

# URBAN COMMUNITY CENTERS IN TURKEY: UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERSITY OF CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, in Turkey, there are a multitude of urban spaces that are described, in one form or another, as "community centers" (hereafter CCs), which entail, essentially, a localized and center-based mode of dealing with different social issues emerging as a result of urbanization and/or migration. While some are directly referred to as the Turkish equivalent of CCs, *Toplum Merkezi*, many other names are also used for these centers, such as *Mahalle Evi* (Neighborhood Home), *Semt Konağı* (District Mansion), *Çok Amaçlı Destek Merkezi* (Multi-Service Support Center), *Hayata Destek Evi* (Support to Life Home), among others. The institutional actors operating these centers are also diverse, including ministries, municipalities, and a diverse range of international, national, and local civil society organizations, working either alone or in partnerships.

This report aims to understand the prevailing patterns behind this diversified landscape of contemporary CC practices in Turkey and argues that one way of identifying differences is by taking a historical approach, which entails looking at the distinct contextual, conceptual, and institutional factors underlying present practices. Building on an extensive literature review, web-based research, and interviews,[1] I suggest that it is possible to differentiate four such historical processes, which are examined under the following headings, and point to four unique conceptual frameworks: 1) Social welfare and participatory urbanism, 2) Sustainable human development and women's empowerment, 3) Social municipal work and localized service delivery, and 4) Urban refugees and community-based protection.[2]

Each section includes a brief overview of the unique demographic/political contexts, conceptual paradigms, institutional actors, legal/administrative structures, and overarching aims, approaches, and services/activities linked with these different CC practices. This is followed by a concluding section, which summarizes the categorical view offered by this historical approach. Finally, the comparison of these different histories is also used to propose an alternative and more fluid approach for further understanding diversity in contemporary CC practices, which center on differences in the targeted communities and main objectives.

1 Academic publications, as well as gray literature, were compiled using different academic (SCOPUS, Google Scholar) and non-academic (Google) search engines. Where available, the websites of different CCs/CC projects were analyzed. As part of the Mercator/IPC fellowship, I conducted ten semi-structured interviews between March and July 2017 in Ankara and Istanbul (with the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, two international donor organizations, two municipality-linked CCs, and five NGO-linked CCs). As part of the GiZ consultancy, between December 2017 and January 2018 I was also able to further inquire into the foundations, structures, and activities of 25 projects/programs linked to CCs in Izmir, Adana, Mersin, Kilis, Hayat, Şanlıurfa, and Mardin.

2 This report is focused on CCs founded over recent decades in Turkey in the context of rapid urbanization and migration following the 1960s. Therefore, it excludes the *Halkevleri* (People's Homes), which are considered among the first examples of CCs in Turkey and were founded by the state in the 1930s with the aim of the educational and cultural development of the broader public. For more information, see K. Karataş, "Toplum Merkezleri Düşüncesinin Doğuşu ve Gelişimi," in *Çağdaşlaşma Sürecinde Toplum Merkezlerinin Yeri Ve İşlevleri Sempozyumu, 18 Mayıs 1997*, ed. K. Karataş (Ankara: Çağdaş Kadın Ve Gençlik Vakfı Yayın No: 2, 1999); S. Buz and A.A. Ayyıldız, "Sosyal Hizmette Toplum Merkezleri," *Toplum ve Sosyal Hizmet* 30, no. 1 (2019): 187–212.

## SOCIAL WELFARE AND PARTICIPATORY URBAN INTEGRATION

The first type of CCs in Turkey adapt approaches from the field of social work in order to deal with the various negative consequences of urbanization, such as poverty, unemployment, population density, alienation, and discrimination. Social work is a historically and internationally grounded approach to welfare services that puts society at the center and targets the social causes of inequality, which is comparably different from the approach of charity work and social aid, focused on individual inadequacies and needs.[3] These CCs became popular across Turkey during the 1990s in the context of rapid urbanization. They aimed to tackle social problems surfacing in deprived urban areas receiving high levels of internal migration. These initiatives were mainly state led, carried out by the Social Services and Child Protection Agency (SHÇEK).[4] In this same period, some local municipalities and civil society organizations also started opening CCs, many of them joint ventures.[5] During the late 1990s the development of CCs in Turkey also received international support,[6] and several conferences were held where academics, authorities, social workers, and other practitioners discussed ideas and practices related to both CCs in Turkey and abroad.[7]

There are several underlying principles evident in descriptions of this type of CC in the available literature.[8] Essentially, these CCs define a community as a whole, being open to all members of the local community where located, while also recognizing the need for focusing on more vulnerable populations like women, children, youth, disabled, and the elderly. They define community by location as they are often named according to a geographically set local area (i.e., district, neighborhood) that is struggling with urban poverty and integration issues. Related to this, they recognize that problems and needs change according to time and place and, therefore, adopt the idea of flexible and locally determined programming. Participation is a central goal and tool of this type of CC, along with other qualities like neighborliness, peaceful coexistence, solidarity, organization, leadership, democratic values, and

3 The first international examples are traced back to the late 19th century, including the Settlement Houses in England and Neighborhood Centers in the US. See Karataş, "Toplum Merkezleri Düşüncesinin Doğuşu"; Buz and Ayyıldız, "Sosyal Hizmette Toplum Merkezleri."

4 In 1999, 28 SHÇEK CCs were recorded across Turkey. See K. Karataş (ed.), *Toplum Merkezlerinin Desteklenmesi Projesi*, Başbakanlık Sosyal Hizmetler Ve Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu & UNICEF (Ankara: Aydoğdu Ofset Matbaacılık, 2001), 8.

5 For example, in 1994–1995 the *Türk Kadınlar Birliği* (Turkish Women's League) and *Çağdaş Kadın ve Gençlik Vakfı* (Modern Women and Youth Foundation) opened different CCs in collaboration with Mamak and Çankaya Municipalities in Ankara (see K. Karataş (ed.), *Çağdaşlaşma Sürecinde Toplum Merkezlerinin Yeri Ve İşlevleri Sempozyumu, 18 Mayıs 1997* (Ankara: Çağdaş Kadın Ve Gençlik Vakfı Yayın No: 2, 1999)). *İnsan Sağlığı ve Eğitim Vakfı* (Human Health and Education Foundation) also was active in opening CCs across Istanbul during the late 1990s.

6 Between 1997 and 2000, UNICEF and the Turkish government implemented a program called *Bölgelerarası ve Kentiçi Farklılıkların Azaltılmasına Destek Programı* (Support Program for Reducing Inter-regional and Intra-urban Differences), which included the project *Toplum Merkezlerinin Desteklenmesi Projesi* (Supporting Community Centers Project).

7 Conference proceedings are published under Karataş, "*Çağdaşlaşma Sürecinde Toplum Merkezlerinin Yeri* "; Karataş, *Toplum Merkezlerinin Desteklenmesi Projesi*; and K. Karataş (ed.), *Toplum Kalkınması Hizmetlerinde Sektörlerarası İşbirliği Toplantısı*, Başbakanlık Sosyal Hizmetler Ve Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu & UNICEF (Ankara: Aydoğdu Ofset Matbaacılık, 2001).

8 Ibid., see also Buz and Ayyıldız, "Sosyal Hizmette Toplum Merkezleri"; D. Dalyanoğlu, *Toplum Merkezi Hizmetlerinin Kadının Kente Uyum Sürecine Etkisi*, MA Dissertation, Hacettepe University, Social Work Department, 2007; K. Karataş and G. Çamur Duyan, "Toplum Merkezleri: Hizmetten Yararlananlarin Gözüyle Bir Değerlendirme," *Toplum Ve Sosyal Hizmet* 13, no. 1 (2002): 1–20.

being equal and active urban citizens. There is also a clear emphasis on the idea that the various activities taking place in CCs are tools for bringing about social change through strengthening local residents' ability to identify and solve their problems together. This is said to distinguish CCs from the state's other types of centers, such as the Public Education Centers operated by the Ministry of National Education.[9]

In 2000, these underlying principles became legally and systematically formalized when the *Regulation on Community Centers*[10] was passed. Here, a CC is described as a place that, "in view of the problems caused by rapid societal change, urbanization, and migration, aims to ensure that individuals, groups, families, and society are able to cope with these problems, and that individuals become participatory, productive, and self-sufficient" (Article 4c). It further emphasizes that protective, preventive, educational, developmental, guidance, and rehabilitation functions are to be carried out in cooperation and coordination with other public institutions, local authorities, universities, civil society organizations, and volunteers. The areas of activity are listed as follows (Article 8):

- Assessments of needs, local stakeholders, and resources;
- Guidance and counseling;
- Educational support for children;
- Adult education courses;
- Activities to improve occupational skills and income generation;
- Social, cultural, and sportive activities.

The range of activities historically offered by these different CCs in Turkey include[11]:

- Improving access to public services (including protective/preventive social services for children, elderly, women, disabled);
- Legal counseling;
- Basic health services, including mental health;
- Awareness-raising activities (e.g., hygiene, women's human rights, sexual and gender-based violence, family planning, child development),
- Providing needs-based social assistance (clothes, coal, food, school items).

Notably, there is an emphasis on non-discriminatory services being determined according to local needs. It is required by law that each center employ a director, social worker, psychologist, child development specialist, teacher, sociologist, child educator, psychological counselor, and guidance counselor, along with general administrative, technical, and supportive staff (Article 9).

An important turning point in this type occurred in 2013 when the CC regulation of 2000 was repealed with the *Regulation on Social Service Centers*[12] coming into effect. The new law stipulated the closure of all CCs (along with Child and Youth Centers and Family Consultation Centers) and the opening of Social Service Centers (SSCs). While there are similarities (e.g., vis-à-vis activity types and personnel profile), SSCs cannot be considered as a simple relabeling of CCs as the underlying goals are distinct. Most notably, as stated in the legislation, SSCs are shaped around the priority and principle of "facilitating access to social services" (Article 1), which refer to the broad range of protective, preventive, and supportive services of the state

9 While both centers offer similar courses, in CCs the courses are designed as tools and not the final objective. On this point see a news interview with the president of the Social Workers Association (SHUDER), https://m.bianet.org/bianet/toplum/163082-shuder-baskani-sosyal-hizmetlerde-donusum-hizmetleri-durdurdu (March 17, 2015).

10 *Sosyal Hizmetler Ve Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumuna Bağlı Toplum Merkezleri Yönetmeliği* (July 11, 2000, No. 24106)

11 Karataş (ed.), *Toplum Kalkınması Hizmetlerinde Sektörlerarası*.

12 *Sosyal Hizmet Merkezleri Yönetmeliği* (February 9, 2013, No: 28554).

available for families, children and youth, elderly, women, disabled, veterans, martyrs and their relatives, including social assistance schemes. The goal of SSCs is to more quickly and accurately identify persons with special needs and ensure prompt referral of these individuals to the relevant national, provincial, or local response mechanisms. In this sense, SSCs tend to function more like bureaucratic structures.[13] Their geographical scope is also much wider, set at the level of city or district (Article 5). In these ways, SSCs can be considered as a mechanism to down-scale national level welfare services, policies, and models to a more local level.[14]

Although not bound by this legal change, most of the civil society-led CCs opened during the 1990s and 2000s eventually seem to have closed.[15] One exception is the *Tarlabaşı Toplum Merkezi* (Tarlabaşı Community Center) in Istanbul, which opened in 2006 as part of an EU-funded project implemented by Bilgi University's Migration Research Center.[16] Fitting with this type, this CC is geographically identified, being located in Istanbul's Tarlabaşı neighborhood, which for decades has been home to various disadvantaged populations faced with poverty and social exclusion, including different ethnic minority groups. This CC aims to support urban adaptation and incorporation of all Tarlabaşı residents, which in recent years has also started including different refugee populations, through a rights-based approach.

**13** Buz and Ayyıldız, "Sosyal Hizmette Toplum Merkezleri."

**14** In recent years, SSCs have also started extending support to refugees and asylum-seekers through the support of different international organizations. Since 2018, UNHCR has been supporting SSCs through the provision of interpreters and social workers, as well as technical advice and support, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/66210.

**15** None of the CCs mentioned in footnote 5 appear to exist today.

**16** http://www.tarlabasi.org/hakkimizda.

While this type carries many similarities with the previous one in terms of approach and practice, the main distinction lies in its grounding within the discursive, conceptual, and institutional field of human development rather than social work and its specific emphasis on women's empowerment. In 1989, the Turkish government initiated a major regional development program called the *Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi* (Southeast Anatolia Project), widely known through its acronym GAP, which targeted this least developed region of the country. Initially, it centered only on water irrigation and energy production. Then during the early 1990s, a social component was also incorporated with a series of survey studies being carried out in the region, leading to the production of a comprehensive Social Action Plan. Consequently, GAP was turned into a multi-sectoral regional development program based on the principles of human-oriented development, sustainability, local participation, and equality.

One of the survey studies carried out, "Status of Women in the GAP Region and Their Integration to the Process of Development," identified the heightened social and economic marginalization of women in the GAP region (e.g., illiteracy, informal work, lower wages, high fertility, and domestic violence) and recognized the need for a gender-sensitive development process centered on women's empowerment through a participatory approach.[17] Based on these findings, the GAP administration worked in collaboration with academicians and civil society organizations in designing a program for developing *Çok Amaçlı Toplum Merkezleri* (Multi-Purpose Community Centers) across the region.[18] These centers, widely known today by the acronym ÇATOM, were conceived as self-sustaining centers aimed overall at the empowerment of women in all spheres of life and were established in some of the poorest urban and rural areas of the Southeast.[19] The first pilot ÇATOM was opened in Şanlıurfa in 1995, and today there are 44 ÇATOMs located in nine provinces.

As noted, ÇATOMs were conceived in view of development discourses centered on the idea of women's empowerment through education, training, and mobilization of local resources. Today, ÇATOMs apply a flexible modular program, shaped in view of local needs, resources, and capacities. The broad range of activities are carried out under the following overarching programs:

- Education;
- Health;
- Income Generation and Women's Employment;
- Children's Reading Rooms;
- Pre-School Education;
- Social Support;
- Social Responsibility;
- Social and Cultural Activities.[20]

17 A. Fazlıoğlu, "ÇATOM: A Model For Empowering Women In Southeastern Anatolia (Multi-Purpose Community Centers)," *Kadın/Woman 2000, Journal For Women's Studies 3*, no. 1 (2002).

18 GAP also includes different center-based interventions targeting other populations, such as the Youth Houses and Child Development Centers.

19 There are numerous graduate theses presenting valuable resources on this history. For instance, for a detailed examination of the development discourses underlying the establishment of ÇATOMs, see S. Genel, *NGO's as the Link Between State and Society? Women's Community Centers in Southeastern Turkey*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Bilkent University, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, 2002; H. Sözer, *ÇATOM Project: Field Supervisors Between 'The State' And 'The Social,'* MA Dissertation, Boğaziçi University, Department of Sociology, 2004; and Z.L. Beşpınar Karaoğlu, *2000'ler Türkiyesi'nde GAP Bölgesi'nde Kadın Projeleri Ve Kadının Güçlenmesi: Valililikler, Belediyeler ve ÇATOM İstihdam Proje Örnekleri*, PhD Dissertation, Mimar Sinan Güzel Sanatlar University, Department of Sociology, 2012.

20 https://www.gapcatom.org/#. For a detailed list of activities involving different programs, see M. Şeker, "Güney Doğu Anadolu Bölgesi'nde Sosyal Projelerin Etkisi: Çok Amaçlı Toplum Merkezleri (ÇATOM) Projesi Örneği," *Sosyoloji Konferansları Dergisi,* Prof. Dr. Mustafa E. Erkal'a Armağan Özel Sayı 2, 44 (2011): 237–256.

While women have been the main targets of ÇATOMs since the beginning, today, children have also become more included in the programs. Men have also become engaged to some extent through health, computer, and literacy courses, while social support programs (birth, school registrations, social assistance applications, and the like) and socio-cultural activities extend to all household members.[21]

There is a strong emphasis on participation in the conception of ÇATOMs, extending from their establishment and management to the selection, organization, and teaching of the programs and courses. A *ÇATOM Sorumlusu* (translated into English as "field worker") is selected from among the young girls in the region and is responsible for managing ÇATOM activities and receives various trainings to this end.[22] In addition, a management committee is formed, composed of five to seven people who are elected annually both among and by participants from the center. The committee is tasked with supporting the field worker in decision-making, planning, and implementation of all activities. As noted on the program website, the committee structure is developed "so that participants can express themselves, improve their managerial skills, support activity and program development, discuss/deliver other participants' wishes and requests, and encourage participation."[23] ÇATOMs also aim to support local participation, sustainability, and ownership through training ÇATOM graduates to become course instructors. Lastly, besides local participation, ÇATOMs also entail cooperation and coordination with a wide rage of public and civil society actors at the international, national, and local level, as well as other local public authorities, universities, and the like, in the implementation of all programs and activities.

As discussed thus far, while there are similarities in the participatory and community-based approaches of both ÇATOMs and the CCs discussed under the previous type, there are differences in the underlying conceptual discourse. ÇATOMs' governance is distinct, both at the local level, involving local women in management of centers, and at the central level, overseen by the GAP Regional Development Administration under the Ministry of Development.[24] In contrast, the first type of CCs were linked directly with the state's social welfare apparatus. On the one hand, ÇATOMs have been conceived as institutions that are more flexible, involve less bureaucracy, and allow greater civil society collaborations compared to the first CCs.[25] Furthermore, the participation component is more comprehensive and structured in ÇATOMs. On the other hand, ÇATOMs have also been the focus of much more criticism, for instance, by social work scholars and practitioners regarding the institutional and administrative structure of these centers and their particular naming.[26] There has been controversy surrounding ÇATOMs since their inception, particularly among Kurdish feminist groups who have tended to see them as part of the state's ongoing assimilation strategies in the predominantly Kurdish Southeast Anatolia.[27]

**21** Ibid.

**22** Genel, *NGO's as the Link*; Beşpınar Karaoğlu, *2000'ler Türkiyesi'nde GAP Bölgesi'nde*.

**23** https://www.gapcatom.org/en/about-us/management-and-approach/.

**24** Following the presidential election of June 24, 2018, the Ministry of Development was abolished as part of the changes made to the central governmental structures. Today, the GAP Administration is under the Ministry of Industry and Technology.

**25** Genel, *NGO's as the Link*.

**26** For instance, in the proceedings of one conference on CCs, scholars of social work extensively criticized the use of the term "multi-purpose" in naming ÇATOMs, arguing that by definition a CC is already a multi-purpose space and that they should be encompassing of communities as a whole. See Karataş (ed.), *Çağdaşlaşma Sürecinde Toplum Merkezlerinin Yeri*, 82–85.

**27** Y. Arat, "Rethinking the Political: A Feminist Journal In Turkey," *Pazartesi. Women's Studies International Forum* 27 (2004): 281–292; Sözer, *ÇATOM Project: Field Supervisors*.

The GAP program, as noted, is located in Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia region, which borders Syria and Iraq. Hence, it is also the region most impacted by incoming refugee flows from these countries over the last decade. In recent years ÇATOMs in the region have started incorporating refugees into their programs to different degrees, such as offering language courses and social cohesion activities through different projects supported by international organizations.[28]

**28** This includes the "Supporting Syrian and Turkish Adolescent and Youth Access to Social Cohesion Opportunities" project in cooperation with UNICEF (https://www.gapcatom.org/projeler/sosyal-uyum/) and the "Economic and Social Integration of Refugee Women Living in the GAP Region Project" supported by UNDP technical support and the government of Kuwait (https://www.gapcatom.org/kadin-sagligi-egitim-programi-egitici-egitimi/).

## SOCIAL MUNICIPAL WORK AND LOCALIZED SERVICE DELIVERY

The third type of CCs can be linked with an evolving local governance approach in Turkey that gives municipalities a greater and more active role in meeting local social needs and has become increasingly more widespread over recent decades. Similar to the first type discussed, it is linked with rapid urbanization across the country. Turkey's Municipality Law (no.1580) passed in 1930 prescribed some limited social duties to municipalities, including identifying and caring for destitute and homeless populations and providing vocational training.[29] For many decades, however, most urban municipalities focused on basic infrastructural work and services, whereas social policies were limited due to rapid urbanization, dire needs for infrastructure, and financial resources.[30] The local elections in 1973 marked the first turning point for these policies, after which some of the major urban municipalities in Turkey (Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir) led by the social-democratic *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People's Party, CHP) started institutionalizing and spreading the idea of *Toplumcu Belediyecilik* (translated in the literature as Municipal Socialism), which entails more active involvement in development and delivery of social welfare policies.[31] There was a temporary stall of municipal services in the social sphere in the 1980s due to both rising political authoritarianism following the military coup and the decline of state welfare policies through economic liberalization and privatization. Another turning point followed the 1994 local elections when the conservative *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party) won the metropolitan municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara and initiated various social aid and service projects for tackling poverty and unemployment in these metropoles.

This localized social policy approach, branded today by the term *Sosyal Belediyecilik* (Social Municipality),[32] became most widespread and institutionalized when the conservative *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, AKP) came into power in 2002, which set into motion important legal reforms on local governance and granted municipalities active agency for ensuring social welfare at the local level. Both the new *Law on Metropolitan Municipalities*[33] and the reformed *Law on Municipalities*[34] gave municipali-

**29** M. Sezik, "Türkiye'de Sosyal Belediyeciliğin Gelişimi Ve Sorun Alanları," *İnönü Üniversitesi Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 5, no. 2 (2016): 179.

**30** D. Toprak and C. Şataf, "Türkiye'de Yerel Yönetimler Reformu Çerçevesinde Sosyal Belediyecilik Yaklaşımı," *Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Dergisi* 1, no. 1 (2009): 12.

**31** U. Bayraktar, "Kamuyu Kamulaştıran Toplumcu Belediyeler için Geçmişten Alınabilecek İlham Üzerine," in *Katılımcı Yerel Yönetim*, ed. İzci (İstanbul: Kalkedon Yayınları, 2014); E. Seçkiner Bingöl and U. Ömürgönülşen, "Sosyal Belediyecilik Bağlamında Türkiye'de Büyükşehir Belediyelerinin Sosyal Hizmet ve Sosyal Yardım Faaliyetleri," *Çağdaş Yerel Yönetimler* 27, no. 3 (2018): 1–27.

**32** Koray and Temiz note that the term Social Municipality is quite unique to Turkey, for instance, compared to Western countries, where these kinds of responsibilities are described through terms including local social welfare, municipal social services, and municipalities and social development. See M. Koray and H.E. Temiz, "Merkezi Yönetimle İlişkiler, Kısıtlar ve Harcamalar Çerçevesinde Sosyal Belediyecilik Ve Dört Büyükşehir Belediyesi Açısından Uygulamalar," *Çalışma ve Toplum* 3 (2014): 19.
There is a plethora of research examining the concept of "social municipality" in Turkey in the framework of theories on the welfare state and social policies and in comparing different local practices across the country. For instance, the Higher Education Council of Turkey alone lists 47 graduate study theses examining the implementation of "Social Municipality" ideas in different contexts in Turkey (see: https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/giris.jsp). However, the more specific topic of center-based interventions of municipalities has received little attention. For a comparison of CCs in Izmir's Karşıyaka district (from an architectural point), see N. Özcan Uslu, *Kentsel Kullanımda Kamusal Mekan Pratikleri: Karşıyaka'da (İzmir) Toplum MerkezleriI*, PhD Dissertation, Dokuz Eylül University, Department of Architecture, 2018. For more on Information Centers (from the information management point), see Ş. Karadeniz, "Yeni Bir Bilgi Ve Öğrenme Merkezi Olarak Bilgi Evleri," *Türk Kütüphaneciliği* 31, no. 1 (2017): 90–104.

**33** *Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kanunu* (July 23, 2004, No. 5216).

**34** *Belediye Kanunu* (July 13, 2005, No. 5395).

ties extensive duties and responsibilities related to social services and assistance (Article 7 and 14, respectively). Accordingly, aside from physical/infrastructural responsibilities, municipalities are also tasked today with planning and organization of social matters. These include provision of social assistance, food banks, soup kitchens, and public housing for populations in need; shelters and care facilities for women and children, elderly, disabled, and homeless; health facilities such as mother-child health centers, primary health clinics, and mobile health clinics; educational facilities for children and adults, including vocational and skills training courses and programs; as well as social facilities for all kinds of sports, cultural, and arts activities.

Given this broad framework, there are significant differences in the ways that municipalities throughout Turkey conceive and institutionalize social municipal work. Both the regional and local, social and economic contexts are factors defining recipients' needs. The different histories described, entailing different underlying political ideologies, are equally important, where, for instance, municipalities led by right-leaning parties exhibit more focus on social assistance schemes compared to those headed by left-leaning parties focused on social development work primarily through projects.[35] Overall, institutional structures of social municipal work are highly variable in terms of the names, numbers, and capacities of responsible units.[36]

The growing popularity of municipal CCs in Turkey can be located within this new approach to localized social service delivery. Unlike the previous two types discussed, there is no unified approach to or legal/institutional definition of these centers. Moreover, these CCs can take many different names but essentially seem to derive from five terms: *mahalle* (neighborhood), *semt* (quarter), *ev* (home), *konak* (mansion), and *merkez* (center). Hence, names such as *Semt Konağı* (Quarter Mansions) and *Mahalle Evi* (Neighborhood Homes) are used, while the name *Toplum Merkezi* (Community Center) in itself is rarely used.[37] These centers provide some or all of the following services:

- Provision of social assistance (food, furniture, clothing, coal, as well as facilities including soup kitchens, Laundromat, showers, etc.)
- Primary healthcare services (i.e., housing clinics for Ministry of Health-appointed family doctors)
- Psychological counseling
- Literacy and language courses
- Kindergarten and educational support courses for school-aged children
- Personal development courses (e.g., handcrafts, IT, music, and arts)
- Awareness-raising seminars

35 For a comparison of social municipal approaches in different cities and under different political parties, see Seçkiner Bingöl and Ömürgönülşen, "Sosyal Belediyecilik Bağlamında Türkiye'de."

36 Pektaş finds that the units within municipalities in charge of social municipal work can variably be named as "Health and Social Services," "Social Services," "Health Works," "Culture and Social Works," or "Education and Culture Works." See E.K. Pektaş, "Türkiye'de Sosyal Belediyecilik Uygulamaları ve Temel Sorunlar," *Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi* 5, no. 1 (2010): 4–22. Seçkiner Bingöl and Ömürgönülşen additionally find that in some municipalities social services and social assistance are organized separately, whereas in others they are joined. See Seçkiner Bingöl and Ömürgönülşen, "Sosyal Belediyecilik Bağlamında Türkiye'de," 12–15.

37 Based on a search of different derivatives of these terms on the search engine www.google.com in April 2018, the following center names were found: *Semt Evleri* (Istanbul – Beşiktaş, Sarıyer; Izmir - Gaziemir), *Semt Konakları* (Istanbul - Beyoğlu, Fatih, Küçükçekmece, Pendik); *Mahalle Evleri* (Istanbul – Silivri, Kadıköy; Diyarbakır – Bağlar; Gaziantep – Şehitkamil; Mersin - Akdeniz); *Semt Merkezleri* (Izmir - Konak); *Mahalle Konakları* (Ankara - Keçiören; Istanbul - Bağcılar); *Mahalle Merkezleri* (Izmir – Karşıyaka); *Çok Amaçlı Mahalle Evi* (Şanlıurfa - Siverek); *Toplum Merkezi* (Istanbul - Şişli; Kahramanmaraş - Göksun).

- Vocational courses and income generating activities
- Legal counseling
- Social, cultural, and sports activities (festivals, concerts, visits, cinema, and theater)
- Multi-purpose halls (e.g., can be used for funeral services, weddings, associational meetings, etc.)
- Sports facilities
- Library
- *Muhtarlık* (neighborhood authority office)

Municipality CCs are open to and free of charge for all local residents. In addition to these CCs, district municipalities also often operate other kinds of centers targeting different populations for specific purposes, including educational support for children, vocational training centers for adults, counseling and protection for women suffering from domestic violence, and recreational services for youth and the elderly.

Like the CCs discussed in the previous two types, here, too, the services are tailor made, shaped according to the socio-economic and cultural needs of the local population. This is also reflected in the actual physical structures of the CCs.[38] What is distinct though, and surfaces in the descriptions of these variously named centers in the respective municipality websites, is the emphasis on service delivery and the idea of *yerelden belediyecilik,* which can be translated as local municipal work or the business of governing from the local scale. To give one example, the Beyoğlu Municipality of Istanbul, which operates 14 CCs under the name *Semt Konakları*, describes the objective of these centers as follows:

> Improving the quality of life of the local population and ensuring faster, easier, and better quality access to various services from education to health, from cultural activities to social assistance... another objective of these centers is to keep the neighborhood culture alive and create a space where people can socialize, mix, and relax in the midst of urban life.[39]

What this description highlights is the way in which CCs are seen as places allowing municipalities to make their services available to citizens even at the micro-scale of a neighborhood. Notably, these services also include providing ample spaces for socialization.

The extent to which municipal CCs have started offering support to local refugee populations since 2011 is unknown given the vast scale and type of centers across the country. What is notable though is that some municipalities, located in cities/districts highly impacted by refugee settlement, have started opening CCs specifically targeting Syrian refugees. These CCs, such as in the Metropolitan Municipality of Gaziantep[40] and the district municipality of Sultanbeyli[41] in Istanbul, are often initiated through international financial support. The International

38 Many of the district municipality websites include photos of the centers. Some of the CCs are stand-alone structures grand in scale and architecture, including many leisure facilities, whereas others are small, ordinary buildings tucked in the midst of a residential neighborhood.

39 http://semtkonaklari.beyoglu.bel.tr/semtkonaklari/default.aspx?SectionId=961.

40 "Ensar Community Center" (https://www.facebook.com/ensartoplummerkezi/).

41 "Refugees Community Center." This center is not, strictly speaking, a municipal center as it is funded and administered through an NGO called Refugees Association (https://multeciler.org.tr/multeciler-toplum-merkezi/). However, the organic ties between this center and the municipality are commonly known, though the reasons for this extend the scope of this paper. See Didem Danış and Dilara Nazlı, "A Faithful Alliance Between the Civil Society and the State: Actors and Mechanisms of Accommodating Syrian Refugees in Istanbul," *International Migration* 57, no. 2 (2019): 143–157.

Organization for Migration (IOM), for example, has been establishing, operating, and/or supporting centers for migrants and refugees in cooperation with different municipalities (Ankara, Şanlıurfa, Adana, and Gaziantep). These CCs are conceived as "one-stop-shops" for all matters related to migrants and refugees, assisting them in accessing public services, making institutional referrals, and providing targeted training, recreational, and empowerment activities.[42]

**42** https://www.iom.int/news/echo-backs-iom-ankara-municipal-migrant-services-center.

## URBAN REFUGEES AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION

The fourth CC type in Turkey is linked with the massive number of refugees arriving in the country following the conflict in Syria that erupted in 2011. In the first years of the crisis Syrian refugees were largely settled in camps operated by the Turkish state. After 2013, the surge in numbers meant that camps were unable to meet demand, leading refugees to seek safety in cities through their own means. Today, over 96% of the Syrian refugee population in Turkey live outside of camps, with the vast majority being concentrated in cities located near the Syrian border and in the major metropolitan centers in Western Turkey.[43] The fourth CC type emerged within this context, with the goal of reaching out to and addressing the needs of these vast urban refugee populations. This particular response, though, is neither limited to the Syrian refugee situation nor to Turkey and is to be understood in the framework of an emerging discourse and practice centered on urban refugees and community-based protection since the 1990s.

Over recent decades, displaced people, both of rural and urban background, are increasingly more likely to end up living in urban areas rather than designated refugee camps. In the 1990s, this changing trend and the new notion of "urban refugees" emerged as an international policy concern drawing the attention of governmental and non-governmental actors and the academic community.[44] As the lead agency responsible for the protection of refugees,[45] the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) launched the *UNHCR Comprehensive Policy on Urban Refugees* (1997), which for the first time laid out the conditions and measures of providing assistance in urban areas. This document offered a rather conservative and problematic definition of an urban refugee,[46] favoring the containment approach underlying the camp type, and was therefore met with heavy criticism by the international NGO community. However, the document was still significant not only for recognizing urban refugees as a population with distinct protection concerns and needs but also for laying the grounds of a gradually changing approach to refugee protection that centered on engaging communities more effectively in their own protection.[47]

**43** http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik.

**44** See for example, K. Jacobsen, "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Urban Areas: A Livelihoods Perspective," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, no. 3 (2006): 273–286. For more recent literature on urban refugees, see: https://www.fmreview.org/urban-displacement; http://www.ijurr.org/spotlight-on/the-urban-refugee-crisis-reflections-on-cities-citizenship-and-the-displaced/the-urban-refugee-crisis/.

**45** For UNHCR, "protection" covers all activities that aim to uphold the basic human rights of uprooted or stateless people in their countries of asylum or habitual residence, including that they will not be returned involuntarily to a country where they may face persecution (https://www.unhcr.org/protection.html).

**46** For instance, under Article 7 the definition of an urban refugee is limited to persons who already had an urban background, whereas people of rural backgrounds are expected to live in rural settlements, if possible. The same article also distinguishes between the different subgroups of refugee populations in urban areas who will not be considered as "legitimate urban refugees," i.e., will not receive UNHCR assistance; those being "irregular movers" (refugees/asylum seekers leaving the country where they have found or could have found legitimate protection); refugees in the prima facie group (implying often large-scale displacement situation); and "legitimate urban caseload." Overall, the document presents a very negative portrayal of the urban refugee phenomenon, emphasizing the added difficulties and costs associated with managing and protecting this population. See Jeff Crisp, "Finding Space for Protection: An Inside Account of the Evolution of UNHCR's Urban Refugee Policy," *Refugee* 33, no. 1 (2017): 89.

**47** Besides the urban refugee phenomenon, the development of this new approach was also linked with other prevailing trends emerging in this period, including drastic reduction in donor funds toward refugees, increasing temporal lingering of refugee situations (termed today as "protracted displacement"), and growing concerns over aid-dependency among refugees.

This new approach was initially outlined by UNHCR in its policy document *Reinforcing a Community Development Approach* (2001), then it was extensively detailed in the manual *A Community-based Approach in UNHCR Operations* (2008).[48] In 2009, the much-critiqued 1997 UNCHR policy document on urban refugees was replaced with the *UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas,* in which key principals of action include community orientation, interaction with refugees, and self-reliance.[49] Last but not least, in 2013, a protection policy paper was published by UNHCR on *Understanding Community-Based Protection* (2013), which documents key lessons learned over a decade in the delivery of a community-based approach to protection and shares tools to facilitate its further use among UNHCR staff and partners. In essence, this approach "recognizes the resilience, capacities, skills and resources of persons of concern, builds on these to deliver protection and solutions, and supports the community's own goals"[50] and "implies that communities engage meaningfully and substantially in all aspects of programmes that affect them, strengthening the community's leading role as a driving force for change."[51]

The opening and organization of CCs is recognized as one among many different strategies entailing a community-based approach.[52] In 2016, UNHCR issued the *Community-Based Approach to Protection in Action – Community Centers* document, which defines CCs as follows:

> Safe and public places where women, men, boys and girls of diverse backgrounds can meet for social events, recreation, education and livelihood programs, information exchange, and other purposes. They are established with the main objective of empowering refugee and host communities and providing them with a forum to promote their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

The document emphasizes that activities and services provided at CCs are dependent on local needs and finances, while also stating that the following services ought to be commonly available: community mobilization and outreach; skills development; awareness raising and information sharing; education; recreation; and other support (registration, referral, feedback, and complaint mechanisms).

Overall, the primary goal of this type of CC is to provide refugees with protection, which entails ensuring safety from potential threats, providing services to meet basic needs, and enabling people to improve their situation and realize their human rights in a dignified manner. As urban refugees do not live in isolation but rather in close proximity

**48** Here a community-based approach is defined as "a way of working in partnership with persons of concern during all stages of UNHCR's programme cycle. It recognizes the resilience, capacities, skills and resources of persons of concern, builds on these to deliver protection and solutions, and supports the community's own goals." See UNHCR, *A Community-based Approach in UNHCR Operations*, 2008, accessed June 6, 2019, https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/47da54722.pdf, 14.

**49** The other key principles are identified as follows: refugee rights; state responsibility; partnership; needs assessment; age, gender, and diversity; and equity. Building on these key principles, the document identifies key objectives and sets out the following protection strategies: providing reception facilities, undertaking registration, and data collection; ensuring that refugees are documented; determining refugee status; reaching out to the community; fostering constructive relations with urban refugees; maintaining security; promoting livelihoods and self-reliance; ensuring access to healthcare, education and other services; meeting material needs; promoting durable solutions; addressing the issue of movement.

**50** UNHCR, *A Community-based Approach*, 14.

**51** UNHCR, *Understanding Community-Based Protection*, 2013, accessed June 6, 2019, https://www.refworld.org/docid/5209f0b64.html, 5.

**52** UNHCR, *A Community-based Approach*, 77; UNHCR, *UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Area*, 2009, accessed June 6, 2019, https://www.refworld.org/docid/4ab8e7f72.html, 12.

to host communities that are often also confronted with precarious socio-economic situations, protection strategies for refugees are to be developed with the consideration of host communities.

This type of CC targeting mainly refugees has become very widespread across Turkey in recent years. These CCs are primarily operated by NGOs and supported through international donor support, most notably the UNHCR, the EU, and the German Federal Ministry of Development and Economic Cooperation (BMZ). The three largest and most structured CC projects under this type are overseen by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), which has been supporting a diverse number of organizations across Turkey operating different types of CCs, including those targeting refugees[53]; the Association for Solidarity with Migrants and Refugees (ASAM), which has been running a "Multi-Service Support Centers"[54] program since 2013; and the Turkish Red Crescent Society (TRC), which has been running a "Community Center"[55] program since 2015, entailing the operation of 15 CCs across numerous provinces in Turkey that follow a modular program[56] across all centers that is adapted to local needs. As with the municipal CCs discussed previously, the CCs opening within the framework of Turkey's refugee response also use various names, including the already mentioned *Multi-Service Support Centers* by ASAM and *Community Centers* by TRC, as well as *Refugee Support Center* by the Refugee Support Association[57] and *Support to Life Houses* by the Support to Life Foundation.[58] There is also significant variation in terms of the physicality of the buildings (size, architecture, facilities), including whether or not there is a securitized entrance. The refugee CC model can be considered unique in respect to staffing, as there are many centers hiring and/or entirely managed by foreign nationals, especially Syrians. As civil society institutions, there is also greater involvement of volunteers. These centers provide some or all of the following services:

- Field work (doing needs assessments, outreach activities)
- Case management (e.g., risk assessment, referrals to public service providers, including translation support)
- Providing needs-based social assistance
- Information dissemination
- Legal counseling
- Basic health consultations, including mental health and psycho-social support
- Life skills training (e.g., literacy and language classes, handcrafts, IT, music, and arts)
- Awareness-raising activities (e.g., hygiene, sexual and gender-based violence, legal rights, child development)
- Education (e.g., catch-up/supplementary instruction for school-aged children, advice and support to university students)
- Vocational training
- Social, cultural, and sports activities (including intercultural events with host communities)
- Social cohesion activities bringing together refugee and host communities.

**53** These are supported under two different projects: "Strengthening social cohesion in Turkish host communities – Multi-Service Centers," which ran from October 2015 to January 2018, and "Improving social services of community centers for refugees and host communities in Turkey – Community Center Project," running from 2017 until 2020. On the latter project see: https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/67106.html.

**54** http://en.sgdd.info/?p=1080.

**55** http://www.kizilaytoplummerkezleri.org/en.

**56** At the time of field research in early 2018 this modular program of TRC was organized around three areas: Protection, Health and Psycho-Social Support, Cohesion and Livelihoods.

**57** http://mudem.org/en/refugee-support-center-mudem-rsc-has-reached-100-thousand-refugees-in-a-year/.

**58** https://www.supporttolife.org/refugee-support/.

Compared to the previous CC types discussed, in this case the availability and extent of services has changed significantly over the course of time. This has been shaped, first, by the evolving nature of refugee needs. For instance, up until 2016, some CCs were even serving as Temporary Education Centers and Primary Health Clinics for Syrians. As the state increased its capacities to incorporate Syrians into public services, such functions became redundant. Parallel to this, the changing level of state intervention over NGO-operated CCs has also been influential. For instance, in 2016 the Ministry of National Education made all non-formal educational activities in CCs serving refugees subject to permission. Similarly, in 2017 the Ministry of Family and Social Policy required such CCs to request permission for protection activities. Finally, as the CCs serving refugees tend to be quite costly in operational terms and rely heavily on external financing, declining international donor support over recent years has also shaped their scope of activities.

Besides this temporal component, as in the previous municipal type discussed, there are variations in practices and approaches across all CCs serving refugees linked to underlying ideological, political, and institutional differences. For instance, some CCs, especially those that have several such centers across the country and operate more closely with the state, take more of a "one-stop-shop" approach focused on protection, with the goal of identifying the most vulnerable refugees and facilitating their access to basic services (e.g., through outreach, information provision, counseling and referral). With some other CCs, which are generally stand-alone local grassroots initiatives, there is more focus on a participatory approach, where social, educational, and creative activities are offered with the goal of promoting well-being and empowerment of refugee populations, as well as fostering productive encounters with host populations. Then, there are also many CCs that are trying to incorporate and balance both approaches.

## CONCLUSION

This report presents a unique attempt to understand the differences underlying the vast range of community center (CC) practices operating across Turkey today. While there are a variety of names used to label such centers, essentially they all entail similar physical structures and offer similar activities in different capacities; hence, terminological differences are not a good proxy for differentiating practices. Moreover, it appears impossible to distinguish CCs by sector, as those run by the state, municipalities, and/or civil society, again, entail similar structures and activities, and there is often collaboration across sectors.

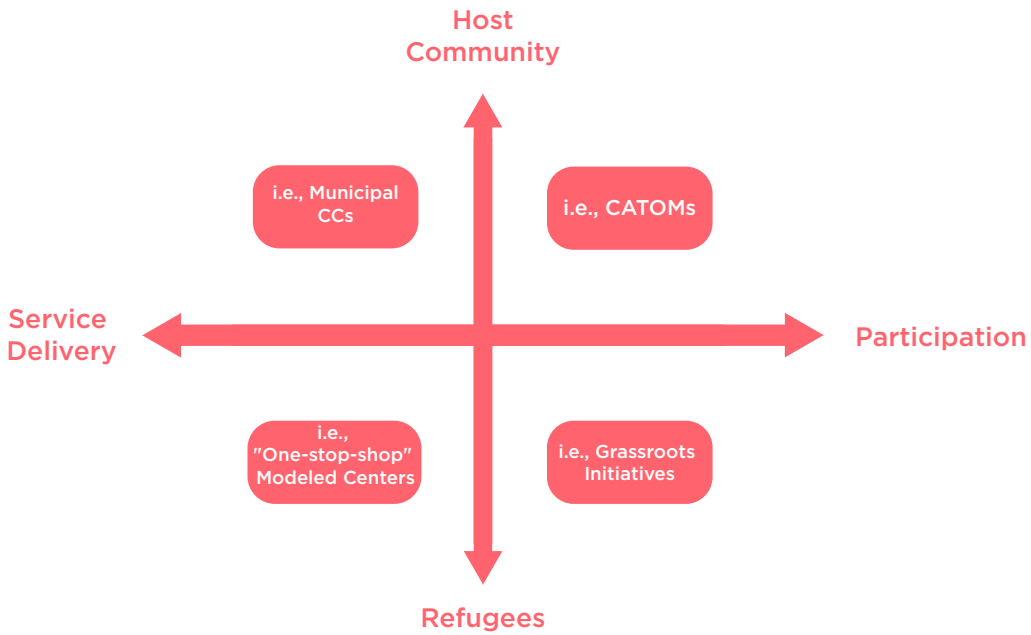
Rather, it is suggested here that one way of understanding differences underlying contemporary CC practices in Turkey is by looking at their distinct historical underpinnings. It argues that there are unique conceptual frameworks guiding the foundations and operations of CCs today that emerged at separate times in history in response to changing demographic and political developments and involving different institutional actors to different degrees. It has explored four such historical processes/types underlying present practices, which are summarized in Table 1 below.

Surely, the four types of CCs discussed throughout are not separated by clearly defined boundaries as in Table 1 below; for instance, with substantial international donor funding becoming available in recent years to support refugees, prior historical CC types have also started targeting these communities and shifting/expanding their activities accordingly. Yet, such a categorical layout can still be useful for understanding the different kinds of discourses and objectives that have shaped the foundations of such institutions.

**Table 1: Comparing Four Historical Typologies of CCs in Turkey**

| TYPE | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conceptual framework | Social welfare | Human Development | Local Governance | Urban Refugees |
| Historical context | 1990s, rapid and uneven urbanization | 1990s, growing regional inequalities | 2000s, changing local governance structures | 2010s, urban refugee population growth |
| Institutions | Primarily state / some NGOs, often in collaboration with municipalities | State / some support of NGOs in activities | Municipalities / some support by NGOs in activities | Primarily NGOs, also some municipalities |
| Targeted Community | Locality | Locality & Group (women) | Locality | Group (refugees) |
| Stated Objectives | Urban citizenship, democratic participation | Women's empowerment, participation | Localized service delivery | Community-based protection (including components of both service delivery and participation) |

**Figure 1: Conceiving CCs in Turkey through a continuum model**




Importantly, besides historical differences, the discussion has also revealed variations in two additional factors: 1) who is defined as the community that such centers serve, and 2) what is the main objective of operating a CC. In the first three types presented, CC names often include a reference to a locality; hence, the community is a geographically identified group. Generally, no specification is made about social groups (other than targeting the most vulnerable local populations), although the second type of CC does distinctly prioritize women. In the last type, CCs specifically target refugees and migrants; hence, the community is a socially and legally identified group.

At first glance, a comparative look at the stated objectives of these four historical CC types shows that the overarching aims are different for each, including from facilitating urban adaptation, encouraging women's empowerment, enhancing access to municipal services, ensuring refugee protection through a community-based approach.[59] However, a closer look reveals that there are actually similarities in relation to the weight given to service delivery versus community participation as the tool and objective of CCs. In other words, for some CCs, improving/facilitating access to a broad range of services is the end priority, whereas for others the focus is on providing services/activities aimed at improving participatory skills and capabilities. Again, in terms of the stated objectives, the "social welfare" and "human development" historical types explicitly center on the latter, while the "local governance" type centers on the former. The "urban refugees" type is more complex as different institutions focus on either one or combine both approaches to different degrees.

59 The question of whether these stated objectives align with actual practices and have the desired impact is a whole other research question that extends the scope of this report but is also important to assess.

Therefore, as an alternative to the more static categorical table, e.g., Table 1, which is based on histories of emergence, it is also possible to suggest conceiving differences between CCs in Turkey through a kind of spectrum as in Figure 1 above. Through this spectrum, CCs are positioned differently along two continuums: who they define as a community and what are their stated objectives/strategies for serving these communities.

This model does not suggest that one position along the continuum is better than the other. Different approaches serve different needs, offer potentially different levels and scales of impact, and have different strengths and weaknesses. For instance, while service delivery-focused CCs might have a greater and more immediate impact in terms of meeting basic needs and reaching out to more people, those centered on a participatory approach might significantly strengthen capabilities for fewer people over a longer term and be more sustainable through community engagement. As with the categorical layout presented in Table 1, revealing the varying discourses and objectives shaping the foundations of different CCs, the continuum approach suggested in Figure 1 can also be useful for situating how and for whom tools of social intervention through CCs are used and for what objective. Overall, the complex nature of society requires diverse interventions. That is why understanding, and supporting, this diversity is important.

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