

## Policy Brief

### Executive Summary

As Pi Youth Association, we are a civil society organization supporting the active participation of young people in social life, working in areas such as volunteering, human rights, intercultural learning, and social inclusion. Since our establishment, we have aimed to empower young people through local, national, and international projects.

As part of the Türkiye-Europe Hand in Hand: Exchange Program for Civil Society and Local Governments, we, as the Pi Youth Association, have carried out a 12-month collaboration with our partner Povod from Slovenia, which will start in May 2024 and end at the end of April 2025. The program aims to strengthen civil society organizations and local authorities. Pi Youth Association worked with Konak Municipality, while Povod worked with the Municipality of Ptuj. The project focused on social inclusion and intercultural dialogue, supported by local governments. We aimed to enhance our expertise in working with diverse groups in intercultural environments.

The project began with study visits in İzmir and Ptuj, which provided opportunities to meet institutions and organizations working in the field of migration and to observe different approaches. These visits helped establish a stronger partnership between Pi Youth Association and Povod. The second step involved organizing local workshops to raise awareness about migration, diversity, inclusion, and intercultural dialogue.

Based on the methods, observations, and insights we gained during the workshops held at the Agora Community Center in İzmir's Basmane district, we prepared this policy brief to share our suggestions with Konak Municipality officials and other local stakeholders. We recognize that communities of different nationalities living in the Basmane district may require diverse methods, perspectives, and considerations. A key focus of our project was to support the participation of young Syrian women in the activities of the community center. Therefore, this policy brief emphasizes efforts to increase and sustain their engagement.

### Current Context

Basmane, a neighborhood in İzmir's Konak district, has historically been shaped by migration. Since the opening of the Basmane Train Station in 1866, it has become a transit area, initially for migrants from Anatolia to İzmir, and now also for refugees a route to Europe.

Following the civil war in Syria, the area became home to a high number of Syrian refugees. As of 2019, approximately 144,000 Syrian refugees were living in İzmir, with a large portion residing in Konak, particularly Basmane and its surroundings. The district has also seen migration from African and Asian countries, adding to its cultural diversity but also creating challenges.

The services provided by Konak Municipality through its community centers have played a vital role in addressing these challenges and meeting local needs.

## Policy Recommendations

In February 2025, Pi Youth Association organized a series of meaningful activities bringing together migrant youth and children living in Basmane and European Solidarity Corps (ESC) volunteers in İzmir. Held at the Agora Community Center, these events combined art, culture, and solidarity, allowing participants to connect, express themselves, and experience the power of co-creation.

The events included four artistic and four cultural sessions. In the artistic sessions, participants collaboratively painted a non-historic wall and benches in the center's courtyard. This was not only a physical transformation but also a symbolic act that strengthened the sense of belonging and shared purpose. Art functioned as a universal language that transcended linguistic barriers.

The cultural sessions revolved around cooking and sharing meals. Participants prepared dishes from Syrian, Turkish, French, Italian, and German cuisines. These shared cooking experiences built strong interpersonal bonds and celebrated cultural diversity, creating an inclusive space beyond language.

Each session had around 11–13 participants, including 2 to 4 ESC volunteers, 1 activity mentor, 5 migrant-background young women, and 3 to 4 migrant-background children. This diversity enriched the experience, fostering empathy, awareness, and social cohesion for both migrant participants and international volunteers.

Based on the experiences, observations, and relationships formed during these activities, the following suggestions are proposed for future activities at Agora Community Center. These recommendations aim to enhance participants' sense of belonging, promote active engagement, and ensure sustainability.

### 1. Strengthening Participation and Belonging

- One-time events were observed to have limited impact on fostering a sense of belonging. Regular and long-term activities helped participants feel more comfortable, adapt better, and express their skills, leading to increased participation over time. Therefore, continuous engagement through extended programs is recommended.
- Due to limited access to technology in this disadvantaged area, face-to-face communication plays a crucial role. Home visits, informational stands in marketplaces or near mosques, and briefings during school parent meetings are effective outreach methods. These approaches help reduce prejudices and fears and, raise awareness of available community opportunities.
- Engaging directly with parents, especially those who initially brought their children to the center, has been found effective in overcoming hesitations and encouraging participation.

## 2. Supporting Women's Participation

- Due to patriarchal structures, married women faced difficulties in participating. Even when they became aware of their rights, they often felt discouraged due to pressure from religious and patriarchal environments. Therefore, informative and trust-building efforts targeting spouses and families are crucial to increasing women's participation in community center activities.

## 3. Creating Intercultural Interaction Spaces

- Activities that transcend language barriers such as shared cooking, enhance social cohesion and communication.
- Art-based activities like collaborative painting foster group bonding through shared creative experiences.
- These intercultural engagements provide new motivations for individuals to participate and help ensure the sustainability of activities. As participation grows more diverse and continuous, overall community interaction increases, particularly among women.

## 4. Strengthening Local Collaboration

- To achieve meaningful outcomes with the target audience, it is essential to develop inclusive and participatory methods that foster a culture of collaboration.
- Organizing symposiums and encouraging participation from civil society organizations (CSOs) can emphasize the importance of partnership. Joint efforts between municipalities and CSOs expand impact and effectiveness.
- Cooperation between municipalities, local CSOs, and community centers plays a key role in implementation, venue access, and outreach. To ensure sustainability, regular evaluation meetings should be held to collectively assess needs and plan future activities.

## References

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