

Combating the Covid-19 Pandemic with a Social Municipalism Approach: The Case of Ankara

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how the approach of social municipalism can serve as an effective tool in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking the practices of Ankara during the pandemic period as an example, it is stated that local governments can play a significant role in increasing the resilience of communities during these crisis periods. The municipality has increased services targeted to vulnerable sections alongside providing public health services and economic support. These applications, which serve as a model for other local administrations, are examined in detail.

Key Words: Social Municipality, COVID-19, Ankara

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a global health crisis, affecting all societies around the world and bringing many sectors to a standstill. During this pandemic, the importance of local governments has become even more evident. Because, although strategies to cope with the pandemic are usually determined at the national level, the implementation of these strategies largely depends on municipalities and other local government bodies. This study will examine how the social municipalism approach can be an effective tool in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The social municipalism approach is based on the understanding that municipalities are not only organizations that provide infrastructure and services, but can also take active roles to improve the social well-being and resilience of society. In this sense, municipalities are recognized as having an important role in various areas such as public health, education, and economic support. This article examines the social municipalism practices of Ankara, the capital of Turkey, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on Ankara Municipality's activities during this period in terms of providing public health services, providing economic support, and increasing services for the most vulnerable segments of society. The aim of this study is to examine Ankara's social municipalism approach and discuss how this approach can be an

effective tool in times of crisis such as the pandemic. Ankara Municipality's ability to respond quickly and effectively to the crisis demonstrates how critical the capacity of local governments to deal with such situations is. In this process, the municipality not only provided health services, but also played an active role in areas such as economic support and social assistance, which helped the community to better adapt to the pandemic conditions. Therefore, this study highlights the usefulness of social municipalism as an important strategic tool in the fight against the pandemic.

1. The Concept of Local Government and Social Municipalism

The concept of local government refers to the institutions or organizations that regulate the administrative affairs of a particular region or local community and provide local services. These institutions are usually responsible for meeting the daily needs of people living in local areas such as a particular city, town or village. For example, local governments are responsible for providing infrastructure services such as clean water, waste management, street lighting, as well as landscaping. At the same time, local governments operate to improve the welfare of the area. To achieve this goal, they carry out physical works such as maintaining roads, organizing parks and protecting green areas. In addition, they bring the community together and strengthen social solidarity by organizing cultural events (Güler, 2018: 30).

Although local governments generally operate independently from the central government, they act under the supervision of the central government. Through this supervision, they both contribute to the implementation of national policies and act more autonomously to meet local needs. Promoting democratic participation is also among the important duties of local governments. By enabling direct participation of the public, they bring transparency to decision-making processes and allow all segments of society to make their voices heard. Thus, more inclusive policies are formulated and services are provided in line with the demands of the people. As a result, local governments not only organize administrative affairs, but also support the local economy, protect cultural values and strengthen social solidarity. In this way, they contribute to the creation of a more livable environment by enabling each individual to take more ownership of the region they live in (Başaran, 2018: 22).

The concept of social municipalism is a concept that broadens the understanding of services and the definition of duties of local governments. Traditionally, municipalities are usually concerned with infrastructure services, such as road maintenance, cleaning services and landscaping. However, in the social municipalism approach, in addition to these physical services, services aimed at improving social welfare and quality of life are also included. This

new approach aims to meet the needs of more disadvantaged segments of society. These groups may include the elderly, the disabled, the poor or the homeless. Social municipalism aims to integrate these individuals into society and improve their living conditions. Social municipalism also encourages citizen participation (Şataf and Mermer, 2017: 14). This means that more citizens are involved in democratic processes. In other words, social municipalism represents a model in which local governments respond not only to physical infrastructure, but also to the social and cultural needs of society. In this sense, social municipal services usually cover areas such as education, health, housing, culture and social assistance. For example, a municipality may support the education of children or the care of the elderly. It can also revitalize the social life of a community by organizing cultural events. Such services help maintain the social balance in society (Altun and Şimşek, 2020: 56). The importance of social municipalism emphasizes the idea that local governments should care not only about physical infrastructure but also about people-oriented policies. According to the social municipalism approach, the most important task of local governments is to improve the welfare of the society. To achieve this goal, municipalities need to provide a wide range of services to meet both the physical and social needs of citizens (Çelik, 2014: 6).

2. Social Municipalism in Turkey

Social municipalism practices in Turkey started to develop in the late 1980s and became more widespread especially after the 2000s. In this period, the duties of local governments have expanded and they have taken more responsibility for providing social services. Social municipalism is practiced in Turkey in various ways. Social services provided by municipalities can be found in many different areas such as educational aids, health services, care for elderly and disabled citizens, and organization of cultural activities (Özgökçeler and Bıçkı, 2012: 45). For example, some municipalities may offer scholarships or free tuition support to help children with their education. There are also municipalities that provide home care services for the elderly or run rehabilitation centers for the disabled. Organizing cultural and artistic events is also an important part of the social municipalities' social municipalism practices in Turkey. Such activities promote social cohesion in society and improve the quality of life of citizens. However, there are also regional differences in social municipalism practices. Some municipalities may be more active in this area, while others may focus more on traditional municipal services. This depends on the priorities of local governments and the extent of their resources (Özden, 2014: 104).

In order for social municipalism to develop and become more widespread in Turkey, the

resources provided to local governments should be increased and policies in this field should be planned more systematically. Social municipalism practices in Turkey started to develop in the late 1980s and became more widespread especially after the 2000s. In this period, the duties of local governments have expanded and they have taken more responsibility for providing social services (Ünlü, 2016: 71). The concept of social municipalism is implemented in various ways in Turkey. Social services provided by municipalities can include many different areas such as educational aids, health services, care for elderly and disabled citizens, and organization of cultural activities. For example, some municipalities may offer scholarships or free tuition support to help children with their education. There are also municipalities that provide home care services for the elderly or run rehabilitation centers for the disabled. Organizing cultural and artistic events is also an important part of social municipalism practices of municipalities in Turkey (Şahinoğlu, 2017: 54). While such activities promote social cohesion in society, they also improve the quality of life of citizens. However, regional differences can also be observed in social municipalism practices. While some municipalities are more active in this field, others may focus more on traditional municipal services. This depends on the priorities of local governments and the extent of their resources. In order for social municipalism to develop and become more widespread in Turkey, the resources provided to local governments should be increased and policies in this field should be planned more systematically (Şataf, 2017: 12).

3.COVID-19 Pandemic Process

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on health, economy and social life in Turkey as well as around the world.

Health Impacts

The first wave of the pandemic reached Turkey in March 2020. In Turkey, the government took a series of measures to contain the spread of the virus. These measures included curfews, closure of schools and various workplaces. The use of masks and social distancing rules were also made mandatory. Efforts were made to build rapid testing capacity and increase intensive care units. During this time, healthcare workers had great responsibilities and they were at the forefront of the pandemic (Ersoy and Ersoy, 2022: 829-831).

Economic Impacts

The pandemic also had a significant impact on the Turkish economy. Economic activity slowed down due to business closures and reduced mobility. Many sectors faced serious bottlenecks. The tourism sector, in particular, has been severely affected by international travel restrictions. The government has tried to mitigate these negative impacts by providing various economic

support packages for businesses and employees. Measures such as unemployment benefits, short-time working allowances and tax reductions were taken (Ünüvar and Aktaş, 2022: 132-133).

Social Impacts

The pandemic has also deeply affected social life in Turkey. People limited their social activities and working from home became the norm. In addition, with the transition to distance education, a new era began for students and teachers. The pandemic has put even more pressure on disadvantaged groups in society. In particular, low-income families were among those most affected by the economic consequences of the pandemic.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had serious impacts in Turkey. During this time, the government as well as healthcare organizations, businesses and citizens have all had to adapt to a challenging process. However, this process has also shown the importance of solidarity and innovation. It was seen that all segments of the society should act together to cope with the challenges brought by the pandemic (Demir and Ateş, 2023: 252-253).

4. Structure of Ankara Metropolitan Municipality

Ankara Metropolitan Municipality is the local government unit that governs Ankara, the capital and second largest city of Turkey. Its administrative structure consists of a mayor, a municipal council and various departments.

Mayor

The Mayor is the highest-ranking official of the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality. He is directly elected by the people and sets the overall policy direction of the municipality. He also prepares and implements the municipal budget, makes staff appointments and is responsible for the general administration of the city.

Municipal Council

The Ankara Metropolitan Municipality Assembly is a body composed of representatives of the public and constitutes the decision-making mechanism of the municipality. Assembly members are elected by the people and approve the municipality's strategic plans, budget and major decisions.

Department Heads

Ankara Metropolitan Municipality has departments dedicated to various service areas. These departments include urban planning, social services, environment and urban planning, transportation, urban transformation, education and health. Each department focuses on a specific service area and develops policies and programs in this area. Heads of departments are usually appointed by the mayor and each is responsible for implementing and managing projects in their

area.

In conclusion, the structure of the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality covers a wide range of both administrative and service aspects. The most important task of the local government is to meet the needs and improve the quality of life of all citizens living in Ankara. In line with this objective, the municipality provides a wide range of services and adopts a social municipalism approach (Court of Accounts, 2022: 1-3).

5. Ankara Metropolitan Municipality's Social Municipalism Activities in the Covid-19

Process

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis that has affected Turkey as well as the rest of the world. This situation has severely affected people's daily lives, work and activities. Ankara Metropolitan Municipality has taken various measures and provided services in line with its social municipalism approach to support citizens in these difficult times. Within this framework;

Health Services

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ankara Metropolitan Municipality has placed extra emphasis on health services to protect public health. Public transportation and public spaces were regularly cleaned and disinfected to prevent the spread of the virus. The municipality distributed masks and encouraged citizens to wear masks to reduce the risk of transmission (Bağdaş, 2021: 18).

Social Support Programs

Various support programs were organized for families experiencing economic difficulties due to the pandemic. Aid packages consisting of food and hygiene items were prepared and delivered to families in need to meet their basic needs. In addition, cash assistance programs were also launched to help with living costs due to people losing their jobs and economic uncertainty. Thanks to these programs, many families were able to survive even in difficult times. In addition, special aids for education and health services were also organized within the scope of social support programs (Bayraktar, 2013: 89-90).

Training and Information

The municipality has placed great emphasis on informing the community about COVID-19. Through various channels, information on preventing the spread of COVID-19 was shared and citizens had access to accurate information about the disease. In the process, the municipality organized a series of educational seminars, both online and offline. Brochures, posters and videos were produced for age groups and risk situations to ensure that everyone is aware of this important issue. In addition, a call center was established where citizens could answer questions and voice

their concerns (Bilgiç, 2021: 13-14).

Elderly and Disabled Services

Ankara Metropolitan Municipality provided specialized services to meet the needs of elderly and disabled citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic. These services included the expansion of home care services aimed at increasing access to care and support services for these individuals in their homes. In addition, special assistance was also provided to elderly and disabled people to enable them to carry out their daily lives. These services aim to improve the quality of life of these individuals during the pandemic (Öner and Çam, 2021: 148).

In conclusion, Ankara Metropolitan Municipality has effectively utilized its social municipalism approach in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In this process, it provided various services to meet both the health and social needs of citizens. These practices show how social municipalism can play an important role in improving the welfare of the society. In addition, these efforts of Ankara Metropolitan Municipality set an example for other municipalities. It has assumed a leadership role in supporting the most vulnerable segments of society during the pandemic. All these services and practices have once again demonstrated how important municipalities are in facilitating the lives of citizens even during the pandemic (Erdem & Emini, 2021: 1934-1935).

Overall Evaluation and Conclusion

During the pandemic, Ankara Municipality not only provided public health services, but also economic support. It also increased services for the most vulnerable segments of society, emphasizing its social municipalism approach. In this context, the municipality's activities have also played an important role in building community resilience. Ankara Municipality's solutions to the needs of the public alleviated some of the difficulties experienced by citizens during the pandemic. Many people's lives have been positively affected thanks to the support provided especially for families experiencing economic difficulties. With this approach, Ankara Municipality has once again demonstrated the necessity of social solidarity and the understanding of valuing people at the core of municipalism. The Ankara example shows how critical a role local governments can play in global crises such as pandemics. Municipalities acting with a social municipalism approach have proven that they have the ability to sustain the society both in terms of health services and economic and social support mechanisms. Especially during the pandemic, the solidarity and solidarity policies implemented by Ankara Metropolitan Municipality set an example for other local governments. This has once again demonstrated that municipalities not only provide urban services, but also have a responsibility to look after the

general welfare of the society. It also demonstrates how municipalities can become an important actor in times of crisis and play a role in increasing social resilience. At this point, Ankara's practices can serve as an example for other local governments. By adopting a social municipalism approach, local governments can be more proactive in areas such as public health and economic support. They can also strengthen community resilience by increasing services for vulnerable groups most affected by the pandemic.

These practices of Ankara can serve as a guide on how to produce more effective and faster solutions, especially during the pandemic. For example, other local governments can also implement services such as online training programs and distribution of hygiene materials in their own regions. In this way, they can both protect public health and support economically vulnerable citizens. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has once again shown us the importance of social policies at both national and local levels. Local governments adopting a social municipalism approach and developing various strategies in this direction can help communities become more resilient to such crises. In this context, Ankara's experiences and strategies can be a valuable guide for other municipalities. We hope that our paper will encourage more awareness and discussion on this issue. In this process, it has become clear how vital social policies are, not only in general, but especially in areas such as health and education. With sustainable and effective policies, local governments can increase their influence and importance in society. Ankara's success in this regard can serve as a model for other municipalities and help to draw a common roadmap.

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