



“WeTheIzmir platform made it possible to match people who need support with those who are willing to provide help. For example, 230,000 food packages were donated by the citizens during the spring 2020 lockdown period.”

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Image Source: Collecting relief package to support households during the COVID-19 crisis lockdown. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Municipality of Izmir, 2020, all rights reserved ©.



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‘Crisis Municipalism’ institutional innovation as a response to COVID-19?

When we were suddenly hit by the pandemic, our lives were disrupted in an unprecedented way. The circumstances of the pandemic have been extremely dynamic and kept changing at an overwhelming pace. To prevent this health crisis from turning into a social one, we had no choice but to create a solution urgently, collectively, and by building a wide-ranging city coalition. Millions of people living in Izmir have been negatively impacted by the pandemic and faced with financial, social, and health-related difficulties. To respond to the urgent needs of the citizens in the most

effective way, the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality decided to put in place an institutional renewal that reconsiders the way it operates.

The fundamental challenge was about how to best manage the municipal resources. We planned how to use most effectively the limited financial, human, social, and time resources of the city overall and the Municipality in particular. To achieve that, the Municipality decided to implement an institutional innovation that updates the regular modality of carrying out municipal operations and services. On March 27th, 2020, the Municipality issued a new directive entitled “working principles of Crisis Municipalism”. First, we defined new processes for municipal operations and services. Second, we established new decision-making, executive, and consultative bodies. Third and most importantly, we created the right environment that promotes solidarity and volunteering in the city.

The Crisis Municipalism model is very much based on building an effective dialogue mechanism that strongly connects the Municipality with the citizens, civil society, business circles, other public institutions, and basically with every key stakeholder in the entire city. A concrete example that can show the commitment to this goal is the large stakeholder meetings taking place digitally, every week on Monday with a long, diverse, and inclusive list of participants and with the presence of the Mayor himself.

Crisis Municipalism organized the response of the Municipality through a critical incident management team. It envisioned structures that bring together the appropriate collection of people. Tasks were distributed to these people who were provided the necessary level of authority. Within this framework, the new directive established three bodies for more effective public governance.

Those are listed below:

1) Crisis Management Supreme Board: Chaired by the mayor, the board consists of high-level executives of the Municipality, directors of municipal companies, representatives of professional organizations, civil society organizations, trade unions, and other experts.

2) Crisis Management Executive Board: This board consists of the Mayor, the secretary-general, and one senior manager according to the nature of the crisis.

3) Scientific Board: It consists of relevant experts and is formed by the Crisis Management Executive Board at the request of the Mayor.

These newly established structures have worked in coordination, taken more robust decisions with the availability of a higher level of expertise and capability, and put these decisions into practice. Since the crisis required the attention of multiple actors along with the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality, the directive foresaw a distribution of roles among organizations coming from different jurisdictions, levels of

government, and professions. In this regard, coordination and cooperation between the district municipalities and the metropolitan municipality had the uttermost importance.

The Mayor of Izmir, Mr. Tunç Soyer, invited the mayors of all 30 district municipalities of Izmir to an urgent meeting to create alignment in the fight against the Covid-19, resulting in a joint strategy against the pandemic. Article 17 of the directive entitled “institutional structuring” encouraged municipal units to build task forces to come up with innovative solutions against Covid-19. In this respect, the Deputy Mayor of Izmir, senior executives of municipal companies, and the Mayor’s advisors have been given the authority to conduct joint activities with district municipalities and relevant stakeholders. Each of the managers was appointed to a different region outside the Izmir city center. The managers have worked in coordination with district mayors and the Metropolitan Municipality Local Management Services units. Besides aiding people in need, these activities allowed the Crisis Management Supreme Board to collect valuable data for further and more effective actions.

A highly important purpose of Crisis Municipalism is to increase solidarity and volunteering in Izmir. At the beginning of the pandemic, Mayor Soyer invited all citizens of Izmir to social solidarity. In this process, we heavily relied on technology as a tool to connect people. We brought citizens together in a digital city square that we call WeTheIzmir. Thanks to this platform, we achieved to take city-wide deci-

sions together, we raised new resources and used them to improve social resilience through the protection of the most vulnerable members of our communities.

By providing the necessary means to our citizens to help each other, we were able to reach hundreds of thousands of people. WeThelzmir platform made it possible to match people who need support with those who are willing to provide help. For example, 230 thousand food packages were donated by the citizens during this period. The active engagement of citizens was not limited to making donations, but it also included helping the Municipality in the preparation phase as well. Thanks to the citizens' contributions, 380 thousand packages of food and 130 thousand packages of hygiene products were distributed to over 250 thousand households.

The Municipality has introduced another initiative using the same approach. It is called the "Pending Bill". This is an online tool in the WeThelzmir platform which enables volunteers to cover the cost of a utility bill of a citizen who is facing economic difficulty. In total, the utility bills of 16 thousand 496 households, worth 1 Million 473 thousand 825 Turkish Lira, have been paid by volunteers.

Other than the above-mentioned ones, the Municipality offered many different options to citizens for them to actively participate in Izmir's collective response to the pandemic. To become a volunteer, citizens can sign up through the WeThelzmir platform. Thanks to their involvement, approx-

imately half a million citizens have received a direct phone call and were asked about their urgent needs. One thousand one hundred volunteers did the shopping for the elderly. Volunteers also fed street animals and harvested the fruits that had not been collected due to the lack of workers during the pandemic. There is also a rewarding mechanism in place. Volunteers earned points for their contributions. These points could be used to buy event tickets or participate in the different trainings given by the Municipality. Citizens could also choose to donate their points. For example, they could purchase clothes for the people in need or plant trees in the name of their friends.

We developed a detailed Izmir Resilience Action Plan where we describe the Crisis Municipalism approach and all the steps that we have taken to fight against COVID-19. This action plan will also help us to be more prepared for potential future crises.

With the Crisis Municipalism model, closer connections were established in Izmir, and there have been more communication, interaction, and cooperation in the whole city. Thanks to this, we were able to create more resources and accomplish more effective crisis management. Through inclusive public governance and solidarity, we achieved to protect the right to life of our citizens better and created the necessary conditions for providing services in a more just way.