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CITIZEN'S NETWORK FOR PEACE, RECONCILIATION AND HUMAN SECURITY

# AN ASSESSMENT OF TURKISH HABITAT III NATIONAL REPORT

## Introduction: General Assessment of the Report

The National Report prepared for submission to HABITAT III, the Human Settlements Summit to be held in Quito, Ecuador on 17-20 October, draws predominantly on outputs of the study KENTGES (Integrated Urban Development Strategy and Action Plan). The KENTGES Report, which was prepared by the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement within a framework of broad participation, has unfortunately been condemned to stay on shelves since it has no consequences and is in no form binding. Especially, the radical “clean slate”-approach which the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization was founded upon has rendered the country's institutional and sectoral experience in this field completely nonfunctional. It could be assumed that this institutional change plays an important role in lack of any reference to HABITAT II or especially to the Istanbul Declaration in the HABITAT III National Report.

From this point of view, the most general conclusion that may be drawn in the evaluation of the HABITAT III Report is that it is a text far from being a study conducted as a result of participatory processes, which pays no attention to scientific concerns, nor to the themes and principles, which were emphasized in previous Habitat meetings. Instead, we are faced with a report which comprises of the practices and legal regulations largely implemented during the 14-year rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) however neglecting any critical assessment of them and which forgets or forces us to forget Turkey's former experiences. Another important point to be emphasized is that the emphasis on participation and locality which marked the HABITAT II Summit which was held in Istanbul in 1996 is remarkably secondary in this report.

In today's Turkey, the most important matter that determines urbanization and therefore the development of human settlements are urban plans and regulations due to their specific importance in creating an increase of value in land and its distribution among social classes. Although the subtitle of the report is “Land and Urban Planning”, it is observed that explanations on this matter are very limited and implicit. It is observed that urban design which is addressed in Chapter Two of the Report is understood as a dimension of planning and presented as a greater problem, although it is generally considered as an area of specialization that is separate but nevertheless completes the field of spatial arrangements. The fact that planning, which is more determining in terms of social and spatial development

and a central issue of urban politics, resources and rent distribution is only briefly addressed, while design, which is rather encountered by city-dwellers in aestheticized form of public spaces in some central places and well-off neighborhoods, is treated as the most important problem indicates how far away the report is from an understanding of spatial justice. Socio-spatial justice, one of the principles of Habitat, is only briefly referred to in Chapter 5 in a disconnected manner.

We think it is necessary to discuss some prominent headings in the report in order to substantiate these general assessments more.

## **Centralization/Localization Dynamics**

With its language, content and approach, the National Report represents a serious deviation from the tendency to focus on localization put forward in the previous Habitat Summits. Limiting authorities of local governments regarding development planning and urban development in favor of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, the Mass Housing Agency (MHA) and in certain cases some other ministries corresponds with centralization within this framework.

Absorbing all settlements within the borders of provinces into the urban centers of the metropolises which they are affiliated to and shutting down town and some district municipalities by the means of special provincial administrations, as well as the loss of the legal status of village administrations by transforming them into neighborhood administrations have been implementations incompatible with the autonomy of local government. The situation becomes graver since local governments and the people are not consulted or involved in decision-making processes at any stage during these developments. The fact that the use of the term local government throughout the report implies only Metropolitan Municipalities indicates that a negative approach towards small and medium size urban administrations and district administrations within local governments itself is dominant. It is worrying that a tendency which is clearly incompatible with the principle of subsidiarity of Habitat, in the sense that services should be provided by the most local entity as possible and that this locality is equipped with resources to provide these services, has become the dominant perspective after 20 years.

Despite the fact that since the mid-2000s beginning with the Metropolises the amount of general budget tax revenues which is transferred from the center to municipalities has empowered these administration units financially and enhanced their investment capacities and ability to carry out their responsibilities, it may be argued that this situation has in general increased the dependency of municipalities on the center. The same situation is also valid for other local government entities. The increase in dependence on the center in this way also creates problems in accountability of local governments towards the local people and local administrators need to get along with the center even more, cannot afford to burn their bridges with the government even if they are from oppositional parties and need to be in contact with local powers close to the government in fiscal affairs.

Finally, the amendment of the municipality law by the emergency decree in the time of writing this report by which assigned mayors have replaced 28 mayors is an attitude in conflict with all local democracy principles and practices. Abandoning the practice of electing a new mayor through the municipal assemblies to replace a mayor who has been proven guilty of an offense and on the other hand bypassing the councils instead of abolishing them are the most explicit forms of this contradiction.

## **MHA, Leading Actor of Urbanization Policies in the 2000s**

The Mass Housing Agency (MHA), established in 1984 and financed by funds outside the general budget, was integrated into the general budget in 1993, but was not very effective until the 2000s. In the period of AKP-government, it has become the main driving force of construction-based policy of economic growth.

Although it has realized a housing production that is unprecedented in the history of Turkey, the legitimacy and source of this housing has been blended with profit-prioritizing projects of large real estate companies which are directed towards the middle and upper classes. Indeed, it has been asserted that such projects take up a larger percentage of the MHA-budget<sup>1</sup>.

The recent structure and practice of this institution have been confined to a narrow understanding of social housing compared to the period following 1984, when it was established: an understanding according to which rent control is not undertaken, the possession of property is praised as the sole form of savings and security and in which real estate-based profits are restricted neither legally nor morally. In addition, MHA practices have caused excessive and uncontrolled urban sprawl and holistic urban planning has been put aside.

In the report, the assignment of urban land production competences to the MHA is assessed as a positive development. That the transfer of these competences of the municipal administrations, which are controlled by the city-dwellers at least through their votes, to an institution affiliated with the central government is depicted so positively in such a way, can be understood as an anti-democratic tendency that clearly contradicts the principle of subsidiarity as one of the most important principles of Habitat.

In addition, the strategy of urban renewal executed under the management of MHA has had serious damages on human settlements as well as on the natural, cultural and historical environment. People have been exiled from their homes they lived for a long time violating their social rights, housing rights, and property rights. With urban policies, which are rather defined as a channel to increase the value of capital than a way to implement housing rights, neighborhoods, which have developed over centuries, have either been eradicated, such as Sulukule and Tarlabası, or experienced a gentrification process which has transformed them into fancy luxury goods only accessible to a limited upper class, such as Galata and Karakoy. In addition, large infrastructure projects which carry this construction/'urban transformation' strategy have caused a huge destruction in the context of historical heritage. The majority of MHA investments have been executed in a way which has caused an irregular sprawl of the cities towards the fringes and damaged agricultural lands, forests, meadows, water basins, natural habitats or paved the way for their destruction by transforming them into urban land. Within this context, it should be emphasized that the way in which the urban land production of the MHA has seriously increased urban sprawl contradicts the notion of the "compact city" which is idealized in various parts of the Report.

Following the rapid intensification of political tensions and armed conflict in 2015 and the blood-shedding clashes leading to a huge destruction in many cities in the Southeastern Anatolian region, the government did not abstain from presenting these places as the area and object of a transformation to be realized by the MHA (and its contractors). In fact, this attitude materialized in the fate of the Sur district of Diyarbakır, which the Prime Minister of

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1. Özdemir, D. (2011) 'The Role of the Public Sector in the Provision of Housing Supply in Turkey, 1950–2009', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35(6), 1099–1117

the time, Ahmet Davutoglu, identified with the city of Toledo in Spain and shows that not even the most grievous experiences are safe from being sold for urban profit.

## **Transition from Public Works to the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization**

The wave of centralization which started with interventions following the local elections in 2004 expanding the MHA's competences administratively and strengthening it financially became even more evident with the abolishment of the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement in 2011 and the establishment of a new ministry in its area of responsibility – to a great extent starting from scratch.

With the establishment of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, the institutional memory, expertise, technical capacity, practices, norms constituting protectionist-statist planning approaches, which had developed within the Ministry of Public Works since the first periods of the Republic, were suddenly abandoned. A (neo)liberal approach that values today's maximization of urban profits and capital's need for economic growth-based urbanization above all, and complying policies and staff have superseded the former.

Placing the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, which the MHA was attached to, in an effective position with regard to spatial development, means that some of the competences in development and planning obtained by urban administrations after 1980 have been reassigned to the center. In addition, it should be stated that the current centralization has different in nature from the centralization approach before 1980. It can be observed that central institutions within the existing structure with a liberal/market-based approach are attempting to "obtain competences" to facilitate initiatives which are adverse to the benefits of society and to eliminate local mechanisms in this process.

## **The National Spatial Strategic Plan (NSSP) of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization**

This plan which is to be prepared by the central government by means of subcontracting is the clearest document of the fact that physical planning competences are being centralized. On the other hand, we argue that such a nationwide prepared plan cannot establish a consistent policy in an environment in which even progress plans at regional level cannot be prepared and executed completely, and "local development" based on the marketing of advantages and potentials of certain urban regions is dominant.

The attempt of this plan may prepare the grounds for new tensions between two central institutions. It is very likely for a conflict to arise between the Ministry of Development which considers itself as the main body responsible for planning and the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization, which wants to keep spatial interventions under its monopoly. Pursuing such a plan in addition to Regional Development National Strategy may be interpreted as an indicator of that. Hence, NSSP project has been cancelled for administrative reasons of the Ministry itself. However, it should be noted that the national spatial strategic plan maintains its place in regulations of the Ministry.

## **Empowerment of Metropolitan Governments and Locality**

With the effect of law no. 6360 which increased the number of metropolitan municipalities to 30 and expanded their borders to include the entire province, more than 75 percent of the country's population, that is about 60 percent of the surface area now lives within the borders of metropolises. It is surprising that there is an emphasis on locality in the defense of this legal regulation which abrogated 30 special provincial administrations, more than 1500 town municipalities and more than 16000 village local governments. In reality, it is not possible to consider providing services by the largest entity available within the local government as done with the creation of metropolitan municipalities as localization, solely because of an increase in efficiency and speed in the provision of services.

By emphasizing efficiency, speed and the quality of services, this approach presents the economy of scale as justification. Different aspects of services which municipalities are responsible for complicate the existence of such a single optimal size. Moreover, it should be noted that no arguments to refute the assertion that it is necessary to authorize the most local level possible to provide services in a fast and efficient way have been developed until now. Even if the assumption of size which is defended in the HABITAT III National Report is taken as true, it should be remembered that it is possible to establish inter-municipality partnerships through municipality associations or cooperation platforms for relatively large scale investments/services instead of a concentration of competencies and resources at higher levels.

Abolishing the institutional structure that had service experience in rural area and giving the responsibility of providing services to the entire province to the metropolitan municipality, which has not gathered any experience of activity in this field, will cause a weakness in activities in this field.

Another problem is that the sharing of competences between central and local governments and metropolitan and district municipalities is not clearly defined. This ambiguity complicates the mechanism even more, which causes arbitrary support or prevention. As observed in examples of the Third Bridge, the Third Airport in Istanbul and the Istanbul Canal, regulations which have paved the way for privileged interventions of the center in the urban area have made the situation even more complex.

## **Driving Force behind Urbanization-Based Growth, Urban Renewal and Megaprojects**

The strategy of urban renewal, trivets of which began to be established in 2004 and which was taken a step further with the implementation of the mortgage law in 2009, has set the Turkish economy, social life and politics just as much on a new course as it has deeply affected human settlements. A serious capital inflow occurred, primarily to Istanbul, due to the increase of value of urban land and transformation into exchangeable commodities on the international real estate market. Along with real estate companies from developed Western countries, mobility in the real estate and construction sector which has ensured the inflow of petro-dollars from Arab countries in Persian Gulf to the country has been the driving force behind the Turkish economy.

In the Report, urban renewal is depicted as an urban development process that is affirmed in every aspect and taken pride of in the form it is applied in Turkey. Though, related

professional chambers have raised many objections against this approach. Therefore, it should not be failed to note that urban renewal practices on one hand intervene into the identity of cities by changing the historical city centers and the stock of historical buildings, and on the other hand inhibit the holism of planning regarding urban areas to a great extent. The social and ecological costs of urban renewal projects are very high and the negative elements of the tendency to urbanization which it creates are overwhelming (it serves the sprawl and leap in urban areas; paves the way for fragmented regulations; and produces a poor quality of building stock in housing directed towards the low-income groups, etc.). Due to rapid increase in land and housing prices with urbanization-based economic growth, the main tendency of the municipal administrations has become to ensure that their own real estate owning townsmen receive a larger share of the growing cake with big, mega, crazy infrastructure-superstructure projects. Urban renewal has become a point of bearing where the success of municipal administrations is tested. It has become the *sine qua non* of municipal work in this sense.

A great number of legal regulations have been executed in urban renewal processes and thus it may be assumed that this rapid, large, or even mega progress in the field of urbanization has a continuous pressure on legal regulations.

The government did not abstain from using big disasters while maintaining its accelerated strategy of urbanization. For example, serious observations have been made that the regulation known as the disaster law, in fact has the aim to facilitate the generation and distribution of urban profits rather than make the existing building stock more reliable.

In the name of urban renewal, projects especially directed towards the middle and upper classes are generally developed, in the form of secure estates and accelerate the dissolution process of neighborhood structures that is stated as a problem in the report. These projects contradict the principle of on-site transformation whose necessity is indicated in the report and force tens of thousands of low-income people to leave their homes and build up a new life in distant corners of cities.

As result of this urbanization-based strategy for economic growth, a dominant project-oriented habitus of mayors has arisen. Candidates who want to express what kind of a city they are running for office of the mayor for, start by revealing striking, crazy, mega projects. Due to the belief that no goal or principle which does not materialize in form of a project can be communicated and find acceptance, the assumption that every promise should definitely be based on a project turns election campaigns into project competitions. These projects with exorbitant costs, limited public benefits and/or which are unjust in character constitute a big threat for natural, urban, historical and public assets besides damaging public resources.

## **Living and Administrating the City Together**

One of the most important emphases of HABITAT II was to pave the way for citizens and non-governmental organizations to take an active role in building and realizing sustainable policies and to participate in these processes. It is observable that no concrete data, indicators or examples of implementation are presented regarding what kind of progress Turkey has undergone since its starting point in 1996 to today in the field of participation of local people and civil society in decision-making and implementation processes, starting with the city councils. While discussing developments during this process in Turkey, the report

focuses on contribution rather than participation and thereby unintentionally expresses issues in that matter. To mention the possibility of contribution rather than the possibility of participation makes assume that contributions to processes and matters deemed appropriate and which do not contradict any already pre-planned decisions, are only accepted for show, while the decisions are essentially made as before. Contribution is desired and expected in the form of voluntary support for implementations which have already been decided both legally and practically and put into effect.

## **City Councils and Related Bodies**

It is possible to observe the clearest form of problems regarding participatory administration in Turkey in city councils which are considered the main bodies for achieving this goal. We can address these problems under a number of headings.

Although we have to assume that all municipalities have established councils since it is a legal obligation, no sanctions are imposed on municipalities that have not established them.

The first and probably the largest group of experiences with councils consist of bodies which are not in any way operational due to the fact that they were only established on paper. It is beyond doubt that city councils which were only established for show or sometimes even just on paper to fulfill legal obligation, do not have any meaning for participation.

A majority among those councils which were not just established on paper, but have in fact gained a certain degree of effectivity, are bodies which have been established and operate under direct influence of the mayor. Councils which have been formed under direction of the preferences of the mayors and which act according to their agenda, only function to further legitimize the mayor's policies, rather than facilitating participation of the people. Mayors, who without restraint can also become the president of a council if they wish, can associate issues already on their agenda with demands of the council and thereby foist these issues onto a larger public opinion. Even if they do not become council president personally, they always have the opportunity to influence the functioning of the council at least indirectly since the secretary generals are elected from among three candidates nominated by them. The establishment of councils free from influence of mayors may not make them exempt from political instrumentalization. Another situation which can be encountered is that some actors who have influence on local politics or want to increase their influence try to increase their familiarity in public opinion and use these councils for their own political projects. One opinion argues that such actors who become prominent through their activities in the councils are in fact only seeking political profits and influenced by their own political benefits have the effect that these bodies lose the interest of a larger section of society.

The most widespread tendency that we encounter in councils which have not become object of attempts of mayors and other actors to instrumentalize them and instead were established and operate completely with participation and labor of civil society, is that these bodies try to develop ambitious projects with the intention of providing solutions for big problems of cities. However, the attempt to substitute tasks of the municipalities by councils does not make much sense in terms of participatory democracy. Councils which have been taken away by such a tendency could get locked up into a project-oriented performance logic, instead of representation and participation, which leaves them faced with limited actions which only benefit a small group.

It is possible to come across other bodies which compete for political legitimation with municipal councils, besides city councils which act as one service unit. There are also some

council members who - based on finally revealed corruption of politicians - consider politics as completely illegitimate, and therefore appropriate the main right to represent the people for themselves. In fact, totally disregarding the political legitimacy of freely and democratically elected municipal assemblies and substituting their representation and decision-making functions can in any case be seen as a threat which councils can encounter in their practice. Finally, some councils which have implemented an autonomous practice from the municipalities lose their relations with associations, foundations and citizen initiatives represented within them. This makes it difficult for them to remain an umbrella platform and causes them to act like a non-governmental organization on their own. In this way, city councils start to resemble an organization which only produces policies and discourses according to the preferences of the people in the administrative bodies and operates in a nature far from being representative.

## **Increasing Urban Security**

In the Report, a generalization is made that migration generates poverty and poverty generates crime, and it suggests the improvement of urban security (police, CCTV etc.) as the method to fight these urban problems. There is another method that is used to solve such “problems” in Turkey, which is however not mentioned in the report: completely demolishing problematic neighborhoods under the name of urban renewal commonly referred to as “clearing”. In 2015-2016, another level was reached when in the name of the struggle against terrorism whole cities (regardless of their historical characteristics) were completely destroyed and almost the entire city population had to migrate. The task of reconstructing these demolished places was almost immediately given to the MHA.

While in such an understanding of the city, the approach which argues that security in cities can only be ensured by an intensification of face-to-face relations, the existence of small local shops, the use of pavement and streets, and opening public spaces to everybody, has unfortunately no place, security is instead materialized only in hiding behind higher walls, surveillance of criminalized neighborhoods, preemptive monitoring by police forces or and totally cleansing them.

## **Urban-Rural Relations**

The Report considers urban migration to be a disease which has to be prevented and gives examples of policies established to prevent it. In fact, political developments since the 1950s, such as the industrialization and mechanization of agriculture, have triggered migration. Still today, policies which aim at expanding the size of agricultural enterprises and therefore cause small producers to abandon farming are constantly implemented under the discourse of making the rural area more attractive, and hence tacitly continue to promote migration to the cities. Subsidized agricultural corporations, such as Turkish Sugar Factories Inc. (Turkiye Seker Fabrikaları A.S.), have been shut down or privatized, which leaves the state deprived of instruments to intervene in agriculture. It is known that the evacuation of villages, bans on access to meadows and curfews within the scope of the struggle against terror have also triggered these migration waves.

Besides, the reason for unplanned and unhealthy growth of cities is not only migration, but local governments which are deprived of competences and resources to deal with the results of migration. In fact, the capacity of urban administrations to fight the results of migration is

weakening because they are deprived of competences and resources more and more due to the aforementioned centralization tendency.

## **Priority Groups**

The report addresses activities directed towards groups such as youth, the elderly and women and by painting a rosy scenario it tries to distract from the fact that the reality is different.

For example, great problems are experienced in education policies due to continuous changes made to the education and exam system which is one of the most important topics for the youth. In contrast to the claims in the report, different sources argue that the schooling rate has decreased. Moreover, we do not know to what extent especially girls who carry the burden of household chores actually receive regular education despite paperwork showing their attendance, since data of school absence is not shared. Administrators and teachers tolerate this matter more since going to school is obligatory and some social aids are conditional on attending the school.

Relative income poverty among youth between ages of 0-17 is 28.4 percent. This is the worst rate among 34 countries in OECD. In other age groups Turkey's ranking is better.

Most of the youth assemblies envisaged for participation of young people are nonfunctional and they work like youth branches of political parties. In addition, there is a National Youth Council initiative which is organized from top-down and in opposition the YOF (Youth Organizations Forum) initiatives which want to mobilize from the grassroots level, however have not been put into practice yet.

In respect to elderly people in Turkey, research indicates that they feel hopeless and lonely besides having financial difficulties.

Regarding women, their existence on the labor market is still very limited. Moreover, although legal regulations were implemented, they are not respected and sexist discourse and violence against women still continue.

# **Developments in the Field of Land and Urban Planning**

## **Centralization of Spatial Planning Competences**

The concentration of spatial planning competences within the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization is the most mentioned matter among the developments in the field of land and urban planning, addressed under the main headings of the new urban agenda. Although it is not certain which level of planning (environmental, regional, or development plans) are implied with spatial planning, the concentration of competences in the hands of the new ministry is legitimized with the argument that it ensures a holistic planning approach and the principle of hierarchical unity of planning.

It should be noted that the problem concerning the clarification of purpose, nature and scope of plans and their weight in eventual decisions of land use, which is presented as the urban politics adopted by the government in the report, has been created by the government in the last decade. In other words, the distribution of spatial arrangement competences, which differ

in extent and quality according to the context, to different central administrative institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Public Works and Settlement, the Ministry of Environment, State Planning Organization (SPO), or the MHA, is actually a result of arrangements of this government. In this sense, it is questionable whether the mentioned concentration is a positive development. It deserves critique that it is not clearly stated which level of competences are concentrated at any ministry, that is part of the central administration, and who will exercise the competences at lower levels. In addition, the power of the Ministry and the MHA to make decisions, if required, by bypassing local governments in places designated as disaster or urban renewal areas contradicts the principle of subsidiarity of Habitat. The phrase “hierarchical unity among the plans” used in the report appears like a discursive principle used for this centralist maneuver. As an example for this issue, in the case that a plan which the MHA or the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization has developed for an area listed as public land, is not deliberated by the municipal assembly of that city within 3 months, it is regarded as approved. Furthermore, the municipal assemblies have no right to reject these plans.

Following local elections in 2004, in a period in which urban renewal became adopted as a goal, the regulation of who and how can exercise competences for public works arrangements were amended in a process in which the central administration as well as the MHA and various ministries were active, but in a way which presents a breach of the European Charter of Local Self-Government which Turkey signed in 1988, annotating some articles. This preference in policy can be associated with a priority for urban profits and the central government's intervention into their distribution in the new local agenda, instead of local democracy.

## **Sustainability Discourses under Conditions of Environmental Destruction and a Rise in Resistances**

It should be emphasized that the development measures which have been applied since the Habitat II Istanbul Summit until today have created exactly the opposite results of what is continuously stressed in plans and reports with the concept of “sustainability”. Especially, if we look at the development strategies put into effect in the last 15 years, a dramatic inconsistency is apparent to the predictions of development, the charter of local self-government and the struggle against the climate crisis. Experiences with energy investments that are considered the most important measure for development constitute clear examples. In the energy sector, hydroelectric power plants (HEPP) that have been or will be constructed on all streams and rivers in the country under the name of “reducing foreign dependency” and increasing the capacity for “renewable energy” have been generated great problems. Among them are that demands of local people are excluded in the preparation of projects; participation in decision-making processes is prevented through continuous amending of legislation even though there are court decrees (regarding the violation of the principle of subsidiarity); places which are designated as or already are agricultural or tourism areas are transformed into HEPP sites as a result of a planning deficit which occurred because in not one single valley “holistic reservoir planning” was undertaken. As result of this, in contrast to the predictions regarding the effects of the climate crisis on Turkey also prepared by the ministries, HEPP's and other investments, which are in fact classified as “renewable” and “sustainable”, cause substantial damage to old natural forests and biosphere reserves which

are very globally important . Even just the example of Macahel (Camili) Reservoir in Artvin is enough to show which energy and climate crisis predictions are dominant. Camili Biosphere Reserve which was declared the first and unique “world biosphere reserve” of Turkey by the UNESCO in 2005 is one of 621 biosphere reserves in 117 countries in the world. Despite this fact, there has been the attempt to construct eight separate hydroelectric power plants even in this area, which however were prevented by struggle of citizens. Nevertheless, the region is still under threat of the “green road projects” developed in the name of improving tourism. None the less, the most important item of the agenda of Turkey during the mentioned period was local resistance in places which have become victims of this wrong “development” approach. In cities, where the current government received the majority of votes, protests were held primarily against these “renewable/sustainable” HEPP’s which have even been erected the in valleys. The people who live in places where HEPP’s have been or will be constructed see each and every HEPP as a destruction project in the sense that they are disposed of the right to access to water, and that the transmission lines installed to connect the tens of HEPPs, which have sprung up like mushrooms along the riverside, with the central distribution system ruin and destroy the forests and agricultural lands and have Therefore, they have protested against them and named themselves “life defenders”. Rapid expansion of urban areas and urbanization of capital have substantially affected agricultural lands along with rural settlements since the Habitat II Istanbul Summit. Different dimensions of these effects are the pollution of streams and reservoirs, the appropriation of them for drinking water needs of the cities, the construction of a great number of dams on every river to promote the energy market, and allow the destruction of the environment for mining activities. Furthermore, fertile agricultural lands have in many places been almost plundered under the pressure of urban profits.

Commencing with granting Koc Holding permission to establish a car factory on SEKA land in Adapazari in the late 1990s; the ongoing severe damage to the environment through the activities of Cargill (Bursa) which have special authorization by the government, despite a court decree in 2000s acknowledging the destruction; the Highway Project carried out by filling the entire coastline of the Eastern Black Sea region with rocks; the HEPP’s which have been or will be constructed across the country, primarily in Eastern Black Sea region and in Tunceli (Dersim); the coal mines which are operated under extremely heavy labor conditions and cause a immense destruction of the environment, such as the uprooting olive trees in Yirca, Manisa one year ago, have all been events that have gone into history due to their political importance and have stirred the conscience of society.

The people’s uprising starting in June 2013 as a reaction to a project that was to transform the Taksim Gezi Park into a shopping mall in form of historical artillery barrack which spread across Turkey lasting for days was the peak of these events. Even in this event, it was obvious that the sole decision-making authority regarding Taksim Gezi Park was in the hands of the prime minister of the time. In fact, as became evident, not even the metropolitan municipality had an interest to make a decision regarding this area, so that in this occasion the principle of subsidiarity was violated again.

Especially, the local population of villages and towns has shown an immense struggle against the destruction of the conditions for a shared life of people and all other living creatures, such as streams and rivers, green spaces and nature as a whole, for the profitability of private capital. For example, for the past 25 years, there has been a struggle

against companies that want to execute cyanide mining in Cerattepe, which is located in an old Caucasian natural forest belt in Artvin. Although a court has based on expert's report and academic reports established that mining activities cannot be executed in the mentioned area, confirmation has been obtained from the ministry with partial amendments in the project. Resistance of the people of Artvin against Cengiz Holding, which is close to the government and last assumed the project, continues even under conditions of state of emergency. In the light of such bad credentials, it is worrying to read that the government's actions are in line with the notion of sustainable urban planning, as stated in the HABITAT III National Report. Hence, all references in the Report to ecological sensitivity, protection of agricultural lands, or incentives for urban agriculture/food production in this context are questionable.

## **Discourse on the Protection of Agricultural Lands**

HABITAT III National Report states that plans developed following the Land Protection Law of 2005 have prevented the use of absolute agricultural lands, special product lands, and cultivated agricultural lands for non-agricultural purposes. Before discussing to what extent the law functions in this sense, it should be stated that it is a problematic approach to use concepts referring to more limited, specific areas; such as "absolute agricultural lands", "special product lands", "cultivated agricultural lands", instead of the concept of "fertile agricultural land" which has established itself in the related literature. However, more critical than definitions agriculture are planning decisions developed directed for these areas and the policies of the country regarding agriculture on the one hand and urbanization on the other.

In proposing the concept of the "compact form" for cities, the real purpose was to prevent the sprawl of cities and to save areas such as agricultural lands, forests etc. from burden of settlement. However, as observed in the example of Law 2B, let alone prevent the fragmentary occupation of agricultural and "deforested" lands due to energy, transport, industry, mining, tourism and similar activities, building development in these areas is even encouraged by central institutions. It should also be noted that the destruction of agricultural and forest lands has rather developed as a cause of local planning.

Furthermore, it is questionable to what extent the Land Protection Law is abided by. The most known example for this was the plundering of olive groves of the village of Yirca, in Soma. Only after hundreds of trees were cut down could the court adopt a motion for stay of execution. However, it was only due to the intense public reaction following the mine disaster in Soma in the same year that the court decree could be implemented. We should also mention such examples as the case of Samsun Tekkekoy, which represent bad marks for Europe's sensitivity to the environmental destruction in Turkey, in which the government and local administrators are involve together. After Asagicinik Village, affiliated to Tekekoy, lost its legal entity as a village according to the Metropolitan Municipality Law no. 6360 of 2014 and formally becoming a neighborhood, the district municipality developed a Logistic village project to transform the mutually used meadows of the village. Although the people of Asagicinik objected to the project, whose construction commenced with a budget of 500 million Euros supported by the European Union, and continued despite two motions for stay of execution by the court, they could not make their voices heard. Tekkekoy Municipality and the District Governorate present the nearly finalized Logistic Village as a big success.

## **Urban Land Management and Public Disclosure**

In this chapter of the Report, the assignment of competences regarding urban land production to the MHA is presented as a positive development. Besides clearly being inconsistent with the principle of subsidiarity, the mentioned assignment reveals an anti-democratic attitude which weakens the power of the local people and the municipalities as their representatives regarding the distribution of financial revenues generated in the city which is one of the most important determinants of local self-government. Likewise, it should be repeated that the land and resource waste which is caused by the style of MHA urban land production, which predominantly develops by extending the urban area towards the peripheries, contradicts the declared goal of creating a “compact city”.

The statement describing transparent administration in this same section which argues that “municipalities are continuing their work to establish urban information systems with the purpose of managing urban land better by accessing urban information” deserves some elaboration. There is no doubt that the formation of an urban information system is an important technical infrastructural investment. However, the questions by whom and with which purpose the information retained is and will be used are another ignored dimension of the matter. While this system becomes a healthy planning instrument in the hands of a democratic urban administration that pays attention to and appreciates the voices and opinions of the local population in direct and indirect ways and attaches more importance to the benefits of the society than individual interests and the pressure of wanting to make profits, it can turn into a real estate information system in the hands of market-based, anti-democratic administrations as we currently observe in many municipalities.

More importantly, it should not be ignored that a social-class related disparity in access to information exists, which is one of the important ways to ensure a transparent urban administration, in favor of investors, constructors, contractors and their political extensions and against the remaining local population regarding matters concerning them. While the listed class of entrepreneurs and owners of land and power receive information about where and what kind of plans to make early on through public call for bids, the other parts of society only reach such information at the very last stage when they are already affected.

In today's Turkey, only a limited number of municipalities such as Diyarbakır and Seferihisar have opened the access to urban information systems for the population (to a certain degree). In addition, let alone opening access in such a way, even the public disclosure of municipal assembly decrees, which is a legal requirement, is done irregularly. For example, Ankara metropolitan Municipality only places half of municipal assembly decrees on the internet and the remaining ones are announced at boards on corridors of directorates affiliated to municipality which can be seen hardly. Such sinuous ways that require extra effort of the population have nothing to do with transparency in administration.

## **Urban Agriculture**

In many cities, urban farming lands which are heritage of the past are opened to investments such as construction, commerce, etc. because they are considered vacant valuable lands. For example, the ongoing plundering of the Ataturk Forest Farm land mentioned in the

Report, which started in the 1990s, has reached its peak in the construction of the new Presidential Palace.

Under the same heading, the Report addresses the centralization of the administration of urban sprawl zones, agricultural lands and areas with ecologic value through the Metropolitan Municipality Law no. 6360 within the context of increasing food production in cities and their periphery. However, authorizing metropolitan municipalities which are responsible for the development of urban areas which have reached metropolitan size, as the sole body for the protection of rural areas, agricultural production, forestry and ecologic values is a both a historical and intrinsic contradiction. Let alone the correct and proper management of these areas, they have the risk of being opened for destruction. No convincing information is presented regarding the claim that increased work is being undertaken to combine small fragmented lands which is stated as another step within the context of increasing food production in urban areas.

It is interesting that hobby gardens which have developed in the last 20 years are presented as a new tendency increasing urban food production in the report. No indicator is given regarding the fact that the amount of products produced in such gardens has reached any serious level. On the other hand, it is remarkable that the Report does not mention neighborhood vegetable gardens in Istanbul which are a heritage from the Ottoman period. Vegetable garden farming which has a multi-dimensional and social function needs to be protected and propagated in a special way also because they are part of the historical and social heritage of local culture.

## **Car-Centered Urban Mobility**

As long as transportation policies based on highways are predominant, measures aimed at decreasing traffic jams will be unsuccessful. In fact, it should be underlined that the problem especially in centers of large city is presented by the Report as a problem of transportation, not a problem of access. As transportation is presented as transportation by individual cars, the construction of new roads, bridges and tunnels are the preferred solution to the problem. However, instead this escalates the problem. The Report states that urban accessibility has increased mainly through implementing large investments prioritizing highways, and sophisticated systems and models in many cities, primarily in metropolises. Such an approach which considers urban mobility as car mobility damages natural resources seriously as observed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bridge project which caused the most shocking extent of heavy destruction in the northern forests of Istanbul. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Bridge which was developed together with the third airport and Istanbul Canal has been criticized for being large scale transportation investment which triggers the appetite of landowners, the construction sector, and real estate companies and contractors by transforming a large area into urban settlement, at the cost of the life line of Istanbul, exhausting its forests, streams, villages, and agriculture in short time.

Another two points regarding urban mobility that should be underlined are the mobility of disabled people in the city and the ignorance towards non-human living creatures. Even though in the last 20 years there have been some legal regulations and formal changes regarding the design of roads, pavements, social-public spaces and mass transportation which are planned to increase the mobility of the disabled, it is obvious that despite the many

promises made in agreements signed, these are substantially insufficient and generally only remain a formality. On the other hand, the magnitude of current urbanization and its car-centered traffic also restricts the mobility of street animals and other living creatures, as well as destroying their living environment.

## **Improving Technical Capacity**

According to the National Report of Turkey for HABITAT III, an important problem in the domain of land and urban planning is the improvement of technical capacity by recruiting technical staff and providing them with proper education. By making a comparison between local governments of different sizes (metropolitan, province and district municipalities), it is argued that this is a problem more acutely experienced by the smaller-sized administrations. However, it should be noted that the issue of technical staff goes beyond the fact that the province municipalities employ one tenth of that of the metropolitan municipalities do, and that district municipalities employ 2,6 people on average. For example, the metropolitan municipalities have a personnel problem not because of the lack of expert or technical staff, but rather because of the clientelist recruitment which is not based on merits, and the precarious way in which municipality workers are generally employed through subcontractors. It is obvious that there is a lack of an employment scheme which recruits personnel in a fair way according to competences and qualities and provides the employees with safer working conditions in which they can use vocational and scientific knowledge free of socio-political pressures.

When it comes to the problem of a sufficient number of personnel, which is valid for relatively small municipalities, instead of increasing the number of technical personnel for each municipality, it can be argued that this problem could be solved by encouraging the municipalities to form a common pool of staff which they could make use of whenever needed. In that sense, regional unions of municipalities appear to be a good solution. Although the institutional and legal framework exists for such a method, it is currently hardly used.

## **LAND AND URBAN PLANNING**

At the end of Part Two, the report states that the grounds for the existing problems lie in the lack of coordination between authorities and investors within the planning system. The most significant problem which derives from this flaw is claimed to be the "emergence of urban environments that are deprived of design and quality".

This focus of the planning and investment enterprises in urban land accelerates the increase in value of land as well as producing responses to the profit-seeking behaviour of property owners and administrators. The form of urbanisation which is shaped by this focus paves the way to deepen socio-spatial problems, such as urban sprawl, the destruction of agricultural land, forests, rivers and the nature as a whole, excessively populated cities, chronic insufficient quality of drinking water, sewage and transportation systems, the rise in housing

prices, the increase of social and spatial injustices, and consequently to the intensification of urban poverty and urban crimes. It is obvious that generating explanations, such as the lack of coordination or the neglect of urban design, without mentioning any of these issues is apolitical and fundamentally insubstantial. And even this approach is left without convincing arguments.

More fundamental problems such as planning are referred to an indirect and implicit way with the terms of "human-centred planning", "priority of infrastructure" or "inconsistency with urban tissue" and the advocated solution is described as the need to encourage "increased work towards the preparation of urban design guides". This approach shows that urban design is still seen within a modernist perspective as a technical issue and that dimensions such as citizen participation or democratic negotiation are completely neglected.

The report also highlights the "insufficient planning of public spaces". However, many examples can be given which underline that is not insufficient planning is the case, but rather the planned destruction of public spaces. For instance, important places like Taksim Square (Istanbul) or Kızılay Square (Ankara) are losing a great degree of their quality as public spaces because of the construction works to either open or close them for pedestrians. In addition to this, urban renewal projects, accelerated construction works in the urban environment more generally, and political segregation along social, class, ethnic or confessional lines which develop due to this, erode neighborhood life and culture and deprive city-dwellers of public spaces in which they can come together and discuss topics about the city, form collective movements and make their voices heard to the governing administrators.

## Environment and Urbanisation

The Report states the lack of coordination between institutions as the main problem of environmental issues. Indeed, the Provincial Environmental Commission, a central-state organisation founded in each province which has the duty and power of coordination and enforcement does not effectively ensure the adherence to environmental regulations as it insufficiently fulfils its duties and monitoring responsibilities. On the other hand, in the past fifteen years, the essential problem in the increase of environmental issues is that decision-makers have put their focus on turning the wheels of the economy giving societal and environmental problems secondary importance.

The report gives no or only very minor space to population movements as a result of climate change and disasters or to those due to large-scale infrastructure investments, whereas they are prone to be the most burning issues in the coming decades.

The report has a basic lack that it is based on old urban data due to the use of KENTGES as its basic document, which was produced in 2009. Since then, Turkey has gone through substantial urban and social transformations. For example, the existence of more than 3 million Syrian asylum-seekers in Turkey for the past 5 years is not mentioned in the report; it is blind to the impact of this phenomenon to the cities. Although in fact, Syrian migration is at the same time an urban issue that has led to new social clashes, sky-rocketing housing rents, an increase in people who are forced to stay in abandoned buildings, and new forms of exploiting migrant labour force.

And again because of taking the KENTGES document as its basis, the report expresses targets which no longer have any substance, and which, hence, are forced to stay at the level of "wishful thinking". For instance, the emphasis put on "green cities" completely denies the realities of urban orientation in Turkey. The target of "getting rid of polluting cities" set forth as a long-term goal is far from being realistic after the implementation of the new metropolitan law or the current urban renewal approach. Expressions such as "green technology", "green buildings" and "green cities" are illusory statements, far from an holistic ecological understanding. If the current urban sprawl continues as such, it will in long-term not be possible to achieve the ecological goals for Turkey, such as lowering carbon emissions or protecting biodiversity.

It is also worthy to note that the mega-projects planned mainly around Istanbul (3<sup>rd</sup> Bridge, 3<sup>rd</sup> airport, Istanbul Canal etc.) and the inevitable urban-rural-ecological disaster that is being caused by them are not mentioned in the report.

## **Addressing Climate Change**

The report mentions to no extent the "ecological footprint", which means that the principal unit of climate change measurements is left out of its discussion. Whereas, the *Ecological Footprint Report of Turkey* states the consumption in Turkey to be 50 per cent higher than global biological capacity. As the national biological capacity of Turkey is below world average, the national ecological gap is great than the global gap.

Although the national report claims that intensive activities have been carried out in order to promote renewable energy sources as well as the reduction of emission in transportation and waste management, according to another report, titled *Ways and Priorities for Low-Carbon Growth for Turkey*, Turkey's greenhouses gas emission rate has increased by 110,4 per cent since 1990. The same report details that the reports and targets put forth by the Turkish government are not based on realistic scenarios and thus produce misleading results.

Another lack is the sole focus of the struggle against climate change on emission reduction. Several expert reports predict that the main impact which climate change will have on Turkey lies in fact in the issue of desertification coupled with excessive rainfall mainly in the Black Sea Region. Besides, a number of measures should be taken for the protection of existing water basins, the reduction of use of the forests by increased protection, the prevention of urbanisation projects in the Black Sea Region which neglect the risks of flooding and landslides, and which include actions, such narrowing river beds, deforestation for the sake of mining etc. Unfortunately, current trends point to the exact contrary. Every year the countryside and cities in the Black Sea Region witness flood disasters and casualties related to them.

## **Disaster Risk Reduction**

The Report argues that Turkey's Earthquake Regulation is one of the most advanced ones in the world. This is a positive aspect in terms of being prepared for seismic movements, but the same report does not mention the abrogation of the Earthquake Council; no explanation is given as to why it was founded and why it has been abolished. It is true that an upgrade in the quality of construction was realised, but this is in part related to the rapid development within the construction sector.

The main problem concerning earthquakes (and other disasters) is the alarming fact that vacant terrains which had been declared gathering spaces have been opened to construction, especially in highly profitable areas. We are now in a position that in densely inhabited cities, particularly in Istanbul, there are no vacant places left for the people to gather safely during or after a disaster.

## **Air Pollution**

The Report argues that air pollution has been decreased thanks to the introduction of natural gas. However, this is a very costly energy source and people prefer to use other sources for heating. The Chamber of Environmental Engineers emphasizes in its *Air Pollution Report* that the air pollution has surpassed the alarming threshold in many cities. The Chamber locates the reason behind this phenomenon in the repeated elections in Turkey during which the governing party distributed cheap coal to the voters, and advises that natural gas should be distributed instead of coal.

Besides this, the heating fuel assistance provided by the Ministry of Family and Social Policies is also a major cause of high rates of air pollution in many cities.

## **Urban Governance and Legislation**

According to the Report, the 1981 Law regulating the percentage of the general budget to be given to the Special Provincial Administrations was implemented after 2000. Although the percentage of funds that flow from the central government to the local governments has been increased by later laws, the most recent period has favoured Metropolitan Municipalities, while local taxes and other revenues were not augmented, and have hence created new dependences. Thus, local governments have been strengthened to the advantage of the large-scale ones. Moreover, the Report clearly reveals the political orientation according to which urbanisation is seen as the leverage of growth. That is why the most important agenda of the local governments, especially of the Metropolitan Municipalities, is stated to be leading and facilitating local development.

Main local government activities, such as urbanisation plans, amendments, permits, infra- and supra-structure investments, are all focused on the sole goal of attracting more capital (in forms of money and investments) to the city and of expanding the existing capital to urban profit, i.e. expanding urban renewal projects to new urban areas. In this context, collective consumption services concerning the reproduction of urban labour force and social aspects of the municipal services oriented towards the poor, waged and middle classes remain secondary. These are only developed and delivered in connection with economical development, private capital and free market.

## **Urban Economy**

The section on urban economy discusses the facilitation and improvement of access to financing housing, which gives a clue of the role that the municipalities are expected to play as well as the instruments they are provided with for these means. It is obvious that thanks to

the acceleration of the construction sector through the MHA, it has become the catalyser of the processes in which capital accumulation/growth in urban economy has gained utmost importance. There is a disparity between the factors announced as the dynamics of local development and the growth dynamics really at work in cities such as Denizli, Konya, Kayseri, Antep known as the "Anatolian Tigers" in the media. These cities are celebrated as places where a high value-added production exists, while in reality, they are places of low value-added production such as textile, weaving, furniture and household goods.

Thus, the only concrete step taken in the last 14 years in order to support the local economy is the boost of urban renewal projects and the acquisition of higher financial resources by the metropolitan municipalities provided by the central authorities.

The Report also makes questionable statements concerning the actions and apparently positive results regarding regional development and regional inequalities. In the last 5 years, Istanbul's share was equated to the sum of 80 provinces combined, while the provinces in the Southern and Aegean Regions have witnessed the greatest loss. This clearly refutes the argument that the Regional Development Agencies serve the reduction of regional disparities.

## **Housing and Basic Services**

### **Improvement of Slum Areas and Prevention**

Today, Turkey's main problem concerning irregular urbanisation is not the slums. A great part of the slum neighbourhoods have been subjected to a transformation during the 80s by small speculators following the increasing land-profits. Hence, the slums were gradually replaced by 4-5 storey apartment buildings and with the 2000s the slum-type building stock was reduced considerably by large speculative actions. The built environment today comprises of gigantic buildings (some of which are public buildings and municipalities) bearing the quality of "irregular constructions".

Besides this, the macro-planning of the cities totally dismisses the conventional planning hierarchy and the development of urban land is defined by the speculations of a small group of powerful actors (public and private).

Consequently, the claim that the slums are the most significant problem of the cities and that this problem may be solved by urban renewal is misleading. It should also be stated that although MHA highlights the slum prevention as its main aim, the majority of the housing that is produced by this institution designed to cater for middle- and high-income households.

### **Improving the Access to Clean Domestic Energy**

The Report places the nuclear energy under this heading, as one of the clean sources of energy! It is an unacceptable mindset and a fatal error. Nuclear energy is by no means a clean energy, not only because of the risks that it puts on human lives, but also because of its economic and ecological costs during the phases of construction, operation and disassembling. Not to mention the links to the nuclear weapons. In Turkey, awareness-raising activities, incentives and sanctions related to energy saving and efficient use of energy sources are not sufficient. The country is deprived of integrated energy planning and far from reaching long-term targets. The priority goal which is observed is the diminution of

dependency to other countries in terms of energy. In this respect nuclear energy is regarded as the most short-cut solution, although the nuclear plants planned to be constructed in Turkey do not in fact count as a domestic energy source, because they would be dependent on the use of imported uranium as well as adequate personnel with relevant technical capacity.

## Conclusion

The *Turkey Habitat III National Report* seems to be written as an appraisal of government actions, instead of being an objective assessment of the country's compliance with the targets set out at Habitat II. The undeniable centralisation, the urbanisation of rural lands and the tragic outcomes of urban renewal projects are ignored and the focus is put on the domains and activities at which the government considers itself "successful". As a consequence, there is every reason to think that Turkey did not show the necessary effort and interest to meet the targets of a declaration which carries the name of one of its own cities.