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FORMAS



Bogazici University's Urban Gardening Community: Tarlataban's Story

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Image 1: "Tarlataban - A grassroots gathering full of solidarity" by Alper Can Kılıç. February 2018.

Source: <https://tinyurl.com/tarlataban>. Image with permission to use by Tarlataban.

Where is this grassroots initiative implemented? Who are the promoters? Who are the beneficiaries?

Tarlataban community was formed at Boğaziçi University. Boğaziçi University is a state university in Istanbul, Turkey. The university campus is located in Beşiktaş district, Bebek neighbourhood. Tarlataban is the name of the green space where the collective was meeting for urban agriculture activities and discussions on food politics. Tarlataban literally means the field (tarla) at the bottom (taban), referring to the location of the field on the university campus.

Volunteer students and academics started the initiative. They came together and asked for logistic support from the university administration, such as land for urban gardening and

necessary tools. Later, people outside the university also joined the community. Those people included students from other universities, activists and ordinary citizens “with an interest in an alternative food system” as one of the earliest volunteers of the community, Mustafa says. The beneficiaries include but are not limited to the community members since Tarlataban’s influence far exceeded campus boundaries.

How does this initiative engage with climate? Does it tackle mitigation, adaptation, both or other dimensions of climate change?

The community contributes to the adaptation to and mitigation of climate change. Tarlataban positions itself within the food sovereignty movement. They embrace ecological farming principles and follow agroecology. Their methods respect the carbon cycle and climate system, and also protect and enhance biodiversity. Çiğdem, another volunteer who put her efforts into the foundation of the community and worked actively for long years, agrees with the community’s positive contribution to climate. She claims the initiative helped reduce GHG emissions by “shortening the production-consumption chain”. Mustafa adds that engaging in farming practices makes people more aware of the effects of their choices on the ecosystems. He also believes that “putting effort for an alternative food supply chain free of exploitation might be one of the many meaningful steps to take against climate change”.

•What are the main objectives? What are the main values?

The community was part of a tripartite structure. The purpose was to establish a holistic food system at the campus, including a gardening community that produces food from the field; a consumer cooperative (BUKOOP - Boğaziçi Members Consumer Cooperative) that works directly with the small-scale local producers in Turkey and Tarlataban community; and a Student Cooperative that would prepare affordable, fair and healthy meals for students using the ingredients produced by Tarlataban and the producers of BUKOOP. Tarlataban strictly used only heirloom seeds and no synthetic chemicals, fertilisers or pesticides. Their ultimate purpose was not to grow food but to establish a model for urban food sovereignty. In Mustafa’s words, they were keen to “initiate and foster a debate about alternative agriculture techniques that might pave the way for a more fair, healthy, exploitation-free and ecologically-friendly food supply chain”.



Image 2: Tarlataban community working together on the field in their first year. May 2012.

Source: <https://tarlataban.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/2012-05-06-13-04-09.jpg>. Image with permission to use by Tarlataban.

What is the timeline? Are there already visible effects?

The idea for a collective agriculture initiative was born after the Starbucks Occupation at the campus towards the end of 2011 (Bostan Hikayeleri, 2017). Students occupied the shop, stating that it was the capital's occupation of a common area that belonged to the university. They were against the neoliberal occupation of public spaces. They used the term "counter-occupation" for their activism (Kocagöz, 2012). They demanded access to fair, healthy and affordable food within the campus area.

The volunteers established the tripartite structure in 2012 with the help of the university administration. Tarlataban's first harvest also dates to 2012. Using the products from the field, they cooked meals for students and sold them near the university cafeteria and in the small building called "Baraka" (barrack) the Student Cooperative and BUKOOP used. After the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, the city experienced a bloom of solidarity collectives. Many other urban gardening initiatives, food cooperatives and solidarity kitchens were

formed. Sometimes, Tarlataban's harvest was excessive for a limited volunteer group to process; they shared that excess with a migrant solidarity kitchen in the city centre. The big greenhouse in the Tarlataban area was used to produce seedlings from seeds. Tarlataban opened their greenhouse for collective use. They distributed the seedlings to the other collectives in the city, for they lacked such infrastructure. The community experienced several years full of production and solidarity.



Image 3: Inside Tarlataban's greenhouse. January 2015.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1043789885637807&set=pb.100064517147201.-2207520000>.

Image with permission to use by Tarlataban.

After 2015, the government of Turkey significantly increased its pressure on the university. The outsiders' entries to the campus got restricted. That way, the collective started to lose its active participants. In 2016, the President of Turkey, Erdoğan, ended the democratic rectorate elections and appointed a new rector to the university ("Bogazici Kayyum Tarihesi", n.d.). In 2018, the appointed rectorate of the university chained the doors of Tarlataban and made the space inaccessible to the community. This marks the ending of the old Tarlataban.

However, during those years of political turmoil, a new community was formed with the newcomer students. Among them, some had the chance to experience the old place with the founding community members. The new Tarlataban community requested entrance to the locked Tarlataban area to continue gardening activities. The administration didn't allow them to use the old *tarla*; instead, showed them another place on campus. Their reasoning was that the old field was a difficult place to control and secure. In 2019, the community got their new *tarla*, but their seeds and gardening tools in the old place were destroyed (Tarlataban Bogazici, 2019).

The new community has been struggling hard to survive under the despotic top-down rule of the appointed administrators. Student meetings and collaborative work in the campus area are very rare because of the current atmosphere. As a result, gardening activities also freeze. Presently, volunteers stay in contact through social platforms and try to reactivate the community.

Who are the actors involved? What are their backgrounds?

Students who came together for the Starbucks Occupation and the Environmental Club members (a student community) constituted the founding team. They collaborated with supportive academics and communicated their requests to the university administration towards the end of 2011. Campus gardeners helped them with their first seeding in the spring of 2012. The actors diversified in time and included administrative personnel, civil servants, NGO members, activists and urban dwellers. The students came from different fields, such as social sciences, engineering and natural sciences. Most of them were urbanites without experience in agriculture, but some of their families were farmers. Some participants who joined the community outside the university shared their knowledge and experience in traditional and ecological agriculture with the Tarlataban community. During the regular weekend meetings, other initiatives visited Tarlataban. Those visitors include bicycle collectives, feminist groups, volunteers of other urban gardening collectives, musicians, journalists, documentarists, and researchers.

Which limits does it encounter?

In Tarlataban's establishment period, Boğaziçi University had a free and democratic atmosphere compared to its recent years. The administration was supportive of student activities. The university was open to the public. People could come and join student activities on campus. For maintaining the garden work, this was important. Because, for example, in summer terms students were mostly absent, and participants coming outside did the necessary work such as irrigation. From time to time, these seasonal difficulties and the voluntary structure of the initiative were experienced as limitations by the community. However, it was a lively space that attracted people. Participants coming outside took active roles and contributed a lot. That way, the collective labour and solidarity over this urban garden continued for years.

However, a more serious limitation for Tarlataban was Turkey's political direction towards authoritarianism. In the 2015-2016 period, Turkey experienced a series of bomb attacks and a coup attempt that failed. Security concerns were the most prominent issue on the country's agenda. Boğaziçi University also had its share of this situation. In 2016, Erdoğan appointed the university's rector himself, not recognising the result of the democratic rectorate election held within the university. The new university administration first wanted the Tarlataban community to provide a list of visitors coming outside of the campus, then restricted the entrance of outsiders, then put a chain to the doors of the community garden and fired the community out of their space completely in 2018. This process corresponds to the fast anti-democratisation of Turkey.

In the following years, President Erdoğan continued to appoint administrators to many universities, including Boğaziçi. Some opposing academic and administrative staff were dismissed and banned from the university. Waves of arrests targeted the academics and students, the university campus got terrorised by the police force. This caused the forced distancing of the students from the university. When it comes to Tarlataban, some of its volunteers were imprisoned, and some were banned by the rectorate because they attended the protests on campus. Thus, in those years and at the present time, the biggest limitation for Tarlataban initiative is the autocratic rule both in the country and in the university.



Image 4: Photo taken by Behram Evlice. The police handcuffed Boğaziçi University's gate. January 2021.

Source: <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Eq6aDc4XIAEDXqF?format=jpg&name=large>.

Are any shortcomings or critical points visible? What other problematic issues can arise from its implementation?

The community's voluntary structure comes with its shortcomings regarding the maintenance of the garden work. Because the initiative was located on the university campus, holidays were hard times for people concerned about the organisation of the work. Summertime were even more challenging, for plants needed care and irrigation when students were not around.

Another shortcoming is the scale of the initiative. The debates over food and agriculture, the activism of the community members and the agricultural production of Tarlataban were limited in scale. Its capacity was not big enough to provide fair, ecological and affordable food for the whole university. In the end, the community wanted to establish a model. Turning this model into a widespread application requires the collaboration of institutions with greater means. Civil initiatives put their efforts into multiplying such collectives throughout the city. But if the governmental bodies do not support people and even discourage them, such implementations become problematic.

Another difficulty regarding the wide-scale implementation of this model is the neoliberal-capitalist economic frame that shapes markets and agricultural activity. The rules of the game that favours commercial industry giants pose serious challenges for these small-scale initiatives to transform the food system and become significant actors.

How would it be potentially replicable in other settings?

Boğaziçi community's food sovereignty model is applicable in other university settings that support such ideas. Suppose the campus has an area that can be used for gardening activities and there are volunteers to maintain the activities. With some equipment, an initiative could easily be established.

The Tarlataban model can be modified and adapted for the local districts as well. Indeed, after the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in 2013, this kind of solidarity movements spread throughout the city. Many other urban gardening communities and food cooperatives were formed with the assistance of the Boğaziçi experience. Some local governments provided land for community gardening and small stores for cooperative initiatives. Since these practices are alternatives to commercial businesses, having commons is important for people to come together, design and test their alternative systems. Even if the governmental bodies do not provide support, people search and find solutions to realise their utopias. However, the Tarlataban example shows that a minimum condition is necessary: the administrators and governments should not be afraid of the potential of collectives and do not prevent them from dreaming and acting together.

Is this initiative conducive to broader changes?

Tarlataban mentally transformed and prepared its participants regarding the ecological crises, including the climate, biodiversity and food crises. Many volunteers later focused on environmental issues in their academic studies and worked for environmental NGOs. The initiative could have continued contributing to the sustainability of student life by providing ecological and affordable food. Currently, there is a severe inflation crisis in Turkey; the prices rise so fast. As a result, the quality and quantity of the food sold in the campus area decreased. Students suffer from the economic crisis greatly. If not prevented, such a holistic

structure could have reduced the economic stress on students. Experiencing solidarity and community spirit would also contribute to people's mental well-being in these hard times.

Such initiatives are also good examples for governmental bodies. Their practices can assist local governments regarding environmental and climate policy designs. Indeed, recently, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality was reorganising a municipal park near the university and invited the Tarlataban community for collaboration. Tarlataban will survive and remind us even in the middle of a megacity like Istanbul, on a university campus, food sovereignty practices are possible and can be transformative.

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