

## ***11. Kindness More Contagious Than Viruses: An Inclusive and Innovative Response to Inequalities in Ankara***

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### **Introduction**

COVID-19 caught the world suddenly and unprepared and turned into a catastrophic outbreak at an unprecedented pace. Besides being a public health crisis, the pandemic also triggered a broader multi-dimensional global crisis, whose outcomes were undoubtedly more devastating for socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Global trade almost halted, many companies closed down, massive layoffs occurred, and many countries experienced recession (see, World Bank, 2020). To combat these impacts and to protect their citizens, governments adopted different measures, varied according to their policy capacities, economic circumstances, and administrative traditions (Capano et al, 2020). In Turkey, the central government, thanks to the strong centralist administrative structure, was able to provide a quick and effective response to the early wave of the pandemic in terms of health care and lockdown measures (Bakir, 2020). Nevertheless, the fragility of the economy forced it to prioritize market-oriented strategies at the expense of the social and economic support needed by impoverished classes.

On the ground, this resulted in an uncodified and forced intergovernmental task-sharing, sometimes pushing social aid policies further into the field of responsibility of local governments. For local governments, which already suffered a severe loss of income during the pandemic, this also meant a heavy economic burden that they could not manage. Unfortunately, this was the case for the metropolitan governments ruled by the opposition parties, which could not get enough financial support from the central government. The Ankara Metropolitan Municipality (AMM) was one of these metropolitan governments. Nevertheless, the Municipality was able to develop an innovative, comprehensive, participatory, and most importantly, relatively low-cost, social support strategy during the pandemic, despite all the financial and political restraints. Put differently, in collaboration with local NGOs, the Municipality not only implemented standard measures more effectively but also encouraged and organized citizenship solidarity and developed various mutual-aid platforms so that wealthier citizens could help economically and socially vulnerable people.

In the following sections, we provide background information on governmental responses to COVID-19 with particular attention to the intergovernmental relations and then proceed with the reasons pushing the Ankara Municipality to follow a solidarity-based strategy and provide a detailed account of the performance of this strategy.

### **The governmental response to COVID-19: from a mandatory distribution of tasks to intergovernmental conflict**

The pandemic reached Turkey on March 11, about three months after China, which prompted the central government in Turkey to set a strategy for combating the pandemic. A few days after the first case was detected, schools, restaurants, shopping centers, bars, and cafés were temporarily closed. Measures were then gradually tightened to mitigate the spread of the virus across the country. All international flights, domestic intercity travel via public transport, entry to and exit from metropolitan regions were banned. However, possibly worried about the fragility of the economy, the central government did not carry out a nationwide stay-at-

home strategy but rather contented itself with partial social lockdown measures. Nationwide curfew was only imposed on citizens under 20 and over 65, who are assumed to be in the high-risk groups vulnerable to the effects of the disease but who at the same time remain out of the official workforce. Apart from this, an additional curfew was imposed in large cities, limited to weekends and public holidays

Moreover, the central government put a set of economic measures, called ‘Economic Stability Shield Package’, into place to stimulate the economy damaged by the pandemic (Anadolu Agency, 2020). The government, struggling with the high rate of unemployment for the last few years, has pursued a three-fold strategy: keep private sector companies alive, prevent massive job losses, and protect incomes. The first support package, amounting to \$15.4 billion, announced on March 19, introduced tax cuts, low-interest credit provision, deferrals on some taxes, and insurance payments for the companies operating in the sectors most affected by the pandemic. The additional packages, unveiled in subsequent months, extended the support given to the private sector. Further, a temporary layoff ban was announced on April 17, and to compensate for potential income losses, short-time work allowances (for employees shifting to partial-working order) and wage supports (for employees on unpaid leave) were put into effect.

In contrast with its success in implementing macro strategies regarding economic stability and market balance, the central government fell short of developing efficient social aid tools for the vulnerable parts of society (for example low-income families, the elderly, disabled individuals, unemployed) during the pandemic. Pandemic-related social aid remained limited to modest and mostly one-time instruments such as extra payments for needy families and pensioners, provision of food supplies, deferral of some household bills (Çerkezoğlu, 2020). Lack of such support compelled local governments to prioritize social policy instruments, which resulted in massive extra costs crippling their budgets. Therefore, at first, many municipalities confined their social support policies to temporary, low-cost, preferably in-kind, aids (for example cancelling or deferral of rents on municipality-owned properties, provision of food or some other essential need goods, free mask distribution). However, as the crisis unfolded, the growing demands of vulnerable populations increased pressures on municipalities, in particular on the metropolitan municipalities where a significant portion of the urban poor lives.

Metropolitan municipalities belonging to opposition parties followed a different path than the ones led by the ruling party, which were able to work more harmoniously with the central government. On March 29, opposition metropolitan municipalities, including Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, launched donation campaigns. This maneuver caused intergovernmental tensions to stiffen since, in the last local elections, the main opposition party won control over 11 metropolitan municipalities (Selçuki, 2020). Just one day after the beginning of the local governments’ campaigns, the central government launched its own nationwide fundraising campaign. Then on the grounds that they undermined the national campaign and were unlawful, the central government cancelled municipalities’ donation campaigns and blocked their fundraising accounts.

Such impediments forced opposition metropolitan municipalities to adopt new policy tools to maintain and develop social aids. Among other examples, the AMM developed an innovative strategy, making it possible to maintain social aid without incurring extra costs affecting its

budget. This strategy involves using online solidarity platforms and participatory mechanisms, in which people can apply to fill the needs of vulnerable households (for example food, cash, public transport tickets, and so on).

### **The case of Ankara Municipality**

With the arrival of the pandemic in the country, all local governments began to develop strategies within their own fiscal and political capabilities to protect vulnerable residents. Among these efforts, the AMM has attracted exceptional attention and gained nationwide popularity with its alternative policies (for all measures see, Eurocities, 2020). What made Ankara different was not only its success in developing and implementing social support policies, which was also done by myriad local governments in and out of Turkey. What differentiated Ankara was the outcome of well-managed participatory mechanisms; practical usage of mobile and data-driven technologies, PR strategies and particularly social media; and an ambitious organizational approach to bring citizens together so they could engage in solidarity-motivated efforts. By doing this, the Municipality was able to adopt a comprehensive, effective, and flexible social policy strategy, which heeded financial and political circumstances and adapted to the course of the outbreak.

Immediately after the arrival of the pandemic, the Municipality declared that all non-urgent municipal investment and services should be halted and that all financial resources were to be channeled into recovery programs for local businesses, shopkeepers, impoverished and vulnerable citizens including the ones who lost their jobs because of the outbreak. At first, a relatively generic and familiar pathway was followed to compensate the pandemic-related income losses in different local sectors, for example all rent payments on municipal properties were postponed, direct cash support was provided to local shopkeepers in need, and private operators in the public transport system were provided with free fuel.

Further, with grassroot feedback from the Citizens' Assembly of Ankara (CAA), workers who incurred income and/or job losses because of the lockdown and curfews in sectors such as entertainment, hospitality, or textiles were identified and temporarily employed by the Municipality to work on various social support projects. These workers were especially vulnerable because they relied on daily wages, were uninsured, and often worked in informal sectors. There were two compelling examples of this type of support. First, about 2,000 musicians were hired to give concerts at different places in the city. And second, tailors and some textile workers were employed to produce masks to be distributed free of charge.

The second component of the social support policy was the deliverance of necessary in-cash and in-kind (for example free food, meal, drug, or fuel provisions) aid to poverty-stricken segments of the city, which immediately began after the pandemic. This was an upscaling of the long-established social aid programs from which roughly over 100,000 city dwellers benefited before the pandemic. However, with the outbreak, the dramatic increase in the number of people in need caused a massive pile-up in aid applications which overloaded the social aid system. To accurately identify citizens who were really in need and to take quick action, the Municipality developed a mobile application through which citizens apply for social aid that works in coordination with the other governmental agencies to cross-check the economic status of the applicants. In this way, despite the difficult circumstances associated with the pandemic, the Municipality was able to meet the basic needs of more than 300,000 people, in a few months.

All this social aid, as can be guessed, placed a massive extra burden on the budget of the Municipality whose revenues had already substantially decreased because of the lockdown. Therefore, increasingly ongoing pressures from grassroots, in particular low-income groups, prompted the Municipality to search for alternative methods to maintain social aid. But as we have seen, the Municipality launched a donation campaign that was soon suspended by the central government. The money that had been collected locally was transferred into the central government's campaign.

Facing these severe fiscal and political challenges, the Mayor introduced a series of mutual-aid campaigns. The mutual-aid programs were among the Mayor's commitments during the local election, initial steps having already been taken before the pandemic. With the sudden attack of the disease, these initial pursuits were easily turned into a comprehensive online mutual-aid system. Introduced with the motto 'kindness is more contagious than the viruses', the campaign was launched just before the month of Holy Ramadan and was publicized through official websites and conventional and social media. At first, a website was constructed by the Municipality to allow people to donate iftar (fast-breaking) meals to people in need. The collected money was added to the usual iftar deliverances of the Municipality, and all donations were compiled and made public daily.

The campaign quickly spread on social media and enjoyed nationwide popularity. In addition to causing a boom in donations, this popularity encouraged the Municipality to add new tools to the mutual-aid campaign. As the system was designed in a flexible fashion, official databases were linked to the website in order to add new features such as direct donations, cash uploads to the transportation cards, and the paying of water bills. Moreover, donations of second-hand computers to students, who lack the necessary equipment to follow online education during the curfews, and donations of meat during Eid were also added to the system in due course. The recent numbers show that about 800,000 people in need utilized these in-cash and in-kind donations, which exceed 50 million TRY (approximately 7 million USD) at the time of writing ([www.ankaratekyurek.com](http://www.ankaratekyurek.com)).

Meanwhile, there were other innovative mutual-aid practices, born out of the collaboration of the Municipality with the Citizens' Assembly. An excellent example of this type of mutual aid was a voluntary logistic network to provide for the basic needs of citizens over the age of 65, who were subjected to nationwide curfews. In this project, two NGOs (one consisting of motorized couriers and the second a local supermarket association) were brought together so people over the age of 65 could make phone orders and be offered free deliveries. Whereas CAA undertook the coordination of the project, the Municipality provided fuel to the couriers and broadcast the list of supermarkets included in the project on its website. Such spontaneous practices led to the formation of a large volunteer platform with the participation of neighborhood-level grassroots organizations, other NGOs, and individuals, most of whom were made aware of these projects through social media. During the pandemic, these volunteers took part in many social responsibility projects carried out by the Municipality, such as counselling and psychological support on the phone, online education, public concerts, food provision for stray animals, and so on. (See Chapters Ten and Twelve for other examples of reliance on volunteers to deal with the social consequences of the pandemic.)

### **In lieu of a conclusion**

In Turkey, the metropolitan municipalities, at least those belonging to the opposition, fought not only against the pandemic but also against severe financial and political restrictions they faced while carrying out social aid programs. In sum, despite financial and political barriers, the AMM found, at least until now, ways to provide social aid for the impoverished dwellers, disadvantaged people, and local businesses who were affected by the pandemic. In doing so, it was able to develop innovative ways of supporting its residents. What is more important, the Municipality involved city residents in all social aid-related decision-making and policy implementation processes. It used technology to recruit and coordinate residents so they could help each other. The AMM experience has shown us that in the face of unexpected crises such as COVID-19, it is necessary to push the usual boundaries of governance and service provision via innovative participatory strategies in order to provide aid to people in need.

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