The Significance of Social Component in Urban Transformation in the Context of Sustainability: A Romany Neighbourhood Example, Istanbul¹

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Abstract

Cities are like living organisms like every single living creature that is born, grows up and dies. Just as when a living being is in bad health and medical intervention becomes inevitable, such intervention is inevitable in cities as well. One of the interventions is "Urban Transformation" in order to prevent dilapidation and deterioration in urban fabric or establishing safe urban spaces susceptible to disasters. The term of urban transformation is not a one-dimensional concept sheltering the process of improving the physical environment. On the contrary it is a multidimensional holistic process embracing social, economic, environmental, and governance aspects. Therefore non-holistic approaches will not make positive contribution to the road leading to sustainable cities.

This paper focuses on a historical neighbourhood in Istanbul where urban transformation work was carried out. The neighbourhood called "Sulukule" is a place where mostly Romany people live besides non-Romany. The neighbourhood is situated within the historic peninsula of Istanbul and its world heritage listed land walls. The paper particularly deals with the social aspect of the process and analyses the situation before and after the implementation of the urban transformation project. The social success of the project is also evaluated. Literature review, observations and fieldwork including in depth interviews with the locals and the administrators were carried out as the method of the study. In the conclusion, recommendations are presented based on the data obtained.

Keywords: Neighbourhood, sustainability, urban transformation, Sulukule, Istanbul

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Introduction

The industrial revolution and the globalisation process after and particularly its economic consequences have had significant impacts on cities. The process radically changes them. Undoubtedly, in these changes, technological developments, new generation communication tools and new transportation and distribution networks have had major roles. Cities are living and complex organisms like human beings. They are born, grown up and die. Sometimes cities also get sick and need treatment if applicable just as human beings do. Therefore, depending on the severity of the disease they may require some interventions such as urban transformation. Cities need to have urban transformation projects due to social and economic reasons, natural disasters, improper land use, and overpopulation based on agglomeration. Besides providing planned and healthy environment to communities, urban transformation plays a strategic role in not only prevention of social exclusion but it provides an urban identity with a sense of belonging.

One of the significant indicators of the disease in cities is dilapidation. A dilapidation may be considered as a consequence of lack of social sustainability. Urban transformation, therefore, is one of the effective tools for making cities liveable again. It has dimensions and its one vital dimension is social structure. There are strong connections between urban transformation and its social dimension. It is not possible to sustain an urban physical space alone unless there is a liveable social life order. Hence sociological dynamics of a community play a key role in the transformation process. Every transformation process requires a different procedure and policy due to the social varieties in countries.

The aim of this work is to analyse the sociological consequences of the relocation of the Romany families living in Sulukule Neighbourhood in the context of the urban transformation project implemented by the government in Istanbul. The work was delimited with the Romany people living in Sulukule Neighbourhood and the social consequences of the transformation project was analysed. Literature reviews, in depth interviews with locals and the administrators and observations were used as the method in this work.

The Concept of Urban Transformation

Definition of the Term

There are variety of definitions of the term 'urban regeneration' due to the different points of views of individuals and institutions. Just as the term of 'sustainability' has been evolved, the term of 'urban transformation' has also evolved and has taken on different meanings (Colantonio & Dixon, 2009). Urban transformation is a complex process dealing with issues of unhealthy and therefore unsustainable urban areas in order to make them healthy and liveable, focusing on their basic characteristics such as social, economic and physical space (Roberts, 2008; Mehdipoura & Nia, 2013; Akkar, 2006; Ertaş, 2011). Roberts (2008) also claims that this process requires holistic approaches, strategies and actions. Whilst Lichfield (1992) considers the transformation as a reconciliation process, Donnison (1993) describes the term as a method to solve problems occurring in degenerated urban areas. Couch (1990) thinks that it is a rehabilitation process putting again into operation social and/or economic functions that were lost previously. As for Leary & McCarthy (2013) they highlight that the process involves multi disciplines including urban planning, urban design, urban policy and sustainability etc.

Urban transformation is not only a regeneration physically but it is also a process requiring holistic approaches and inter disciplinary and multi-sectors efforts to ensure basically social integration and therefore liveable urban spaces taking into consideration the environmental balance.

Aim and Objectives of Urban Transformation

Urban transformation is one of the strategic tools leading to sustainable communities. Not only improvement of physical and sociocultural structure but also economic revitalisation of urban parts are the major components of the process. According to Roberts (2008); the process is basically based on five inclusive tenets. It should:

- Establish direct and also strong connection between spatial characteristics and social problems of the space.
- Meet the spatial needs forming urban fabric.
- Have economic development strategies improving social life quality and urban prosperity
- Develop strategies making the best appropriate utilisation of urban land and avoid unnecessary urban sprawl.
- Enable urban policy via participatory and collaborative planning process.

As for Gülersoy & Gürler (2011) they group urban transformation under three main categories:

Heritage conservation

• It is a form of transformation taking place in the historic urban zones to protect the fabric by using particular methods such as restoration, restitution, renovation and reuse.

Regeneration

•It is another form of transformation process dealing with existing urban spaces having potential. Reconstruction, redevelopment, restructuring and land-use change are the main methods.

Re-development

• The process is applied in the urban areas which are dilapidated, deteriorated, and devastated. It mainly deals with renewal, revitalisation, rehabilitation and adaptive reuse.

Figure 1: Three categorises of urban transformation

On the other hand, Ertaş (2011), Şişman & Kibaroğlu (2009) group the urban transformation process under ten methods. These are renewal, rehabilitation, conservation, revitalisation, redevelopment, improvement, clearance, infill development, refurbishment and gentrification.

History of Urban Transformation

One of the dramatic consequences of the industrial revolution was agglomeration experienced in urban spaces (Clerici & Mironowicz, 2009). Experiencing the inhuman conditions of the working class and cramped and unhealthy conditions in major cities of Europe influenced many thinkers and planners. This accelerated the emergence of the idea of transformation. As a result, in the 19th century some areas in Europe were destroyed and were reconstructed again. In this period all operations were performed under the leadership of public administrations based on two approaches. One of these was the housing legislation named "The Common Lodging Houses Act" producing urban policies in 1851 in England. The act dealt with particular authorities focusing on the issues regarding the lodging houses. Another approach was a public works programme named "Haussmann's renovation of Paris" and operated by Georges-Eugéne Haussmann between 1853 and 1870. The programme focused on bringing not only infrastructure such as sewers, avenues, parks, squares, fountains and aqueducts but also superstructure by demolishing of unhealthy medieval settlements in Paris. The transformation process in the world more accelerated after the world wars (Mishra & Pandit, 2013). Roberts (2008) groups the policy types between 1950 and 1990 under five periods (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Urban transformation policy types based on the periods

The transformation processes based on liberal and neoliberal strategies as well as heritage base urban transformation having "multi-actor" and "multi-sector" were accepted and developed in the 1990s. As for the 21st century the concept of sustainability – sustainable development and its components stamp the transformation process as a strong paradigm (Gülersoy & Gürler, 2011). The process focuses not only on physical issues but also on social, economic and environmental issues (Colantonio & Dixon, 2009). Thus the significance of the social dimension of urban "sustainability-oriented transformation works based on the new concept transformation" have come into the forefront as the focal point.

Importance of Social Dimension of Urban Transformation in the Context of Sustainability

McKenzie (2004: p.12) defines the term of social sustainability as "*a life-enhancing condition within communities*" and interprets the term with "*strong sense of social cohesion, and equity of access to key services*". Social sustainability is directly connected with establishing liveable communities that are equitable, diverse, democratic (McKenzie, 2004; Colantonio & Dixon, 2009), and cooperation-oriented.

Hence, one of the major parameters making urban transformation works successful is the social dimension to be considered.

Colantonio & Dixon (2009) claim that urban transformation projects have ten critical outputs with respect to social sustainability: Demographic change, education and skills, employment, health and safety, housing and environmental health, identity, sense of place and culture, participation, empowerment and access, social capital, social mixing and cohesion, and well-being, happiness and quality of life. As for the UK Presidency EU Ministerial Informal on Sustainable Communities Policy Papers in Annex 1 (2006) there are eight characteristics of sustainable communities (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Eight characteristics of social sustainability

As shown, characteristics and also processes of both urban transformation and sustainability are quite similar and connected. It is obvious that a space not used by humans, is obliged to become dilapidated. Social aspect is the major issue in not only urban transformation projects but also in all urban-oriented projects. It should be considered a key component for establishing liveable communities. Therefore the thought that social structure can be sustained through physical renewal works alone is completely wrong. Urban transformation works are the process requiring holistic approaches such as planning, designing, management and governance etc. The

success of the projects will depend on whether these elements are taken into consideration.

The Urban Transformation Process in Turkey and the Sulukule Project

In general, the seeds of urbanisation movement in Turkey were sown in the 1950s. Ataöv & Osmay, (2007) claim that urban transformation works in Turkey can be briefly analysed under three periods (Figure 4). In the first period of 1950-1980 there were two basic facts affecting the urban transformation process. One was that a part of people living in the city centre moved to the satellite towns and instead of these people, the people with low income settled in the city centre. This caused dilapidation of areas in the centre. The second fact was the migration process and its negative consequences. Urbanisation increased based on migration in connection with the mechanisation process experienced in rural areas. Many people were unemployed and they came to big cities such as Istanbul to find jobs.

Hence cities faced urban agglomeration and urban sprawl with the uncontrolled population movement because they were not prepared and necessary measures were not taken for this migration wave. Insufficient urban housing stock in cities resulted in squatter housing areas. In the 1980s large scale urbanisation process and its problems gained a rapid momentum (Bulut & Ceylan, 2013). The urban sprawl based on squattering took shape in peripheral areas of cities (Sat, 2007). However in the process of time these areas remained in the city centre and needed to be renewed. There are quite a lot of such areas in Turkey having poor economic conditions, insufficient social and technical infrastructure and are unsafe (Beyhan & Gürkan, 2015).



Figure 4: Urban transformation strategies in Turkey

The second period was the years that Turkey started to develop its economy and growth by exporting its products. Increased production led to the change of the type and scale of industries on the other hand it increased the demand of quality workers.

Therefore the decentralisation process of industries began. The major industries leaving cities met their worker needs through the surrounding new illegal settlement areas. Urban redevelopment (Akkar, 2006) was one of the basic policies focusing on rehabilitations in dilapidated areas with the improvement plans besides conservation and gentrification of the historical urban fabrics.

The last period is important because the concept of urban transformation has taken place in the domestic legislation. In this period the strategies such as rehabilitation at building scale have come into prominence along with other strategies such as renewal, redevelopment, conservation and gentrification. TOKİ (Housing Development Administration), a non-profit government agency, has played a key role in the urban transformation process in Turkey. It has been a pioneer to the works of the multisector (Görün & Kara, 2010). Despite all the good intentions, urban transformation projects were considered as one dimensional, overlooking the socio-economic dimension, and they have been made a victim of urban rent. In addition there was a phenomenon affecting the transformation policies in this period. Turkey experienced a severe earthquake in 1999 in the Marmara Region. The magnitude was 7.6; and approximately 20,000 people were killed. It left behind close to 500.000 people homeless. After the earthquake and its consequences urban transformation works and policies gained great importance. Thus the government developed policies to mitigate the consequences of such disasters focusing on regeneration and improvement of poor and earthquake sensitive buildings. Basically there are some issues affecting the success of urban transformation efforts in Turkey (Figure 5). Unless the following one or more components are missing it may not be possible to gain success. They work as the sub-systems of urban transformation and therefore they need to be considered and performed together with a holistic approach. They can be grouped under five main categories:

Economic
• Development of a financial model and employment opportunities
Social
 Reducing social exclusion and poverty Access to services such as education, health etc. Considering identities and cultural diversity Ownership and vested rights
Technical
• Effective land use, transport and infrastructure
Environmental
• Policies focusing on sustainability such as resource usage, pollution, waste, energy use etc.
Governance
Public participation on decisions

Figure 5: The basic issues affecting the success of urban transformation works (Adapted from the report prepared for Kocaeli Chamber of Industry, **Source**: http://kosano.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/kentsel-donusum-rapor-1.pdf)

The Sulukule "A Romany Neighbourhood" Project

Location of the Neighbourhood

Sulukule is a settlement unit locating in the Fatih district within the historic peninsula of Istanbul (Figure 6). It is also located adjacent to the west of the city walls. The region is commonly preferred by Romany families who are famous for their entertainment houses that have unique music and dances. Sulukule has been the source of inspiration for many TV series and films.



Figure 6: Istanbul and Sulukule Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cf/Turkey Istanbul location map.svg



Figure 7: The border of Sulukule (Source: Adapted from Google Earth)

The name of Sulukule settlement unit has been changed and today it is represented with two neighbourhoods named "Hatice Sultan" and "Neslişah".

Brief History of the Neighbourhood and Romany People's Characteristics

Romany people basically were divided into two groups, settled and nomadic. Settled ones were in Sulukule and music and dancing are a life style and also business for them (Göncüoğlu & Yavuztürk, 2009). This characteristic of Romany people has stayed the same since the Ottoman period. Sulukule has been the place where Romany people, having low income, known for their unique entertainment culture consisting of dance, music and food, have lived for 500 years since the Ottoman period (Uçan Çubukçu, 2011). Based on the census in 1477 while Istanbul had a population of 16,327 the Romany community consisted of 31 households (Göncüoğlu & Yavuztürk, 2009). According to Kenrick, Romany people essentially are of Indian origin and their migration movement westward began in the 1050s.

Romany people living in Sulukule have been blamed for immorality and they have been perceived as the society involved in crime, disease and illegal activities such as drug use and dealing, prostitution, illegal slaughter since the Ottoman period in the 1880s due to their unfamiliar job environments. They used their houses as homes during the day and for entertainment purposes at nights. In 1993 the prohibition of these houses and activities in Sulukule led to an increase in prostitution because they could not earn money via music, dancing and food. They lived a marginal life style and hence this led to them being expelled from the main community (Somersan et. al., 2011). While Sulukule was almost the only authentic entertainment centre of the city it fell out of favour after 1993 due to the new rising star legal entertainment centre "Beyoğlu" and therefore the depression process began.

They carried their culture until 2006 which was the starting date of the transformation project. And as Harvey (1993) emphasised in his book the Romany community began to lose their social cohesion. The project was carried out based on the strategy of gentrification and the area was adopted and built with new buildings by demolishing existing poor quality unhealthy buildings without considering community participation. As the requirement of gentrification strategy, the project aimed at establishing healthy spaces with new buildings for completely different people in terms of class, ethnicity and culture. This resulted in a socioeconomic trauma for the Romany people.

The Sulukule Urban Transformation Project

The aim of the project was to establish a healthy and comfortable urban space by rehabilitating economic and social levels and life style of the local community (IMM, 2016). The main objectives were;

- To ensure that the Romany people made more use of infrastructure
- To provide more parks and green areas
- To regenerate existing buildings without interfering with their entertainment culture

• To provide a cultural centre with multi-purpose general halls permitting Romany people to perform their traditional culture.

In 2015 Sulukule and the neighbourhoods adjacent to Sulukule were declared as the regeneration zone and were approved by the Council of Ministers. The stakeholders of the project consisted of Fatih Municipality, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and TOKI (Housing Development Administration). Based on the protocol (TOKI, 2016) signed amongst them, Fatih Municipality was to be responsible for the issues related to proprietary and TOKI was to responsible for preparing design projects while Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality was to be responsible for the issues related to infrastructure. The project started in 2006. The project area consisted of 93,000 m² and the population was 5132 of whom 3500 consisted of Romany people. There were 386 plots in the project area. The number of registered buildings in the area was 22 of which 5 were monuments and 17 civil architecture.



Figure 8: The transformation project of Sulukule

The protocol had certain rules for people living in the area. Both properties in Sulukule and Taşoluk, which was the area where social houses were to be built by TOKİ, were going to be evaluated. Anyone, who was a proprietor in Sulukule, was able to own a new property in the area as long as they could afford it. If not they were able to own new social houses in different areas such as Taşoluk which was approximately 45 km away from Sulukule. No down payment would be necessary and they could pay back the loan over 15 years (180 months) after completion and delivery. On the other hand however there were no solutions suggested for tenants and invaders of Sulukule (Somersan et al., 2011). Some argued that they should not have pay for the houses that were to be built, while some did not want to move to Taşoluk due to reasons such as unemployment, distance and relationships with their relatives.

The transformation project unfortunately resulted in frustration socially and almost all 3500 Romany people were affected. According to Pündük, the president of the association of the Romany culture, 334 households of 337 have already come back to Karagümrük neighbourhood which is adjacent to their old neighbourhood. Although the figures of IMM differ, stating that 306 households of 313 moved due to the insufficiency of social and economic infrastructure, this does not change the tragic result. On the other hand, the rest of the families living in Taşoluk suffer from increased rent, dues expenditures, culture clash, and social exclusion. There are particular reasons for the failure of the project as can be concluded from the interviews carried out with the people living in and then returning from Taşoluk. The factors triggering the return process were grouped as follows:

a. Economic:

- Sulukule homeowners moved to Taşoluk as tenants after selling their properties very cheaply, and hence could not buy a new house with the amounts that they had.
- In Sulukule, the rents were about between 150-200 TL/month. The present rents were between 400-600 TL/month excluding dues and heating expenses. Because they are unable to pay their rents for months they face losing their homes.
- Taşoluk did not provide the working opportunities of Sulukule.
- Some of the locals lost their jobs because their working areas are far from Taşoluk. In addition due to insufficient means of transport expenditures have increased.
- Although the municipality gives 100 TL/month financial support, the amount is not enough for livelihood.

b. Socio-Cultural

- They experienced social exclusion when they moved to the area due to their bad reputation. Their neighbours did not talk to them for months. They fought with the neighbours' prejudices.
- This caused compliance problems with others. For instance as part of their local culture they used to sit in front of their houses chatting, drinking tea until the mornings. Yet this is not possible in their present environment.
- Neighbouring relations are extremely important to Romany families. Face to face communication is vital, hence many of them were forced to leave Taşoluk because of the lack of communication and socialisation with others.
- They don't have a sense of belonging because even though the buildings in which they live are magnificent they are harassed and exposed to violence, particularly their children, by people living in the surrounding villages accusing them of being thieves, prostitutions and drug dealers.
- First social transformation should be considered before the project. The people preparing the project really do not know what is really happening in Romany people houses. They do not know their culture and lifestyle. The only important thing is the value of our land and to get unearned income for them.

• The Romany families wanted this transformation project to be performed without being snatched from their neighbourhood.

Apart from these, the following critiques were made:

- The traditional physical fabric of the neighbourhood was transformed into a totally new fabric not reflecting their culture.
- The types and typologies of the traditional buildings were changed
- The project aimed gentrification
- The user profiles of the locals were ignored

Conclusion

The urban transformation projects are carried out to regenerate the buildings taking place in unhealthy, dilapidated and urban sprawl zones. And the main focus of the projects is to rehabilitate not only buildings but also living standards of communities. They are also the process of multi-decision making. However it is not a process of removing people from their habitat. It is also not a process dealing with demolition and clearance issues of old existing buildings solely. Hence the projects require holistic approaches focusing on not only spatial but also economic, social, cultural, technical, environmental and governance aspects.

These projects, in general, may lead to the change of people's lifestyles and incomes. In some cases they may lose their jobs or they may be forced to change their jobs and the consequences of the projects may be catastrophic. Particularly people with low income who are forced to live in an area which is far from the city and is totally new to them, fall in a kind of social coma due to losing their own social, economic and cultural identity. Hence the inevitable parts of the process are socio-cultural and economic dimensions. This means that the success of urban transformation projects depends on the success of its social transformation focusing on public participation. Probably these are the main components of the process making neighbourhoods and thereby cities liveable in other words 'sustainable'.

- The selection of the areas to be transformed should be performed based on scientific data with deep analysis.
- Undoubtedly the projects should be prepared holistically considering social, economic, cultural, technical and the environmental dimensions of the area in the context of sustainability.
- The transformation methods to be used should be decided appropriately.
- The projects should be people-oriented and more qualified.
- The projects should be transparent and should allow the involvement of not only local people but also NGOs through a participatory process not just informative.
- The local traditional architectural identity and the urban fabric should be protected.
- Public interest in the projects should be considered at high level where possible.

In conclusion urban transformation works can be a strategic tool in reaching sustainable development as long as they serve the common interests of a society. As for the social aspect of the process it is a prerequisite. It should also be noted that justice and equality are the inevitable important concepts not only for state governments yet also for local governments. Without these concepts it is not possible to achieve success completely in urban transformation projects.

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