Civil society organizations in Turkey: assessing interactions and impact in environmental politics

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Environmental issues and politics have become an important part of political agenda both at the local and global levels as environmental problems such as climate change, resource depletion and water crisis have become severe. In debates on environmental politics and sustainable development, it is now better recognized that a centralist and non-participatory system of governance falls seriously short of meeting environmental challenges. In the case of the environment, a multi-actor scene is emerging, in which the role of civil society organizations is especially crucial.

There has been a large growth in the number and scope of civil society organizations since the 1990s as well as growing interest in them as they have become 'high-profile' (Anheier and Themudo 2002; Lewis 2001; Hulme and Edwards 1997; Edwards and Hulme 1996). The growing interest in NGOs is accompanied by a more comprehensive debate on the efficiency, accountability and effectiveness of NGOs, replacing the earlier tendency to see them as “magic bullets” (Lewis 2001). A re-thinking of the role of civil society in democratization, increasing participation, and accountability is called for (Edwards 2004). This broadening of the debate was made possible by studies which investigated claims and achievements attributed to NGOs' development work and which showed that they could not be simply presumed (Lewis 2001; Hulme and Edwards 1997). These studies found that whether NGO work is characterized by the values and strengths attributed them such as greater focus on gender and poverty, greater performance and efficiency, the ability to innovate and adapt, an emphasis on participation and human rights, and a sensitivity to need and appropriateness of interventions, is an empirical question (Lewis 2001). Thus, this growing debate is also more critical of the neoliberal agenda which often promotes NGOs as an unconditional good. In the field of environment as well, the role of environmental NGOs in global civil society and their relations to states and multinational corporations have been investigated (Keck ve Sikkink 1998; Wapner 1995).

Closer investigation has given rise to the awareness that first, the category of NGO is not homogeneous and varies in terms of size, region, task, aim, and organizational form (Kaldor 2003; Lewis 2001; Anheier and Themudo 2002). This recognition of diversity among NGOs is coupled with a criticism, what Kaldor calls the NGOization of public space. This refers to the fact that certain types of NGOs, those that are northern, solidaristic, formal, hierarchical and that emphasize service provision have dominated the field (Kaldor 2003). The growth of this type of NGO raises concerns because of issues of accountability which is crucial since it is directly related to the relationship NGOs form with governments and donors. Problems of accountability and representativeness are seen as one of the limitations of NGOs. The issue of financial dependence raises several concerns as to what is done and how it is done. First, there might be an emphasis on certain activities at the expense of others, financial dependence distorting mission. The providers of funds may come to define achievement and techniques more and more (Kaldor 2003; Hulme and Edwards 1997; Edwards and Hulme 1996). As a result, the diversity of NGOs is being reduced. More NGOs are adapting ‘best practices’ and leaving their role as innovators because donors promote the adoption of best practices (Hulme and Edwards 1997; Anheier and Themudo 2002).

The proposed paper analyzes the relationship of civil society organizations (CSOs) to donors, transnational actors, and the state in the field of environment in Turkey while assessing the points raised above. The paper will be based on qualitative research on environmental CSOs in Turkey. Extensive in-depth interviews with employees/volunteers of CSOs, state bureaucrats, experts in the field of environmental conservation and policy-making have been conducted. Emerging findings show that environmental CSOs have accumulated scientific knowledge, expertise and experience in working with the state which empowers them vis-à-vis the state and donors but at the same time, lack of participation and campaigning raise concerns. Based on these findings, the paper will analyze environmental CSOs in terms of their capacity for agenda setting and effective policy making. The resources, activities, goals and impact have to be examined in order understand whether CSOs have a say in shaping policies and how far their impact reaches. At the same time,
studying these CSOs in terms of their accountability, representativeness, trust and legitimacy, participation, and autonomy will allow us to assess more generally what kind of a role they can play in promoting a democratic setting. For instance, the fact that there is no widespread participation in environmental CSOs has implications for the capacity of CSOs to effect change and the broader transformative role they can play in terms of state-civil society relations. Furthermore, the claim of Turkey's environmental CSOs of being "a-political" will be examined in order to flesh out some of the important paradoxes of the environmental movement in Turkey. Finally, the relevance of the findings will be discussed for civil society organizations in a broader context in terms of impact, empowerment, and democratization.

**Selected References:**


Edwards, M., 2004,


