens; they have to consider themselves active and they have to try to increase their capacities to improve themselves. Therefore, participatory democracy can only be achieved as long as the citizens are autonomous and are able to improve themselves to the extent that participatory democracy is achieved. At the same time, citizens then can be *autonomous* and improve themselves.

Depending on the conceptual developments, we would regard the local governments as the practical units where participatory democracy is to be institutionalized. Democracy at the local level allows for more flexible and efficient solutions for today's complexities. In this framework, one of the key approaches in increasing the quality of local democracy is to improve the citizens' participation in the decision making process.

## 2. A Type of Participation in Government in Local Democracy: *The City Councils*

The most important arrangement of the 5393 numbered Municipal Law on the issue of "participation" is that of the City Councils. Even before the arrangement in question was passed, there were still the City Councils in Turkey. However, these Councils did not have a legal basis (Ökmen & Parlak, 2010; Şengül, 2010; Çukurçayır, 2007; 2009; 2011).

The City Councils signify democratic structures and governance mechanisms (2006 dated and The City Council Arrangements with the 2009 amendments, art. 4/b) of common sense and reconciliation where the central government, local government, vocational institutions having the characteristic of public institutions and civil society get together with a mutual understanding and within the framework of citizenship. When the developmental priorities and the problems of visions of the city are determined, at that point the debated and mutual solutions are found on the basis of sustainable developing principles.

The real objective of these councils, in addition to enabling the citizens to take part in local government, is to overcome the common inadequacies of the existing local government system, to be able to find solutions in terms of *modern social municipality* by directly determining the needs of the public through the mediation of municipality's organizations and the local representatives, and to overcome the shortcomings and inadequacies of the municipality through public participation and a probable "collective and voluntary work of the city". In short, being able to establish a more livable, modern and solidarity-based city are the prominent objectives of the City Councils (Seyyar & Demir, 2008).

The City Councils that the municipalities have tried to establish through their own demands are today considered as legal obligation. In the Municipality Law dated 2005, numbered 5393, the establishment of the City Councils was made an obligation. According to this Law, the City Council was defines as in the following: A democratic government organ that aims to improve a city vision and awareness of citizenship, to protect the rights of the

city and accomplish (art. 76) a sustainable development, environmental awareness, social assistance and solidarity, transparency, asking for account and accountability and the principles of *participation* and *decentralization* in the city life.

The main duties and aims of the City Councils are as in the following (2006 dated and The City Council Arrangements with the 2009 amendments, art. 6):

- *Popularizing democratic participation at the local level, improving citizenship rights and consciousness of a mutually dependent life, and enabling the adoption of a multi-partnered and multi-agented sense of governance.*
- *Enabling a sustainable development and preparing plans for the solution of emerging problems, and enabling their application.*
- *Contributing towards the establishment of a common mind in determining, implementing and monitoring the basic strategies and action plans related to the whole city.*
- *Improving participation, democracy and the culture of reconciliation within the framework of locality.*
- *Protecting the values related to the identity of the city such as its history, culture and natural beauties and improving them.*
- *Contributing to the utilization of the city's resources efficiently, productively and fairly.*
- *Supporting the programs that are based on sustainable development, improving the quality of life in the city that are environmentally- friendly and the elimination of poverty,*
- *Enhancing the effectiveness and the active role of the children, young people, the women, and disabled people in the social life and enabling them to take an active role in the local decision making mechanisms,*
- *Contributing to implementation of the principle of transparency, participation, accountability and predictability,*
- *Making sure that the opinions and views collected at the city council are sent to the relevant municipality to be negotiated.*

The City Councils are in a position to establish a council or workgroups regarding the issues of their duties. However, the rules of procedures and principles of these councils and workgroups are determined by the general assembly. The opinions and views determined and collected in the councils and workgroups are presented to the municipal council after being negotiated and accepted in the general assembly of the City Council (2006 dated and The City Council Arrangements with the 2009 amendments, art. 12).

## **2.1. The City Council of Bursa Metropolitan Municipality**

Although Bursa Metropolitan Municipality set up the City Council in 1995, the municipality could only prepare the work guidelines in accordance with article 76 of the City Law numbered 5393, on the basis of article 16 of the City Council Arrangements dated 2006 and numbered 26313 (with the amendment dated 2009 and numbered 27250).

Towards the direction determined in the article 75 of the Municipality Law numbered 5393, The City Council of Bursa; in the light of European Municipal Charter, European Local Governments Autonomy Charter, Agenda 21 and the principles of *sustainability, livability and empowering people* of Habitat II, within the framework of tolerance, respect and understanding, developing the mechanisms that will enable the public to participate and monitor local government and encouraging the public to make a claim to their own problems; is a formation that is based on governance-oriented participatory democracy and

prioritizes civil society (The Work Guidelines of the City Council of Bursa, Chapter II, art. 4, <http://www.bursakentkonseyi.org.tr/?sayfa=icerik&id=14>, 29.07.2011).

The main objectives of the City Council of Bursa Metropolitan Municipality, which has done some great accomplishments so far, can be stated as follows (The Work Guidelines of the City Council of Bursa, Chapter II, art. 5, <http://www.bursakentkonseyi.org.tr/?sayfa=icerik&id=14>, 29.07.2011):

- a) *Popularizing democratic participation at local level, enabling the adoption of a multi-partnered and multi-agented sense of governance.*
- b) *Determining the strategies that will be integrated with the nature, history, cultural heritage, tourism values and socio-economical lives of Bursa and publicizing them.*
- c) *Determining the priorities amongst the policies that will constitute the basis of a sustainable development of the city.*
- d) *Contributing towards the institutionalization of civil society by improving participation, democracy and the culture of reconciliation.*
- e) *Preparing action plans together with townspeople, implementing and improving them.*
- f) *Supporting all the activities aimed at enhancing the efficiency of the children, young people, the women and the disabled people in the social life and enabling them to take an active role in the local decision making mechanisms.*
- g) *Making sure that the decisions taken by the Council is brought to the agenda of the Metropolitan Municipality.*
- h) *Working and researching on every issue concerning the city life.*

The City Councils have adopted an understanding of a *multi-agency/governance* concerning all the issues related to the city. This understanding has developed a legal framework. This understanding has gained a legal framework after the last law reform. As it is stated in the Municipality Law numbered 5393, not only the City Councils, it has appeared to have a vision/image supporting the institutionalization of participation through other mechanisms as well.

### **3. A Study on the Council of Disabled People in Bursa City Council**

Together with the work groups and the councils of *young people, woman, children and disabled people* formed aimed at accomplishing a sustainable development, popularizing a participatory government, regulating the social and cultural activities, generating an awareness of environmental protection, and publicizing the city, the City Councils are carrying out their duties and activities.

With the aim of making the awareness of common life and living conditions in the city more efficient, the City Councils are enhancing their practices and activities especially for the “disadvantaged groups”. In order to facilitate the transportation of the disabled people in the city, the central and local government representatives, together with NGOs, are carrying out joint works and activities by launching vocational courses to enhance their employment opportunities, making them feel that they are not alone thanks to various social and cultural activities, (Çukurçayır & Eroğlu, 2009).

The Council of Disabled People set up in 1997 became one of the councils available in the City Council of Bursa since 2009. Apart from the Council of Disabled People, there are also *the councils of Children, Women and Youth*. The main aims of the Council of Disabled People that has currently 350 active members can be summarized as follows (The Work Guidelines of the City Council of Bursa, Chapter II, art. 6, <http://www.bursakentkonseyi.org.tr/?sayfa=icerik&id=54>, 01.08.2011):

- *Ensuring that the disabled people take an active part in city government and taking up a role in the solution of problem related to themselves and to the city.*
- *Ensuring that the disabled people carry out their activities with an aim of maintaining a "sustainable development".*
- *Representing the disabled people at national, international and municipal levels, and organize activities accordingly.*
- *Improving the disabled people's sense of municipal identity and belonging.*
- *Supporting the disabled people to research and produce and become useful individuals to their society and the country, as well as to improving their individual initiations by featuring their entrepreneur and dynamic identities.*
- *Improving their solidarity and sharing-oriented characteristics within the sense of "partnership" and getting them adopt a habit of cooperation.*
- *Ensuring that the practices and applications to be made in the buildings within the city life, outdoor venues, in transportation, education, commerce, art, culture, health and employment opportunities are to be rearranged to cater for the needs of those described as "disabled people".*
- *Ensuring an integrative and identical functioning in the design of buildings and supporting the construction of unhindered venues and spaces for the whole community.*
- *Ensuring that the existing physical spaces are restored, adopted or designing and implementing the new practices and application with the disabled people, with the old people in mind. The relevant standards and strategies are determined, and do research and take actions regarding this issue.*
- *Ensuring that the education and productive capacities of the disabled people in the society are improved and help them take a greater part in the social life.*

Besides, the Council of Disabled People in Bursa City Council makes sure, within the atmosphere of reconciliation and participation, that the production of what is to lay the foundation of a sustainable development of the city of Bursa and the underlying problems are determined, and to contribute towards the potential solution of these problems without discriminating against *language, religion, race, culture, class, education and gender*.

Furthermore, attracting the disabled people into social and cultural life, informing them and their families about their statutory rights enabling them to be active by generating proposals of solutions to their problems and building a bridge by telling the public about the disabled people are areas of interest of the Council in question.

There are in total seven (7) interrelated work groups of the Council in question. These are: *Social and Cultural Work Group, Physical Landscaping Work Group, Research and Development Work Group, Press and Information and Media Manager, Communication and Support Work Group, Manager of Women's Status and Project Work Group*. In this study, those member with whom we interviewed in terms of participation were selected from those work groups mentioned.

Within the body of Bursa Council of Disabled People, the members are predominantly *orthopedically/physically disabled people*. The other members are hearing

impaired people, people with mental disability as well as visually impaired people. The majority of these members had only primary/secondary school education. Nonetheless, education opportunities of the people with metal disability were very limited. It is simply because education opportunities for people with mental disability are almost none existing.

One of the members Mr. MT (age 29, with elementary school education only), emphasized that the most crucial problem in integrating the disabled people into the social life was their failure to take advantage of the education opportunities efficiently and went on to say:

*“What we are doing here is to provide training to those disabled people who failed to be trained through public education centers. At the end of those courses, they get a certificate recognized by the ME (The Ministry of Education)...as far as I am concerned enhancement of participation is closely related with the training of the disabled people!”*

When asked who the active members of Bursa Council of Disabled People are, Ms. EG (age 30, high school graduate) replied as in the following:

*“It is like a multi-attended representatives’ council in here. I mean the members of the Disabled Council members, the representatives of associations and foundations working for the disabled people, one apiece representative from the Directorate of National Education and Private Education and Rehabilitation Center of the Provincial Social Services Directorate, one representative from Uludag University, the representatives of the units working for the disabled people at Metropolitan and central district municipalities, and the director of the City Council’s Disabled People Councils of the central district municipalities are the ones that spring to my mind (...) Therefore, we have the participation of all different sorts of circles here (...)”*

Bursa Council of Disabled People is also regarded, in a way, as a “unifying” factor between the disabled people and the local people in the city. Therefore, the disabled people have the chance to get themselves represented through the Council and do not break away from the city life. Nonetheless, “a joint city vision” is likely to emerge amongst the local government, the City Council and the disabled people; the disabled citizens grow stronger “ties” with their locality. This is crucially important for the establishment of participation and participatory democracy.

This particular characteristic is predominantly true for the Council of Disabled People of Bursa as well. Mr. İS (age 31, high school graduate), one of the members of the executive board had the following to say regarding this issue:

*“We have a meeting here on every Thursday at 6 o’clock. The reason why we have them is to deal with the complaints and the requests of the disabled people and mobilize the relevant authorities to resolve their problems! All those complaints are dealt with the participation to the Council... What we generally do is to send official authority certified letters to the other parties concerned. These are mostly the resounding things. At the end of the day, all those places (bus-stops, pavements and public institutions etc.) are physically turned into more agronomical places. This is particularly important in terms of social cohesion...”*

According to Mr. AK (age 30, secondary school graduate), who views himself as a direct mediator between “the public” and “the lawmakers”, the Disabled People Council, while playing a crucial role in terms of participation, also has a unique and contemporary view aim in terms of institutional structure:

*“The main view of our Council of Disabled People in Bursa City Council is not a top down management; it has a notion of bottom up management. What I mean is that the support comes from the grassroots or the public... Or the demand comes from the grassroots and those on the top implement them!”*

The activities at the Council of Disabled People found, under the roof of the City Council, one of the models of participatory approach, are determined according to “the demands of its members”. This is the case for the city of Bursa as well. The disabled citizens here decide on the activities based on their own preferences and priorities. Ms. SK (age 26, university student) from the Social and Cultural Work Group summarized this case as in the following:

*“I'd like to give you few examples from our activities! Our choir took to the stage this July in the Open-air Theatre. We have recently supported the roller skating activity organized by the Youth Council through our participation. We organized a wheel chair competition. We organized meetings and seminars related to the right of disabled people, self-confidence and joy of life. We pay attention to the demand and requests of our members in the choice and implementation of our activities. It is simply because we have to organize activities in view of their needs...”*

In terms of actively participating in the joint decision, the Council of Disabled People of Bursa currently has a member distribution of between 90 and 110 people. Therefore, out of the total of 350 registered members, a 30%-35% of them actively take part in the decision making process. Although this percentage looks small, given the fact that the proportion of participation of the members from 46 different disabled associations, specifically in Bursa, is between 3% and 5%, the percentage of participation of this Council is successful enough.

The head of the Council of Disabled People in Bursa is a natural member of the executive committee of Bursa City Council. The head of the Council, who is in constant contact with the head of Bursa City Council and the General Secretary of Bursa City Council, informs them about the works of the Council of Disabled People. Furthermore, it also represents the Council of Disabled People in consultation together with the representatives of the workgroups at local, national and international levels (The Work Guidelines of the City Council of Bursa, Chapter II, art. 11, <http://www.bursakentkonseyi.org.tr/?sayfa=icerik&id=54>, 01.08.2011).

In the meantime, the General Assembly, the most authorized body of the Council of Disabled People of Bursa, is responsible to discuss the order of the day prepared by the Executive Committee, to evaluate and to make some amendments by adding new articles if necessary, to be able to make some changes of guidelines and to take the necessary decisions. The General Assembly of the Council of Disabled People meets routinely at least twice a year. The Assembly meets, in the case of extraordinary meeting, if necessary, upon the call of the Executive Committee the Council of Disabled People, and takes its decisions with the majority of votes of its active members attending the meeting (The Work Guidelines of the City Council of Bursa, Chapter II, art. 9, <http://www.bursakentkonseyi.org.tr/?sayfa=icerik&id=54>, 01.08.2011).

Almost all the members of the Council of Disabled People who were interviewed stated that, as an addition to the articles prepared by the Executive Committee, the issues

such as the *rehabilitation of physical conditions, vocational training and employment* needed to be emphasized. According to Ms. ES (age 25, high school graduate):

*“...As far as I am concerned, one of the main basic problems is employment. We already inform the top level authorities about it to be discussed. For instance, there are some serious problems related to the employment of our orthopedically disabled friends! It is because a position at a factory is advertized in a newspaper. This is great news! But, since the physical strength of the orthopedically disabled people is not sufficient, another type of disabled person is employed instead. Maybe, a hearing impaired person is demanded. This particular problem related to physically disabled people is always on our agenda ...”*

Media plays a very crucial role in a *democratic, participatory, and open society*. Since media is an efficient tool enabling the flow of information into the society, it undertakes an active task in the formation of opinions, value judgments and change of perspectives. This particular feature of media is remarkably important for the disabled, one of the disadvantaged groups in society.

However, the local media in Bursa *fail* to provide the necessary support to the actions and activities carried out by the Council of Disabled People of Bursa. Mr. SN (age 38 university graduate) had the following to say for this particular case:

*“The other day, our disabled choir had a concert at the venue of Open-air Theater. But this event was promoted to the public in Bursa by the local TV channels and media only with some small pictures and a few sentences. This is very sad! Moreover, most of the visual media organs even print our institutional name incorrectly. Hard for me to understand why they are doing this! Another problem is this: I do not wish to name names here, but the other day, a newspaper quoted me as having said something using the logo of our Council; But I made no such a statement! In my opinion, not only in Bursa, but in Turkey at large, the media is using the disabled people as a tool of agitation. The news making the public shed tears is the kind of news worthy of publishing unfortunately ...”*

While, on one hand, *participation* is generating territories for optimal service productivity, it will, on the other hand, strengthen the improvement of social capital through participatory programs, and the enhancement of the perception of the sense of “trust” in interactive relationships through the socialization of people. Participation, at the same time, signifies fast access to information and the control of the decisions and activities of the administration as well (Toprak, 2008). From this point of view, in terms of participation, the Council of the Disabled People should be regarded as one of the tools of implementation to accomplish it.

## **Conclusion and Evaluation**

When the undertaken activities by the City Councils are considered, it is possible to say that there is a *close cooperation* and a *relationship of solidarity* between the municipality administration and the City Council. In this study, we observed some joint works carried out together with the municipality in the activities of the City Council of Bursa Metropolitan Municipality.

The projects undertaken by the Council of Disabled People and the other work groups together with their respective expectations emerge as the decisions of the City Council. All these activities and works undertaken in order to improve the living standards

of townspeople and enhance their participation are significant improvements in terms of the reproducibility of the objectives of the City Council.

Even though the City Councils and the subordinate Council of Disabled People and other units are not crucially important for Turkey, they are able to fulfill some significant functions in terms of the institutionalization and internalization of the participatory democracy at local and general levels. However, all these units are, in general, far from making this contribution given their existing structure and the way they are operated. It is because there exists some *serious* and *important* problems in terms of both the participants and the executives.

Primarily, there are no effective legal arrangements, at a general level, regarding the operational processes of the City Councils and the Council of Disabled People. Legislation, regulations and the guidelines anticipated the establishment of these units. However, there are some “uncertainties” with regards to when they will be established and how they will be operated.

Nonetheless, even though there are some limited *positive* examples [such as Bursa City Council and the Council of Disabled People] regarding the participation possibilities, the local governments have failed to revitalize the participatory democracy because of failing to encourage *the culture of participation* sufficiently.

Further to that, apart from the case of Bursa, the practices in question are the model established by the city administrators themselves without asking the general opinions of the public. The unilateral participation practices implemented without examining the features of “acceptability”, “participation” and “accessibility” should not be expected to be *productive* and *effective*. Moreover, in addition to the factors such as insufficient education and social rapport that hinder the participation of the public into administration, the majority part of local people are still suffering from financial difficulties [this state of affairs can be “generalized” for the disabled people too<sup>4</sup>].

It is not realistic at all to expect the *poor deprived* citizens, who are already struggling to survive in their everyday lives, to pay attention to their own municipality’s problems. As long as the problems and hardships are not relieved, the general welfare level of the public does not increase, the local development opportunities are not improved and eventually, one cannot expect the democratic participation to be established and improved. In short, one of the leading handicaps regarding participation is “*what the –disabled- people expects*” of participation.

Besides, the factors affecting notion of “positive” and “negative” participation can be summarized as in the following:

- *the expected time and the attitude of the local government regarding participation;*
- *the faith in participatory democracy;*

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship between *disability* and *poverty* varies within and between cultures. Although disabled people are disproportionately amongst those living in (chronic) poverty and all disabled people experience discrimination, not all disabled people are poor in economic terms. Poverty is not only about rates of income but also about social exclusion and powerlessness. Maxwell (1998) writes that people become poor because they are excluded from social institutions where access is based on *status, privilege, race* and *gender*. Exclusion leads to lack of resources, lower expectations, poor health and poor education (Yeo, 2001: 9).

- the level of democratic improvement in the region;
- the high level of political culture of the administrators;
- the fact that the participation channels are legally and actively open to the all parts of the society;
- the subjective attitudes and behaviors, and the world views of the administrators.

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