**YERELİZ’s contribution to call for inputs to a Report on Cultural Rights and Sustainable Development**

1. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was accepted with the signature of 193 countries at the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Summit held in September 2015. The 2030 Agenda recognizes the elimination of poverty with all its dimensions as an integral part of sustainable development and brings together all problems, ranging from climate change to gender equality, with reference to economic and social development. This Agenda, which carries the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) implemented in 2000 even further, aims to evolve the direction of development to a more sustainable route all over the world. In this direction, 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been defined. The main aim of SDGs is to drive a sustainable development path that “lefts no one behind”, both between countries and at the national level during the period 2015-2030.
2. Turkey put the concept of sustainable development on its agenda in 1996, shortly after the United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio in 1992, and reflected this concept in its Development Plans and many strategic policy documents in the following years[[1]](#footnote-1). Finally, sustainability was included as one of the main themes in the 10th Development Plan (2014-2018) and the 11th Development Plan (2018-2023). In addition, in 2019, Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) preparation processes were initiated in line with the 2030 Agenda by Strategy and Budget Department which is responsible for the preparation of national development plans under the Presidency. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member states to "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven"[[2]](#footnote-2). These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the high-level political forum (HLPF)[[3]](#footnote-3). At the end of this process, a report assessing the current situation of Turkey was published by the Strategy and Budget Department to show which sustainable development goals Turkey has made progress in, and which ones need more effort.
3. Turkey's development goals are largely growth-oriented, so much so that the famous investment bank Goldman Sachs has counted Turkey among "11 countries that achieved success in growth"[[4]](#footnote-4). However, the inclusiveness of this growth and its effects on access to social, economic, and cultural rights have not found sufficient place in the "development marketing approach” of governments. While growth walks arm in arm with inequalities and prevents development itself from being sustainable, Turkey has focused on communication and marketing strategies around the activities which can be more or less associated with SDGs to show its success in the international arena. Since development goals are viewed through the lens of marketing, SDGs in Turkey have rather served to brighten and brand the existing policies, rather than as a guide for new to-the-purpose policies. When the UNDP and UN Habitat, which are the upper policy actors for the implementation of SDGs, give priority to cooperating with central governments by recognizing them as the main actors of development, the “development marketing approach” of governments is reinforced further. Moreover, indicators and datasets prepared for monitoring SDGs have also been prepared at the macro level and have focused central governments’ roles. As a result, the 2030 Agenda has turned into a marketing tool that serves to brighten the international image of governments, rather than being an achievable, monitorable and local human development goal.
4. Since a large part of the population all over the world lives in cities, local governments should be recognized as crucial actors in guaranteeing access to rights and services, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed how local governments turn into a buffer mechanism in times of crisis[[5]](#footnote-5). Especially in countries like Turkey where the share of public expenditure in the Gross Domestic Product is insufficient[[6]](#footnote-6), social protection and redistribution systems do not provide adequate infrastructure for sustainable development, it has been clearly seen that sustainability crises just as Covid-19 has created can only be mitigated by strong and effective local government mechanisms. In fact, strong and effective local governments in Turkey assumed a role that exceeded their legal authority and responsibilities in this process, and actually took steps to prevent the suspension of sustainable development goals altogether[[7]](#footnote-7). Considering what Covid-19 also has taught, the role of local governments in redistribution, sustainability, and development by “leaving no one behind” needs to be better understood by international actors.
5. Municipalities with a population of over 50,000 in Turkey are obliged to prepare their strategic plans within six months after local elections. As stated in the *Regulation on the Procedures and Principles Regarding Strategic Planning in Public Administrations,* the Strategic Plan is defined as “the plan that includes the medium and long-term objectives, basic principles and policies, targets and priorities of public administrations, performance criteria, the methods to be followed to be achieved, and resource allocations”. The strategic plan is prepared by participatory processes with universities, professional chambers, and relevant non-governmental organizations while establishing the basis for the budget allocation. Therefore, integrating SDGs into municipal strategic plans is extremely important for ensuring that these goals will be put into practice with a specific budget allocation and institutional adoption. Before the 2019 local elections in Turkey, the “Sustainable Urban Development Protocol”[[8]](#footnote-8) prepared by YERELIZ was presented to the signatures of the candidates and later, the mayors. In parallel, a comprehensive training program on Sustainable Development Goals and Strategic Planning was led and 21 municipalities meticulously work on the localization of SDGs and integrating them into municipal strategic plans. The municipalities participating in the program later established the Sustainable Urban Development Network. The Network still endeavors for the recognition of local governments as crucial stakeholders for SDGs and for a stronger adoption of the 2030 Agenda by municipalities which are “the administrative units capable of understanding the problems, needs and capacities of communities the most”.[[9]](#footnote-9)
6. However, the contribution of local governments to the implementation of SDGs and inclusive development in terms of access to rights is denied not only by international actors but also by central governments. In the Sustainable Development Goals Evaluation Report published by the Presidential Department of Budget and Strategy in 2019, the role of the private sector in the realization of SDGs is highly emphasized, while local governments are mentioned together with other stakeholders (academy, civil society, written and visual media, etc.) without attributing special responsibility:

*“One of the crucial issues highlighted within the framework of the 2030 Agenda is to involve the social segments, especially the private sector, in the sustainable development efforts as much as possible. Benefiting from the commercial and economic experience of the private sector on the international level in bilateral relations as well as international cooperation will increase the success of projects and programs.” (p.21)*

1. Local governments are specifically called to take responsibility by the Budget and Strategy Department for the themes of representation of women in politics, management of water resources, sewerage infrastructure projects, provision of services to disadvantaged groups, especially the disabled people, spatial regulation processes such as urban transformation and construction, transportation services and raising social awareness on SDGs. However, all these activities are not associated with the requirement of the localization of SDGs and the metafunction that local governments can undertake in realizing these goals. In a similar way, even though the 11th Development Plan (2019-2023), which is still in force, has matched the SDGs with the national development goals, it does not attribute special responsibility for the localization of SDGs while defining the improvement areas for local governments. The plan roughly defines the following three tasks regarding the local governments:

* Increasing financial and institutional capacities of local governments
* Enabling local governments to provide effective, fast and qualified services
* Increasing local governments’ transparency and accountability

1. Within this scope, commitments such as allocation of resources in accordance with the strategic objectives of the municipalities, increasing the quality of human resources in municipalities, guiding them while preparing their strategic plans, setting the minimum standards in service provision, and increasing the participatory processes have been defined. However, the Department which drives Turkey’s agenda on SDGs does not define how local governments will function in the macro agenda of sustainability with their increased resources, qualified personnel, strong institutional organization, and effective services.
2. If a metafunction that is integrated with the central government's development agenda and the vision of the 2030 Agenda is attributed to local governments, we predict that the following advantages will emerge for the implementation of SDGs: 1) increased efficiency and productivity in terms of resource use and process management, 2) more applicable processes of monitoring, evaluation, and intervention, 3) local actors’ increased motivation to the adoption of 2030 Agenda when many of the works local governments are already doing are linked with the macro vision which is supported both nationally and internationally[[10]](#footnote-10), and as a result; 4) the 2030 Agenda’s moving beyond being a marketing tool applied by central governments to manage their image in the international arena and ultimately turning into real improvements to be experienced and observed.
3. Although "supporting local actions to accelerate the implementation" was emphasized as a main goal in the preliminary evaluation made in 2020 by the Department for the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)[[11]](#footnote-11), which is responsible for monitoring and reviewing the implementation of SDGs at the international level; the recognized role of local governments in promoting sustainable development is still very limited in Turkey. For instance, in the evaluation report, it was underlined that a large part of the population in the country lives in cities as in the rest of the world, therefore the development and planning of cities are extremely significant. According to the report, the sustainability goal of local governments is fulfilled when a more effective city development plan is made, infrastructure and superstructure services are improved, and the labor force in the city is aligned with the competitive needs of the labor market:

*“More than half of our country's population lives in big cities or urban centers. Urban settlement areas are not enough for this increasing population and our cities are growing in the direction of new development areas... It is important to determine the disaster hazards correctly, to clearly determine the precautions to be taken, to ensure that people can live in safe and sustainable areas by making long-term integrated plans that take these into account.” (p.29)*

1. However, the realization of the 2030 Agenda seems possible by transferring resources and authority to local governments, and by ensuring that the Agenda is adopted locally with binding provisions since in the current situation the adoption of the 2030 Agenda is dependent on Mayor’s political choices. Since cities have become the engine of development when a large part of the population all over the world lives in cities, change and progress can best be observed through cities. It can be said that Izmir Metropolitan Municipality[[12]](#footnote-12) and Sultanbeyli Municipality[[13]](#footnote-13) are the first good examples in Turkey in terms of localization, implementation and local monitoring of SDGs under the leadership of local governments. However, institutional culture and administrative gaps that undermine the data collection processes encountered in the process, and indicator discrepancy problem resulted from the fact that indicators and datasets of SDGs are not defined at the local scale show that there is still not an adequate infrastructure for the localization of the 2030 Agenda. In order to create this infrastructure by 2030; 1) Institutionalization of a special unit similar to the “Sustainability Office” at a level where it can undertake a metafunction (such as under the Strategy Development Directorates, as widely defined in Turkish municipal administration), 2) Supporting localization and local monitoring activities of municipalities and other local actors such as the Union of Municipalities, with budget, training and authorization, 3) Setting well-defined sanctions that will force decision-makers to adopt the 2030 Agenda instead of focusing public awareness activities or management of international public image.

1. T.R. Presidential Strategy and Budget Department (2019) Sustainable Development Goals Evaluation Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paragraph 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stated in the United Nations System Organization Chart, https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/english\_un\_system\_chart\_11x8.5\_4c\_en\_web.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Boğaziçi University Soma Solidarity (2015) Some Observations on the Problem of Growth and Development in Turkey. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. OECD (2020) The Territorial Impact of Covid-19: Managing the crisis across levels of government. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is 13% according to the Turkish Statistical Institute (2020) Social Protection Statistics [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. TEPAV (2021) General Outlook of Local Governments in the Process of Combating COVID-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://yereliz.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/S%C3%BCrd%C3%BCr%C3%BClebilir-Kentsel-Geli%C5%9Fim-Protokol%C3%BC-2.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://surdurulebilirkentselgelisimagi.org/hakkinda/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. YERELİZ (2020) Localizing Sustainable Development Goals: 2020-2024 Strategic Plan Analysis of the Founding Municipalities of Sustainable Urban Development Network. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. T.R. Presidential Department of Strategy and Budget (2020) 2020 UN High-level Political Forum Sustainable Development Goals 2018-2020 Developments in Turkey. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. İzmir Sustainable Urban Development Network (2021) İzmir Voluntary Local Review Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sultanbeyli Municipality (2021) Sultanbeyli 2030 Agenda on Leaving No One Behind. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)