

# Development: What's in a name?

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## Abstract

The article looks into the process of the creation of development discourse in Turkey and its consequences on the field. In the first section of the article, amusing anecdotes are given from 1990s during which this process unfolded and gave way to a “project industry” with the EU accession period in Turkey.

The focus of the second part is on the evaluation of paradigm shift towards “human development”. Evaluation methods of development projects, numbers, statistics, indexes in this paradigm are critically interpreted.

In the last part, field cases from Kavar Region, east of Turkey, are given in order to find answers to questions like what development means for Kavar and the relationship between happiness, dignity and development.

**Keywords:** Development discourse, Turkey, Human development, Dignity and development

## Introduction

When you talk about development, it is important to reflect on what one understands by ‘development’. Development can be about economics, personal development, human rights, individual freedom, politics and many more things. And even more important, we have to reflect on who it is that are setting the standards for development. This article looks into the process of the creation of development discourse and its consequences on the field.

In places where NGO’s and development organizations are heavily dependent on financial support from international institutions such as the UNDP and the EU, their understanding and definition of development becomes the holy mantra of the ‘project industry’.

For more than 10 years I worked for the UNDP in Turkey. I remember hearing the magic words ‘sustainability’ and ‘participation’ for the first time in 1997. Back then, these words did not even exist in Turkish. After a while, the Turkish words “sürdürülebilirlik” and “katılımcılık” were born. Three years later, after several workshops, the Turkish word for ‘gender mainstreaming’ was introduced. Although in the beginning many of

us didn't immediately grasp the meaning of the words, everybody understood how important it was to use them.

Later, with the Turkish accession process, EU arrived on the scene as another potential project funder. The Turkish development sector became the victim of the Project Cycle Management (PCM)– dogma, propagated by very expensive EU-experts in even the smallest Anatolian districts. We would ask each other, even after receiving our PCM certificates, what exactly PCM was. After a few years we learned it was nothing more than Project Management with a cycle in between.

A lot of Turkish NGO's who started out with a very clear aim, wanting to solve a very urgent matter, became project writing machines, no longer considering the needs of their region, but making sure their project proposals contained enough 'sustainability', 'participation' and 'gendermainstreaming' to get the money their way. We even see a new profession arising: consultants who write project proposals for NGO's.

A few months ago a European friend of mine came to Turkey to do some volunteering works. She was invited by a municipality to help them with the writing of project proposals, mainly to apply to the European Union Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance. My friend, who didn't know any Turkish, was handed some of the former project proposals in English and given the instructions: "Make a project!". The municipality didn't think it was necessary for them to discuss this a little bit further or even pay a visit to existing projects of the regarding neighbourhoods. With her Western education and English skills she could easily write the magic words that the EU likes to hear...

### **Human development... in numbers**

All these things happen in the name of "development". So what is development after all? Is the 'project industry' contributing to Turkish development? After the '90's we saw a big shift in the development paradigm, changing from an economic approach to a more freedom of choice, capabilities-centered Human Development Paradigm. A lot of assumptions about development have changed. We now see that the provision of social services such as education and health care are more effective than increasing the GDP per capita. The latest research in Africa shows us that even with a decrease in income, the quality of life can be improved by making social services cheaper and accessible<sup>1</sup>.

The Human Development Paradigm is a big step forward to real development in my opinion. But after all, let's not forget that these definitions and criteria are developed by rich people at comfortable New York tables and not in the field. The development

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<sup>1</sup> DAVID LEONHARDT, 'Hopefull message about the world's poorest', published on March 22, 2011, in the New York Times

sector desperately needs a more bottom-up approach if it wants to genuinely contribute to the dignity and happiness of the people they are working for. Even more, if donors pretend to take into consideration the more 'soft' components of development, such as wellbeing and empowerment, their project implementation process and evaluation methods should be changed drastically.

Even though there is a consensus now that development is not purely economical we still need to use economical approaches and methods (numbers, indexes, statistics ...) to prove the developmental impact of our project to donors. Even when we try to raise awareness on domestic violence for example, the donors expect us to provide numbers of women not getting killed by their husband, and then showing how this contributes to economic growth! Donors expect even very deeply rooted social problems such as child marriages or child labour to be dealt with within the planned program time and represented in as many stats as possible, ignoring the impact of these projects on the lives and feelings of the children involved.

A few years ago, when I was conducting a needs analysis with the women from Kavar, a war-torn village in the east of Turkey, one woman told me that she had a small window in her kitchen, through which she could see destroyed houses of her neighbors. Every time she was working in her kitchen and looking at the ruins, she relived her war memories. How can the fact that we rebuild the houses only be measured in economic terms, not 'counting' the peace and happiness this woman now experiences when she is doing her dishes?

The Kavar basin consists of 6 villages and 5 hamlets in the east of Turkey, not far away from the Iranian border. In 2008 the Ozyegin Foundation entered the basin with their Ozyegin Rural Livelihood Program. For this Turkish family foundation to choose Kavar was an important and brave decision. Most Turkish people never visit these conflict-ridden areas. In return the local villagers are very mistrustful of Turkish institutions and feel isolated from the rest of the country. In the beginning of the '90's, the Kavar basin was evacuated because of the armed conflict between Kurdish militants and the Turkish army and most of the villagers migrated to Istanbul. They survived by working in construction and by collecting garbage. At the beginning of 2000, the villagers started to return without any help from NGO's or the government. After their return all the schools were ruined and the land was unusable.

### **Development in Kavar?**

For more than three years I have been coordinating this program. More than watching these villages develop, I saw these people reconstruct their lives. It has been the experiences in Kavar that made me question the development discourse. They simply had no meaning in Kavar. It made me rethink the concept of development again and again. I am still wondering what development means in Kavar. Which villager has ever

thought about sustainability? Which Kavar woman ever talked to her neighbour about gender mainstreaming?

In June, we managed to build a school in a Kavar village after struggling two years to convince the state authorities. This way, the children of the villagers didn't have to go to the State's Regional Boarding School<sup>2</sup>, taking children as young as six away from their mothers. Again, how can the joy of these mothers be counted now that they can take care of their own children? Or the fact that these children can now feel safe and loved within their own family?

Without using a lot of expensive words, the following example shows how a very simple investment can bring a big change to people's lives.

***"You talk about 'rural development'. I don't quite get what it means, but it would be good for us women if you could fix the "beri" road improved...."***<sup>3</sup>

*"Here, local women walk up to highlands to milk their animals everyday, from June to September. We start out at around 10 in the morning and we reach our animals at around 1 pm. Milking takes half an hour. Then we walk back, each of us with a load of 10 to 25 liters of milk on our backs. Back home, we get busy again with child care, boiling the milk, preparing dinner etc. This lasts until 5 pm. After that, we again spend 2.5 hours walking to "beri", which means the beri takes 5 hours each day... You talk about 'rural development'. I don't quite get what it means, but it would be good for us, women, if you could improve the road to "beri". The road now is too stony, our feet get hurt and it is too tiresome. It will make our lives easier if this road were to be improved. I wish there was a tractor to take us to "beri" and bring back."* (Female, age 28, Duzcealan Village, married with 2 children)<sup>4</sup>

By building the beri road, the women of Kavar would have five more hours a day for themselves and their families. Which number or statistic do we have to use to convince the donors about this achievement?

In short, the dignity that arises when people make their own choices cannot be captured by any development index. The only way to include these values into the development spectrum is by allowing a real participation. This participation should include the field workers and the people they work with, instead of forcing them to conform to the big words and principles set out by the international donors. The happiness and dignity of the people living in underdeveloped areas should be the priority of NGO's and international institutions, not 'making projects' to fill out the databases in New York or Geneva headquarters.

<sup>2</sup> Regional Boarding Schools (YIBO) in Turkey are established to provide education to children coming from villages where there is no school available and for children whose families can not financially support their education. Children stay there overnight and most of them only come home during the holidays.

<sup>3</sup> Beri" a local word for highlands where animals are kept during summer months, where they are also milked.

<sup>4</sup> Ozyegin Foundation, Field Research Report, Kavar, Bitlis, August 2008