Chapter 2.14
Developing Regional Communities in Turkey

Melih Kirlidog
Marmara University, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Communities (VC), as defined by Rheingold (2000), are the social groups formed in the cyberspace when enough people carry on public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feeling. VC enabled by the ICT technologies are formed in two ways. Either their members can be actively engaged with each other and tightly coupled in e-mail discussion and communication groups, or they can be the passive observers of the Web pages and thereby loosely coupled with other members of the community. The Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) among the members of the VC is facilitated by Community Informatics (CI), which is defined by Gurstein (2000) as a

technology strategy or discipline which links economic and social development efforts at the community level with emerging opportunities in such areas as electronic commerce, community and civic networks. (p. 1)

This article will provide an overview of regional VC in Turkey. It will focus on the rural, rather than the urban regions of the country. By "rural areas" is defined here as the entire country excluding major metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Adana, and Bursa. It is hypothesized that in such areas economic and social hardships as well as cultural characteristics constitute major obstacles in the development of VC. The losing side of the digital divide within the country will be investigated and possible future trends will be examined. Although the penetration of ICT and the sophistication level of CI in some urban areas of the country are comparable to developed countries, this article will exclude such spheres.

BACKGROUND

Turkey is located between South-Eastern Europe and the Middle East and has close historical ties with the Western and Eastern world. Partly due to

Turkey's bridging characteristic between the East and the West, the country has strong traits from both worlds. As one foreign observer (Wolcott, 1999) notes, Turkey is:

a land of dramatic contrasts. [..] The Western portion of the country, centred on Istanbul, offers a cosmopolitan, urban life for over half of Turkey's population. Most of the country's geography, however, consists of pastoral agricultural regions. (p. 5)

and "both the conservative and liberal ends of the social spectrum are well represented" (p. 57) in the country. Such contrasts provide an additional fertility for a stark digital divide within the country.

By most economical and social indicators, Turkey is a developing country. United Nations Developing Program (UNDP) issues yearly Human Development Reports (UNDP, 2003) where countries are compared according to several development and life quality criteria such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), education, and access to health services. The 2003 report ranks and categorizes the countries in three groups, namely high (55 countries), medium (86 countries), and low (34 countries) human development. In the 2003 report, Turkey is ranked in overall human development somewhere in the middle of the Medium Human Development group. Table 1 shows some economic and social indicators of the country as compared to the average of the 86 medium development countries (ibid.)

Technology diffusion and usage indicators of Turkey and the average of the medium development group in the same report are shown in Table 2 (ibid.)

As Table 2 shows communication instruments are exceptionally used in the country. Disregarding the incomparable tiny island countries, Turkey is ranked second in the penetration of both mainline telephone and GSM subscriptions in the group of the 86 medium development countries.

Wolcott (1999) investigated the diffusion of the Internet in the country where he identified an analysis framework with six dimensions, each having levels from zero (least advanced) to four (most advanced). According to this framework, the diffusion dimensions and their levels for Turkey are shown in Table 3.

Although these figures and ICT usage are above the average of the comparable developing countries, the number of scientists and engineers and the receipt of royalties and licence fees are much below the average as Table 2 shows. This indicates that the people in the country are fascinated with the usage of technology but there is insufficient scientific activity to support it.

Table 1. Some economic and social indicators of Turkey as compared to the average of medium development countries

G	DP per capita (2001)	Adult literacy rate (2001)	Physicians per 100,000 people	Infant mortality rate per 1000 births (2001)
Turkey U	SD 2230	85.5%	127 3	6
Average of the 86 countries	USD 1929	83.3%	131 4	0

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