

Internal displacement and gendered economic strategies in Turkey

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Between 1984 and 1999 continuous low-intensity conflict between Turkish security forces and Kurdish insurgents in south-east Turkey led to the evacuation of around 3,500 Kurdish villages and produced one of the world's largest IDP populations – estimated by NGOs at around three million.

Can Kurdish IDPs return from the cities to which they fled? What strategies are needed to help displaced Kurds resume disrupted livelihoods? How can Kurdish women be empowered to play a major role in reconstruction?

Internal displacement in Turkey took place as a result of:

- revenge attacks from security forces attacked by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)
- flight born of fear of attack by the security forces or PKK
- forcible evacuation for reasons of 'military security'
- villagers escaping pressure to join pro-government village guards
- abuses of power by village guards using violence to settle old disputes
- state-imposed embargoes on delivery of food and medicine
- military closure of areas needed for grazing

IDPs have neither received compensation, been allowed to return to their villages nor been given the choice of settling in a new locality of their own choosing. Given the discrimination they face, only some 20% of IDPs have thought it worth taking formal legal steps against injustices suffered and a mere 0.2% have won a ruling in their favour. The majority of IDPs – facing problems of chronic unemployment, health, nutrition, shelter, safety, discrimination, police harassment and denial of access to public services – would like to leave urban shanties and return to their villages. However, the structural reasons leading to displace-

ment remain in place. The Turkish state is still unable to develop a democratic political response to the Kurdish issue.

Current efforts to address the Kurdish IDP problem are not meeting with success. Focused on the integration of IDPs into local economies, resettlement in model villages and the development of a modern agro-industry in Kurdish populated areas, they are derived from the dominant modernisation paradigm which views the economy in Kurdish-populated regions as characterised by rural backwardness. Conventional plans ignore gender issues and the multifaceted survival strategies employed by displaced Kurdish women before and after their flight. They can offer little more than a limited range of low-paying jobs for a skilled population who instead deserve the chance to use their capacities to become economic actors in their own development. IDPs will continue to constitute a cheap, unskilled labour force for the urban informal sector.

The centre-piece of state-led development plans is the massive Southeast Anatolian Project (GAP) to construct a series of hydroelectric dams and to open new areas for irrigation, thus supposedly encouraging the cultivation of high value, globally marketable products. GAP is controversial. The scheme has embarked on a few pilot projects to assist those newly displaced by dam construction but is completely ignoring the needs of the far greater number of local people previously displaced by conflict and discriminatory policies. GAP has led



to the loss of productive fertile land and forests. The project only pays lip service to participatory rhetoric. Forced migration will continue to recur in Turkey, and cannot be reversed, until there is a decisive shift away from the authoritarian and militarist system (that finds its articulation in the 1980 constitution), the systematic ethnic discrimination practised by the security courts, draconian emergency laws, unpunished abuses of human rights and denial of the right of democratic organisation.

A participatory research project we are developing – working with IDPs in a number of urban settings – aims to make a modest contribution to political and economic democracy in

Turkey. We want to get away from narratives and practices based on powerlessness, to give IDPs in Turkey an economic voice by repositioning them as skilled economic actors operating within the context of dynamic community economies, to document their gendered capabilities and to

actively involve them in the process of developing emancipatory economic alternatives at the local level.

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