

Contributing Factors to Less than Equitable Social and Economic Development in Eastern Turkey

Whilst Turkey's economy is growing at near equal pace with China's, its eastern half is still not yet reaping the benefits of a prosperous economy to the same degree as the rest of the country. A larger proportion of the populace in that part of the country lives below the poverty line. The region lags far behind the rest of the country, due to the prevalence of a system of social values incompatible with those of the modern world. Most women are forced to stay at home and fulfill their traditional roles instead of being allowed to study or work outside of the home. It is therefore little wonder that the path of development has been a difficult one for the region to follow.

BY ASSOC. PROF. RICHARD ROUSSEAU | JANUARY 30, 2012

Even though the Turkish economy is among the fastest growing in the world, the development gap between its western and eastern regions has become a serious cause for concern. Solving this problem should become one of Ankara's main priorities if it wants to fulfill the criteria for entering the European Union (EU) – and achieving the living standards of a developed country. Turkey is geographically divided into 7 regions: Marmara, the Aegean littoral, the Mediterranean littoral, Central Anatolia, South East Anatolia, East Anatolia and the Black Sea littoral. However, this division doesn't make political sense, as it just creates, rather randomly, an unnecessary – and rather inefficient – provincial administrative level between the national and municipal ones.

Of all Turkish regions, East and Southeast Anatolia are the poorest, having the lowest per capita consumption and revenue, education levels (particularly amongst women), as well as the lowest number of doctors and teachers per capita in the country. Furthermore, these administrative regions have been the most affected by the ongoing conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Since the 1980s, violence and oppression in the education and business sectors have rendered social and economic development initiatives almost redundant, and thus these regions have become a stagnant backwater.

In 1998 alone, approximately 4,400 primary schools in these regions remained closed for the whole year due to security problems and a severe shortage of teachers, most of whom are simply unwilling to work in such inhospitable conditions. The industrial sector is still strained, as most businessmen find it too risky to start up a new business or run an existing one in an area still subject to attacks and population displacement. Before being put behind bars in 1999, the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, made a personal threat to the private sector, warning Turkish citizens and foreigners against making investments in southeastern Turkey.

South East Anatolian Project and other measures

The Turkish state is aware of the situation in East and Southeast and Anatolia but has paid too little attention to it, not even allocating adequate funds to bring about much needed improvements.

The only project Ankara has funded is the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP, the Guneydogu Anadolu Projesi, in Turkish). GAP is a multi-sector integrated regional development project which aims to reduce regional development disparities and targets the little more than 9 million people living in southeast Anatolia. The project has been ongoing since 1977, but has yet to be completed.

It gained speed only after 2002 and is now one of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's priorities, but the payoff at this time is not significant enough to fulfill its initial objectives.

Originally, it was proposed, under the plan, to exploit waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers to build Turkey's largest dam and irrigation system. Since its inception, this gigantic scheme has experienced standstill periods and gone through many revisions. It almost fell into oblivion in the 1980s following the coup d'état and subsequently failed to meet its initial targets and timescales. Today it takes the form of a social and economic development plan covering 75,358 square kilometers of Turkish territory in nine provinces: Adıyaman, Diyarbakır, Batman, Gaziantep, Mardin, Kilis, Siirt, Şirnak and Sanlıurfa. Under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, the share of public funds underwritten to the project has increased year on year, reaching 7.1% of the national budget in 2007.

The paradox is that although the southeast of Turkey is the least developed region, it is indisputably the richest in natural resources. For example, it accounts for 99% of the country's crude oil production and for 100% of its asphalt, phosphate and flint production. Although GAP is supposed to stimulate East Anatolian development and improve access to the natural resources of the territory, the major outcome of the scheme has been that these natural resources continue to be sent to the more industrialized regions, that is, those in Western Turkey. The Turkish authorities' greatest challenge is to find efficient ways to utilize these resources locally rather than sending them away to be used for value-added production.

Education, economy and migration

The underdevelopment of Anatolia has many underlying causes. Foremost amongst these is the low level and quality of education in that part of the country. Schools, teachers and students are scarce, as most parents believe it is more useful to put young men and women in the fields rather than have them "waste time" in a classroom. Each young Turkish teacher is usually sent to these regions for the first year of his/her career, right after graduation, and finds him/herself in front of a group of children with a quite different socio-economic background and set of linguistic skills from his/her own, and those he/she is used to encountering. In Turkey's east and southeast rural areas most children who enter primary school have only spoken Kurdish up to that time; they are hearing the Turkish language for the first time in their lives. On their first day at school they are met by an inexperienced teacher, fresh out of the training program, who is not up to such a difficult task. Most often they are clueless about the local culture and language, and will begin the lesson by quoting the famous Turkish national motto: "How happy is the one who says he is a Turk." The same teacher, after a year of service, will probably relocate to a more developed western region and teach in a better managed and equipped school, thus leaving the same problems behind for the next teacher.

There is a direct link between the low level of education and the level of development in Eastern Turkey. Most of the people living there gain their education, a meager "cultural capital," from what is passed on to them by their nuclear family. Agriculture remains the most important economic sector, but this too is underdeveloped, as farmers lack experience of, and are resistant to, new technologies and practices. Wise use of natural resources is not common and there are many problems with the supply and proper use of water for agricultural purposes or household.

All these problems combine to create a climate of poor business initiative, stagnation in infrastructure development and widespread social poverty. In 1997 per capita income in southeast Anatolia was half the national average. This region, which accounts for roughly 10% of the

country's territory and population, accounted for only 5.3% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As a result, employment levels are very low and the industrial sector is almost nonexistent.

According to government figures, the percentage of people employed in industry in 2003 was 25% in Marmara (the western region), 7% in Southeast Anatolia and 3.6% in Eastern Anatolia. On the other hand, the percentage of workers employed in agriculture was 25.33% in Marmara, 61.35% in Southeast Anatolia and 66.41% in East Anatolia. Also in 2009, GDP per capita (in dollars) was \$1,653 in Marmara, \$593 in Southeast Anatolia and \$523 in East Anatolia. One can reasonably affirm that these numbers have not been significantly modified by more recent higher growth rates in Turkey.

The parochial mentality of the people of Eastern Anatolia is another factor underlying its underdevelopment. A sort of feudal system still prevails in that region: The 1995 census showed that 82.2% of the local people did not own any piece of land, while a group of Turkish citizens in that region, representing only 17.8% of the regional population, owned large chunks of land.

Traditional family structures are also predominant in domestic life. The level of education among women is still extremely low. Early marriage is very common, as is polygamy, although this practice is forbidden by Turkish law. Overall, the prevalence of social and cultural tradition and the poor quality of education continue to be the greatest obstacles to human development. For that reason, public policies should not be strictly oriented towards economic growth and production but also towards human development.

As a consequence of the traditional lifestyle, Southeast Anatolia has the highest reproduction rate in Turkey. Indeed, its share in the overall population of the country has increased continually since 1945, when it was recorded as 6.24%. By 2007 this figure had reached 10.2%. These numbers are based on place of birth, but migration must also be taken into consideration, since one of the most common phenomena in the region is young people leaving for the major urban centers in search of jobs.

There are few developed cities in East and Southeast Anatolia. One is Gaziantep, which has been undergoing rapid economic development over the last few years, with resulting inward migration. However, this trend has not resulted in the migrants integrating with urban dwellers. Most commonly, Eastern Anatolians who move to major cities live on their outskirts, in their own communities, far from the infrastructures and institutions of everyday urban life. What we see is the "ruralization" of the city, as the incomers continue to live in the rural way, maintaining their traditional culture. Approximately 50% of Anatolian city residents are settled in districts with inadequate or no infrastructure, lacking such basic municipal services as clean and regularly supplied drinking water and adequate drainage and waste disposal equipment.

The biggest cities (Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir) account for the largest wave of migration. The largest wave of migration is to the larger cities: Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir. This social drift – and brain drain – also contributes to the impoverishment of the eastern rural regions and to the challenge of designing and implementing social and economic development policies in Eastern Turkey.

Tourism and economic disparity

Since the 1990s, tourism has been a fast developing sector of the Turkish economy. However, this sector also has its problems, as not only is a tourist income disparity between the regions evident but

government policies and investment have helped intensify it. After the 1980 military coup d'état the Turkish government adopted a series of short-term measures to soothe the economic crisis hitting the country. To encourage tourism, the government identified in its Tourism Incentives Act of 1982 some "tourist zones" suitable for infrastructure investment. However, the "zones" that received these investments were the ones that already had the highest level of production, and are still today the most developed and prosperous: the Marmara, Aegean and Mediterranean coasts. Millions of foreign tourists, from all around the globe, visit these historic regions, while a few of them have heard of Samsun, Gaziantep, Van or Diyarbakir, or will enter Turkey with the idea of visiting such places. On the other hand, some tourist attractions in Eastern Turkey have recently opened or been upgraded for domestic tourists. These include the ski resorts of Sanliurfa, Siirt and Mus.

In recent years, and particularly since the AKP has been in power, more attention has been paid to the development of South and Southeast Turkey. The GAP project is expected to be completed within two or three years and, if its work is conducted in an organized and efficient way, it might change the lives of many Anatolian plateau residents.

Eastern Turkey is not solely handicapped by economic problems. The region lacks social and cultural development as well. Narrowing the education gap, integrating local cultures and providing the locals with the knowledge and tools to plan and conduct their own development are the necessary conditions for achieving real integration. Investing in social infrastructure is also imperative, as this will discourage the current pattern of out migration which makes it even harder to achieve stability and sustainable economic growth in the region.

GAP does not address enough of the problems of the socially and economically disadvantaged Turkish regions. The province of Van (which was struck by a violent earthquake in October 2011), like all the other provinces of Eastern Turkey, are still excluded from the project, as they are too far from the Tigris and Euphrates, the original but no longer relevant focus of GAP. No alternative plans have been made for these areas, but it is to be hoped that the earthquake may now awaken some degree of understanding and sense of responsibility towards these people and regions in the Turkish government.

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