

An Evaluation Of Regional Development Agencies' Roles In Regard To Social Sustainability: A Discussion Of Turkish Development Agencies' Experience

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Abstract

This study focuses on the nexus between social sustainability and regional and local development. In handling the issue in question, the work proposes to focus on the role played by regional development agencies in facilitating social sustainability. The study will facilitate the discussion by reviewing the Turkish experience in regional development by reviewing Turkish regional development agencies' legacy that came on the Turkish regional development discussions in the mid of the very first decade of 2000s. The attempt will be to demonstrate that Turkish RDAs cannot handle mechanisms to deal with problems that appear at social and environmental levels of the notion of social sustainable development.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study shall dwell on the nexus between social sustainability and regional and local development. In dealing with the issue in question, the work proposes to focus on the role played by regional development agencies in facilitating social sustainability. The study will facilitate the discussion by reviewing the Turkish experience in regional development by reviewing Turkish regional development agencies' legacy that came on the Turkish regional development discussions in the mid of the very first decade of 2000s.

Given the prospect of full membership of Turkey to the European Union and related never ending accession talks and negotiations with the Union (Öniş, 2000, Öniş 2003), regional development agencies assumed to bring a wide array of remedies to the ongoing important problems in regard to the regional economic and social disparities embedded in the Turkish politico-economic setting (Reeves, 2005). In such respect, the scale of regional disparities between the different parts of Turkey has posed itself as a significant problematization in a wider dimension than that of the scale of regional disparities in the EU (Sungar, 2005).

Given the challenge, regional development agencies have been primary actors to deal with the disparities mostly emerging in economic dimension while Turkey in terms of geographical size encompasses an area bigger than that of Germany, Italy and Portugal combined, with an approximating population of seventy-five million (Loewendahl-Ertugal, 2005). Despite the fact that most regional development related institutions and programs came to be inextricably linked to the economic development disparities first and foremost, not adequate attention has been paid to the social sustainability dimension of problems (Gibbs, 2010). In this respect, the proposed study will problematize respectively:

On theoretical terms the link between regional development and the notion of social sustainability how the economic, social and economic dimensions of economic development may be integrated in a single approach of regional development.

What the Turkish regional development agencies' experiences have been on the way to create a national regional development policy while maintaining ties to the EU accession talks, thereby setting linkages to the Union's regional development policies.

How the Turkish Regional development agencies have devised mechanisms to integrate social sustainability schemes to the regional development policies.

Following the juxtaposition of research problematizations, the intended study aims to fill in some gaps. Although there exists a bulk of literature on regional and local development in the context of the EU; the lack of research on the link of regional development agencies to social sustainability schemes in the case of Turkey is striking. In such regard, one other effort of the paper is to contribute towards filling the gap in research literature on regional development in relation to social sustainability in Turkey.

2. REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES (RDAs) AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT NOTIONS IN GENERAL PERSPECTIVE

2.1. Rationales for RDAs and Regional Policies

In an era of major restructuring and retrenchment of government internationally, RDAs assume to play essentially important roles in facilitating and promoting economic development (Halkier and Danson, 1997). As understood from the dimension, the economic role of RDAs has been the pillar characteristic of the *raison d'être* of the organizations (Danson et al., 2005, Pike et al., 2006). A standard academic definition shall also interlink the role of RDAs to the notion of public policy by stating that RDA is "a regionally based, publicly financed institution outside the mainstream of central and local government administration designed to promote indigenous economic development through an integrated use of predominantly 'soft' policy instruments." (Halkier and Danson, 1997). Then the basic components of such definition will emphasize the semiautonomous characteristic of RDAs functioning in a multifunctional and integrated manner. (Halkier, 2011, Halkier et al 1998)

Accordingly, RDAs are given the task of supporting economic development through soft policy means. The soft policy means may stand on a wide array of alternatives ranging from the provision of advice to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to inducing networking and learning (Halkier et al., 1998) Lagendijk et al emphasize that such a soft-policy-means perspective implies a strategic point view that RDAs shall "bridge the gap between regional economic policy and other fields of policy that impact upon regional development, building on their capacity to collectivize local interests" (Lagendijk, 2009).

The importance of RDAs comes from three factors. First and foremost, RDAs develop a platform for public policy that will have proximate links to the private enterprise along with a sound distance that will avoid the abuse that might possibly come from the individual enterprises and local political interests (Benneworth, 2001). Secondly, RDAs are alternative bureaucratic bodies more closely related to private enterprises in terms of facilitation of

regional development, offering a shelter from day to day political pressures and providing a more strategic approach to the issue of regional development in the long run. These two factors bring forth a third repercussion that RDAs become more suitable actors involved in regional policy under the EU Jurisdiction, namely, European Structural Funds. As Halkier notes, “and as the importance of the European level in regional development has increased significantly since the late 1980s, the growing role of RDAs in and beyond the current borders of the EU undoubtedly owes a lot to the adoption of a long-term programming approach within the Structural Funds.” (Halkier, 2011)

In terms of regional policy paradigms, the pre-1990s regional policies were designed in a top-down style, that is to say, the basic rationale of regional policy was to “to promote equality between regions by redistributing economic activity to problem areas by means of a system of ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’, primarily relying on ‘hard’ policy instruments such as infrastructure and financial subsidies in order to boost economic hardware in the designated regions through increased investment” (Halkier, 2011). In terms of organization, the developmental era emphasized the need to nationally designate programs via different bureaucratic departments (Danson et al, 2005). The top-down design of regional policy signified the redistribution of growth, thereby increasing economic hardware through ‘hard’ resources by policy instruments which were non-selective and reactive in terms of their nature (Halkier,2011).

In the post-1990s setting, the making of regional policies has significantly changed. First and foremost, RDAs were designated as semi-autonomous bodies which contributed to the juxtaposition of regional based targets (Halkier,2011). Individual regions became the basic unit of analyses rather than nationally-designated units. The rationale behind top-bottom regional policy has not changed in its essential sense and rather remained economic as the approach principally aimed to deal with competitiveness of individual firms of localities. The basic means for public policy became ‘soft’ policy instruments such as advice, networks. In such regard, RDAs became training units which added up to improving economically relevant knowledge (software) and knowledge exchange (orgware). Moreover, within the bottom-up approach responsibility became selective and proactive (Halkier,2011).

2.2.Sustainable Development and RDAs

Despite the economic-centric definition of RDAs and regional policy, there is an increasing awareness of sustainable development notion at the policy level. By 2000s, sustainable development notions have been more and more incorporated into the concerns of spatial scales in terms of mediation of objectives and economic development and other concerns of sustainable development (Shearlock et al,2000).

A bulk of literature exists on sustainable development, defining the term as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” (Shearlock et al,2000)Therefore the term has a long-term vision for society along with the short term horizons which add up to long-term objectives. Sustainable development as a term integrates various dimensions of human action starting from the local level to the global level. In such regard sustainable development has a different set of objectives inclusive of the improvement of the quality of life of both current and future generations, while safeguarding the earth’s capacity to support life in all its diversity; promotion of high levels of employment in an economy whose strength is based on

education, innovation, social and territorial cohesion and the protection of human health and the environment and Notion of its grounds and emphasis on democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights including freedom, equal opportunities and cultural diversity (Gibson,2010).

Economic, social and environmental dimensions are the basic pillars of sustainable development. It is rather a process that facilitates “improvement of the range of opportunities facilitating individual human beings and communities to meet their needs, as well as to achieve their aspirations and full potential over a sustained period of time, while maintaining the resilience of economic, social and environmental systems ” (Shearlock et al,2000). There exist distinct driving forces and objectives for each domain As the economy domain strives to improve human welfare, primarily through increases in the consumption of goods and services, the main focus of the environmental domain is on protection of the integrity and resilience of ecological systems (Gibson,2010). The social domains underline the need for the enrichment of human relationships and achievement of individual and group aspirations. Sustainable development becomes the basic object of programs with continuous improvements in the present quality of life at a lower intensity of resource use, thereby leaving behind for future generations an undiminished stock of productive assets (i.e., manufactured, natural and social capital) that will enhance opportunities for improving their quality of life (Gibson,2010; Shearlock,2000).

Given the basic perspective drawn above, regional policy schemes have not been able to take general approaches that shall integrate the social and environmental domains of sustainable development. Most regional policies devised RDAs in a novel way that would embrace bottom to up approaches; however RDAs lacked means to integrate social and environmental domains. Most environmental policies devised by RDAs globally suffered from the same set of problems. In spite of European and global recognition of Sustainable Development throughout the 1980s, many concrete projects were far away from dealing with the problem that emerged at social and environmental levels. As Straaten et al (1999)observe in his discussion of environmental policies throughout the EU, “the principle of sustainable development does not alter this situation. On the contrary, all polluting industries accept the principle of sustainable development as a starting point for the national economy. However, as soon as the pollution in their sector is discussed, they use strong arguments based on traditional economic theories. The government is then always in the difficult position of having to demonstrate that the implementation of strict environmental standards will benefit the economy. In many cases they are not able to do this. The situation is also complicated in the case of transboundary pollution. The traditional interests of the polluting industries in some countries may be contrasted with the interests of countries suffering from pollution” (Straaten et al,1999). Indeed, the RDAs as alternative bodies that could spread the word of sustainable development could not penetrate through mechanisms that would supposedly produce solutions at environmental level and social levels. Here one should note that problems of social domain of sustainable development can not become substantial concerns for RDAs. In particular, cultural integration and social participation, as two important problems in the EU integration region did not constitute as significant problems that required immediate remedies.

3. Turkish RDAs in Perspective

By mid 2000s Turkey entered a new phase in which the country witnessed the making of a great of number of RDAs thanks to the Europeanization of regional governance policies. In such respect Turkish RDAs nurtured in a setting of European Union and central government funding (Kayasü etal 2003, Sungar,2005, Loewendahl-Ertugal2005). By 2012, Turkey established 26 ‘statistical regions’ at the NUTS-II level, which group together Turkey’s 81 provinces. In this context RDAs are supposed to play a critical role in mobilizing support and funding for regional development projects. As Lagendjik (2011) observes, RDAs are potentially apt to become strategically important organizations strengthening regional forms of governance and regional socio-economic development. In the Turkish case, RDAs become centers for consultancies for the European funding. In such regard Turkish RDAs become highly absorbed in a tension of, as Lagendjik observes at the European level, “ ‘high politics’ and the necessity to embed themselves in a particular local institutional and business setting” (Lagendjik, 2009). While facing ‘top-down’ political-strategic and bureaucratic obligations, Turkish RDAs are obliged to respond to local demands in terms of governance (partnering, strategy development), economic intelligence, and business needs in a state of institutionally and politically conditioned and circumscribed priorities (Reeves,2005).

In terms of integrating the social sustainability dimension, Turkish RDAs have a long way to cover. The main objectives of RDAs still stay at a level of economic domain of sustainable development notion. It should also be noted that given the short life spans of Turkish RDAs, it may be too early to carry out an assessment. However, given the path of development of Turkish RDAs, these institutions should find ways to integrate social sustainable development notions into their developmental projects. The economic-centered emphasis in Turkish RDAs , thus, remains an important concern to which more attention should be paid.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In light of short life span of Turkish RDAs, social and environmental concerns are not important references for regional governance policies. It can definitely be argued that the sustainable development can be used as a policy-making principle for the Turkish RDAs. Until now, the notion of sustainable development has not been well operationally defined due to the difficulties arising in RDAs’ insistence in shortcomings of economic-centered definition of regional governance policies. Although Turkish RDAs mention about the term ‘sustainable development’, there is not much materialized in terms of concrete policies pursued by these institutions. Therefore sustainable development should be the basic reference point in particular for the social and environmental concerns. Most of these concerns ‘objectives are to be realized in the long-run. In such regard, it is required that Turkish RDAs become more and more absorbed in the formation of a coherent environmental and social policy with the European regional policies.

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