

# SOCIAL INNOVATION IN TURKEY

## CASE STUDIES IN THE POLICY FIELDS OF ENVIRONMENT, POVERTY, AND EMPLOYMENT ALONG WITH LESSONS DERIVED FROM THEIR STORIES.

We provide an overview of the current state of social innovation in Turkey: how socially innovative projects develop solutions to challenging social and environmental issues amid financial and organizational barriers. An outlook for the future of social innovation in Turkey is offered.

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### MAIN POLICY FIELDS OF SOCIALLY INNOVATIVE PROJECTS IN TURKEY

Socially innovative developments in Turkey are mostly found in the policy fields of environment, poverty, and employment. The case studies that we selected and analyzed are the most salient ones in these policy fields. The areas of energy, health and transportation are not covered due to few social innovation activities and pervasive government involvement in these fields.

Social Innovation is not formally positioned at the policy level in Turkey. Governments of local municipalities may, however, encourage Social Innovation in their areas, financially support and collaborate enthusiastically on an ad hoc basis where they are aware of projects. However, the concept of social entrepreneurship is more commonly used and has some traction at policy circles.

### THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR SOCIALLY INNOVATIVE PROJECTS

The biggest challenge for socially innovative projects is that the individuals involved may have difficulties in funding their endeavor on a continuing basis, a problem exacerbated by the muddled legal status of such projects. Therefore, many socially innovative projects will never reach an advanced stage due to the innovators' inability to remain committed to the project in the face of financial insecurity. This problem may prevent the innovation from spreading

beyond the initial stillborn project. Concerns regarding personal finance as well as career risks may also represent a barrier to taking action on socially innovative ideas by social entrepreneurs.

### SOCIAL INNOVATION PROJECTS THAT ARE MORE ENDURING AMID FINANCIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

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As part of our work in the SI-DRIVE project, our team at Istanbul Technical University identified several active and effective social innovation projects in the areas of environment, poverty, and employment. We found that these projects are more resilient in the face of financial and organizational barriers, and have survived to reach a scale at which tangible benefits could be produced. Our conclusion is that chances for success and significant impact from Social Innovation will be much greater for projects in which actors are more likely to represent local communities. Similarly, success comes when the broader goals of a Social Innovation in the policy field cut across social groups.

In the field of employment, a few large-scale social innovation projects are initiated by government agencies. The case study ISMEK (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Lifelong Learning Center) is a good example of the policy fields Education and Employment ISMEK is a mass education organization by the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul,

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which comprises art and vocational courses. The organization aims to increase the personal knowledge of people living in Istanbul, improve their vocational and artistic perceptions, equip them with the urban culture, help them to be actively included in production processes, and contribute to their efforts to have an income and hence increase their chances of employability. Trainings and services are free of charge and are performed in accordance to individual and societal needs, in compliance with the regulations of the Ministry of Education. [1]

International support and local preferences play an important role in the field of environment. Also, fighting poverty has a long tradition rooted in the Turkish society. Mainly for these reasons, Social Innovation made significant inroads in the fields of environment and poverty in Turkey.

Agricultural Marketing ([tarimsalpazarlama.com](http://tarimsalpazarlama.com)) is an example of a cross-cutting social innovation including the environmental field. It represents the first online platform in Turkey for farmers to sell their products without “middlemen” involvement, to track new information about, e.g. stock market prices etc. and farming as well as to search for new technologies. The initiative aims to mitigate losses from farming that typically cause the farmers to migrate to cities and eventually end up unemployed. The project has been supported by sponsorships from the private sector but

progress was not smooth. The initiators think that rules and regulations sometimes become barriers to growth. [2] [3]

Egalitarianism, fight against poverty, economic prosperity, social rural development, and the empowerment of women are the main issues that many NGOs and associations deal with in Turkey. The Kavar-Basin Rural Development Project came up with concrete solutions to these issues in a socially innovative framework. The project was initiated by the Özyegin Association. The main partner of the association is the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Livestock. The project has successfully alleviated poverty in the Kavar region, a part of Bitlis province. [4]

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In general, the biggest challenge for socially innovative initiatives relates to the initiators' difficulties to funding their endeavor on a continuing basis, barring substantial financial support from the government or private sector. We observed that in almost all projects, the leaders are idealistic and determined about their projects; hence charismatic leadership played an important role, and we predict this will continue to be the case. The general economic environment will also be important as we expect individuals to develop interest in Social Innovation only in a gradual fashion, taking part time off from their professional lives before eventually moving to it full time. We further observed that government involvement is advantageous, especially for the policy fields of poverty reduction and employment. We see more potential for Social Innovation in the fields of transportation and mobility, particularly in the metropolitan areas of Turkey; however, do not expect drastic changes in other policy fields in the near future.

## REFERENCES

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