

Güler Sabancı Interview

Until 2007, when it created a new strategy to address social injustice in Turkish society, the Sabancı Foundation followed the well-trodden track of traditional Turkish philanthropy. Guest editor Filiz Bikmen asked the foundation's chair, Güler Sabancı, what lay behind the change and what more philanthropy can do to address the challenges faced by emerging economies like Turkey.

Why did you decide to change the Sabancı Foundation's approach to philanthropy?

For years, the foundation funded the infrastructure for social development by building schools and other institutions, establishing a university, giving scholarships and awards, supporting arts and culture. That was the traditional way of Turkish philanthropy, which goes back to Ottoman times.

In 2007, we assessed the current state of social development in Turkey and looked at international foundation practices. We saw that no matter how many schools were built or scholarships given, women, young people and people with disabilities continued to face challenges to social and economic participation. So we decided on a new approach to try to benefit such groups.

Since the early 2000s, Turkey has been undergoing a critical democratization process, highlighting the importance of an active and vibrant civil society. Again, after research and consultation, we decided that we should support NGOs and work more closely with civil society and government partners.

So we designed a new strategy, which led to the development of grant programmes to support NGOs in promoting social development for disadvantaged groups (mainly women, youth and people with disabilities). We also began engaging in new partnerships with the United Nations and the Turkish government (local and national) to promote the rights of girls and women. We subsequently launched a TV and social media programme called *Turkey's Changemakers* to capture the efforts of unique individuals contributing to social development.



'I have always felt that leading the holding is my duty, while leading the foundation and university is my purpose.'

How successful has this new approach been?

We have three areas where we look for success: increasing the capacity of NGOs to achieve their goals; contributing to systemic change (new laws and regulations) and increasing the capacity of civil servants and government divisions; and raising

the awareness and know-how of stakeholders and the public at large, especially the media.

Over the past six years, we have achieved measurable success in each of these areas. Through nearly 70 grants, a major joint programme with the UN and Turkish government, and 90 *Turkey's Changemakers* videos seen by over 2 million people, we have made vital progress in promoting social development.

The impact of our support has been extensive in a number of fields, including campaigns to end child marriage, pilot programmes to improve education for children with disabilities, and advocacy initiatives to integrate gender into

the strategic plans of local governments. These efforts have also gained international acknowledgement. At the annual Clinton Global Initiative meeting in 2011, Bill Clinton recognized Sabancı Foundation's commitment to ending child marriage in Turkey and support for the Global Partnership to End Child Marriage (Girls not Brides), an initiative launched by The Elders in 2011. This confirms my conviction about the increased impact of working in partnership. Our decision to support a broad range of NGOs and engage in more partnerships, nationally and internationally, has created a significant multiplier effect over a fairly short period of time.

I also believe that communicating success is just as important as achieving it. Sabancı Foundation attaches great importance to storytelling and sharing experiences. We have published stories for all the grants we have made, as well as a library of online videos of 90 Turkish 'changemakers'. The stories convey the voice of the organizations and individuals who implemented the project as well as the partners

and people who benefited. Each is different, but one thread is common: whether the project is small or large scale, local or national, something changed for the better as a result. So capturing the story is a critical part of measuring and communicating success.

You have been involved in the mostly family-owned Sabancı Holding since 1978 and chairperson since 2004, and you are also chair of the Sabancı Foundation. Do you see your business and philanthropic activities as closely connected?

My father and five uncles established the foundation in 1974. My family has always seen business and philanthropy as closely related, and the foundation was set up to be the main mechanism through which they could personally and institutionally share with society. The holding company businesses make annual contributions to the foundation. We also try to create synergies among the social responsibility programmes of the businesses and the strategic programmes of the foundation. For example, when the UN joint programme to promote girls' and women's rights was being implemented in six Turkish cities, we engaged our technology retail company Teknosa to deliver computer training classes to women in those cities.

Since my uncle Sakıp Sabancı passed away in 2004, I have been leading the Sabancı Holding and the Sabancı Foundation (as well as the Sabancı University of which I am also chairman). I have always felt that leading the holding is my duty, while leading the foundation and university is my purpose.

Of course, our institutions share a common culture, a 'Sabancı way' of doing things – such as innovation, making a difference, quality and credibility. Still, the business is very different. It is more like hunting: you set a target and you go straight for it. The social aspect of our work in the foundation and the university is more akin to farming: we are constantly planting new seeds and harvesting the fruits. This requires a very different approach and a lot of patience.

Turkey is an emerging market and demonstrating strong and fairly consistent growth. Yet many social challenges remain. What do you see as the biggest ones and how do you think business leaders can help address them?

One of the most important issues for Turkey in particular is the low rate of women's employment. Only about 30 per cent of working-age women are

in the labour force. It's a great waste of talent and opportunity, and it's also very disempowering for women. I recently became co-chair of the World Economic Forum Task Force on Gender Parity in Turkey. This new initiative aims to close the economic gender gap. Task force members are mainly from the private sector, with government, NGO and university representatives also involved. It's a valuable platform to address this issue. I strongly believe that business leaders in emerging market countries have an important role to play in bringing the sectors together to address critical challenges like this.

Do you expect that as these countries get wealthier, philanthropy will increase?

Philanthropy is a core part of Turkish culture. As people have more income, they may be more likely to give more. Although there is no hard evidence to prove this correlation in Turkey, my sense is that philanthropy is increasing.

Yet philanthropy should not be something accessible only to individuals with wealth; philanthropy is about a culture of giving, no matter what your income. Even if you don't have a high income, you might have other resources, such as your skills, to share with society. As our markets continue to grow, we need to create more opportunities for people to give back. Just as in the private sector, foundations, NGOs and governments in emerging market countries have a lot to learn from one another and would benefit from creating platforms to exchange practice and experience in this area.

What are the obstacles to increasing philanthropy?

I grew up in a family that is very dedicated to philanthropy. Having led the foundation for nearly ten years, I can say that it takes a lot of attention, effort and expertise. Yet in Turkey there are limited channels for making donations, and it is challenging to find the right NGO or partner to work with. What's more, it is not enough to just make a donation; tracking the project is as important as providing financial support.

There are also a limited number of experts in the field. Many NGOs lack capacity to do effective fundraising and reporting. As in most emerging market countries, the third sector is still developing, which means limited capacity to bring in new donors. So there is certainly a lot more we can and should be doing to increase philanthropy in Turkey and other emerging-market countries. @

For more information www.sabancivakfi.org