e-ISSN: 2564-680X
Volume: 20 Issue: 1 Year: 2025 Pages: 210-233
https://doi.org/10.48145/gopsbad.1606979
Submitted: 24.12.2024 | Accepted: 14.04.2025

TOKAT GAZİOSMANPAŞA ÜNİVERSİTESİ

SOSYAL BİLİMLER ARAŞTIRMALARI DERGİSİ
THE JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Evaluation Of Development Agencies in Türkiye From a Governance Perspective: Discussions on Their Structural and Functional Problems

Adnan KARATAŞ[1]

ABSTRACT

The transformations observed in the field of public administration in the context of globalization have contributed to the emergence of similar and standardized institutional structures across many countries. As a manifestation of this global shift, development agencies have been introduced in Türkiye as one of the policy instruments strongly recommended by the European Union for candidate countries. Despite lacking a clearly defined position within the traditional public administration framework, these agencies have been incorporated into the administrative structure with the aim of advancing development objectives.

This study seeks to analyze the development agencies operating in Türkiye since 2006, focusing on their structural and functional dimensions within the context of governance principles. The primary research question addresses the extent to which these agencies function in alignment with key governance principles—namely participation, transparency, accountability, efficiency, and locality—and how their role is situated within the broader public administration paradigm in Türkiye.

The methodological approach employed in this study involves content analysis of the agencies' official reports and the activities they have undertaken. This analysis evaluates the nature of the agencies' engagement with local dynamics, the balance maintained between centralized authority and local actor involvement, and the influence of these agencies on policy-making processes. Furthermore, the study examines criticisms related to funding mechanisms, human resource policies, and implementation performance. Based on these evaluations, recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness and structural integrity of the current system.

Keywords: *Development Agencies, Governance, Criticisms, Suggestions*

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Türkiye'de Kalkınma Ajanslarının Yönetişim Perspektifinden Değerlendirilmesi: Yapısal ve İşlevsel Sorunları Üzerinden Tartışmalar

Adnan KARATAŞ[1]

ÖZ

Küreselleşme süreciyle birlikte kamu yönetimi alanında yaşanan dönüşümler, birçok ülkede benzer ve eş biçimli kurumların ortaya çıkmasına neden olmuştur. Bu dönüşümün bir yansıması olarak Türkiye'de de kalkınma ajansları, Avrupa Birliği'nin aday ülkeler için önerdiği zorunlu politika araçlarından biri olarak gündeme girmiştir. Her ne kadar geleneksel kamu yönetimi teşkilatı içinde net bir yere sahip olmasalar da kalkınma hedeflerine ulaşmak amacıyla idari yapıya entegre edilmişlerdir.

Bu çalışma, 2006 yılından itibaren Türkiye'de faaliyete geçen kalkınma ajanslarını yönetişim ilkeleri çerçevesinde yapısal ve işlevsel açıdan incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Temel araştırma sorusu, kalkınma ajanslarının yönetişim ilkelerine — katılımcılık, şeffaflık, hesap verebilirlik, etkinlik ve yerellik — ne ölçüde uygun çalıştığı ve bu yapıların Türkiye'deki kamu yönetimi anlayışı içindeki yerinin nasıl şekillendiğidir.

Yöntem olarak, ajansların hazırladığı raporlar ve yürüttükleri faaliyetler üzerine içerik analizi uygulanmıştır. Bu analiz aracılığıyla, kalkınma ajanslarının yerel dinamiklerle kurduğu ilişki, merkeziyetçi yapı ile yerel aktörlerin rolü arasındaki denge ve politika yapım süreçlerindeki etkileri değerlendirilmiştir. Ayrıca finansman yapıları, personel politikaları ve uygulama performanslarına yönelik eleştiriler ele alınarak, mevcut yapının iyileştirilmesine yönelik öneriler geliştirilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kalkınma Ajansları, Yönetişim, Eleştiriler, Öneriler*

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1. Introduction

The word "agency" is derived from the French term "agence" and is used in English as "agency" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2021). The Turkish Language Association (TDK) defines this word as "an organization engaged in the activity of gathering, disseminating, and distributing news to its members, a bureau providing services in this field, or a radio unit presenting news bulletins" (Türk Dil Kurumu [TDK], 2018). In the 9th Development Plan Regional Development Specialization Commission Report prepared by the State Planning Organization, development agencies are defined as "institutions designed to ensure regional development in line with the new regional development paradigm, where decisions and policies are taken and implemented with a participatory approach by the residents of the region, especially key actors and stakeholders, and focused on local governance and regional strategy development." In addition, these agencies have been described as "coordinator and catalyst structures that identify sectoral or general development problems, develop strategies for these problems, and provide support for plans and projects to achieve concrete results" (Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı [DPT], 2008).

Development is a concept that refers to the growth and progress that occur in the economic, social, and cultural areas of a region within a certain period and the improvement of the living standards of the society (Sevinç, 2011: 40). Regional development agencies are institutions that support societal development and contribute to this process. These agencies, which have a structure independent of the central authority, are new organizations established to ensure regional development within certain geographical boundaries. In this context, it can be said that the agencies aim to reduce economic, social, cultural, and environmental differences (Karaca, 2013: 1).

Although there are different definitions in the literature, regional development agencies are generally defined as "institutions that have an independent management structure from the central government, are established with the aim of improving and revitalizing the socio-economic conditions of a certain region, and finance their activities partially or completely with public resources" (Zengin, 2015: 99). According to the European Association of Regional Development Agencies (EURADA), development agencies are institutions that identify sectoral and general development problems, develop solutions and opportunities for these problems, and support projects to implement these solutions (Uzay, 2010: 6). These agencies are regional-level organizations supported by public resources to promote economic development, apart from local and regional public administration. In fact, they represent an imported understanding that has no roots in the Turkish public administration tradition (Avaner and Düzenli, 2023: 60). As an example of a type of policy transfer (Övgün, 2007), these development agencies are not part of the decentralized administration institutions in the classical public administration organization (Güler, 2009: 62).

The definition of regional development agencies can be expanded to include all the characteristics of these structures. Accordingly, development agencies can be defined as "semi-autonomous structures established to improve and revitalize the socio-economic conditions of a certain region, independent of the central government, and financed in whole or in part by public resources." In other words, development agencies are institutions that promote local economic development without being directly affiliated with the central government and local government structures, generally use "soft" policy tools, operate at the regional level, and are financed by public resources (Halkier, 2006: 17).

In line with this definition, development agencies are expected to meet the following basic conditions (Uzay, 2010: 6-7): Structural autonomy: They should be able to make regional decisions independently. Comprehensiveness and application orientation: Their objectives should be broad and comprehensive; these objectives should be translated into concrete, applicable projects. Unified and widespread application: They should address policies and practices with an integrated approach. Multiple policy instruments: They should be able to use various policy instruments effectively. Cooperation with local producers: They should encourage the contribution of local firms in the region to the development processes and develop strategic partnerships with these firms. Regional coordination: They should be able to coordinate their policies effectively with other regional institutions. Access to financial resources: They should have the financial resources necessary to achieve their objectives. Technical capacity: They should have strong and sufficient technical personnel. These qualities are critical for development agencies to be effective actors in regional development processes.

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was established in 1933 in the United States to mitigate the effects of the 1929 World Economic Depression and to develop the Tennessee Valley, one of the regions most severely impacted by the depression (Avaner, 2008: 244). Recognized as the world's first regional development agency, the TVA facilitated development in this rural region, encompassing eight states, through activities such as natural resource management, dam construction, agricultural improvement, and electricity production and distribution. During this period, the encouragement of industrial investments and tourism transformed the region from being a source of emigration to a destination for immigration (Erikli and Bayat, 2008).

Although the concept of development agencies originated in the United States, their proliferation was more pronounced in Europe, particularly due to the devastation caused by World War II and the need to address regional development disparities. Development agencies, established with the aim of reducing regional inequalities, achieved significant success in Western Europe. From the 1990s onwards, these agencies began to emerge in Central and Eastern European countries, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Eastern Bloc countries sought to promote capital accumulation and reduce development disparities (Çalı, 2011).

Türkiye's first substantive engagement with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) began at the Helsinki Summit in 1999, when its candidacy for the European Union (EU) was formalized. As part of the Accession Partnership Document prepared by the EU Commission, the establishment of RDAs was included among Türkiye's medium-term objectives, prompting the initiation of legal and institutional studies to this end (Avaner, 2008; Berber and Çelepçi, 2005).

During this period, the EU's NUTS (Nomenclature of Statistical Territorial Units) system was adopted through the Council of Ministers' Decision No. 4720, dated 22 September 2002. This system introduced a three-tiered classification of statistical regional units to help Türkiye develop regional policies, conduct socio-economic analyses, and create a database aligned with EU standards: Level 3: Each of the 81 provinces was defined as a statistical regional unit. Level 2: 26 statistical regional units were created by grouping neighboring provinces. Level 1: 12 statistical regional units were formed by grouping the 26 Level 2 units.

Development agencies play a crucial role in supporting the economic, social, and cultural development of a region by fostering cooperation among the private sector, local governments, and civil society organizations within a defined geographical area. These agencies aim to enhance access to information and technology, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), by leveraging regional potential. With their governance-oriented structures, development agencies transfer public authority to legal entities where private sector and civil society organizations are represented (Özer, 2012: 41).

Regional development agencies facilitate the achievement of sustainable development goals by optimizing existing regional potential. In today's competitive environment, these agencies develop tools and methods for more effective resource utilization and serve as key actors in directing development processes. They also play significant roles in creating regional strategies in fields such as transportation, tourism, and culture, as well as in improving the quality of human resources (Engin, 2011: 72).

Despite the increasing importance and institutionalization of regional development agencies in Türkiye, questions remain regarding their governance, effectiveness, and integration into local decision-making processes. While these agencies were intended to operate autonomously and address regional disparities through inclusive and participatory mechanisms, criticisms have been raised about their financing models, personnel policies, and their ability to balance central authority with local agency. Moreover, concerns persist regarding whether these agencies effectively embody the principles of good governance—such as participation, accountability, transparency, and efficiency—in practice.

One of the most significant advantages of these agencies is their operational focus on regions where development plans are implemented. This enables them to analyze local problems closely and devise effective solutions. Additionally, their localized activities contribute to more efficient resource utilization, making development agencies indispensable components of local development processes (Polat and Özdemir-Yılmaz, 2014: 137).

This study examines development agencies in Türkiye, which have been operational since 2006, through the lens of governance principles. The structural and functional characteristics of these agencies are analyzed based on governance elements such as participation, transparency, accountability, effectiveness, and locality. Furthermore, the study explores the integration of development agencies into local dynamics, the balance between centralization tendencies and the role of local actors, and their impact on policymaking processes. Finally, the study addresses criticisms related to the financing structure, personnel policies, and implementation performance of these agencies and offers suggestions for improvement.

By critically evaluating the governance mechanisms and operational structure of Türkiye's RDAs, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on regional development and decentralized governance. The findings are expected to provide insights into the effectiveness of RDAs as tools of local development and offer practical recommendations for enhancing their impact. Furthermore, the study informs policymakers and stakeholders about the potential of RDAs to facilitate more inclusive, efficient, and responsive regional development strategies in line with both national priorities and global sustainable development goals.

This study aims to analyze the structure and function of regional development agencies in Türkiye through the lens of governance. Specifically, it seeks to: 1-Examine the extent to which RDAs operate according to the principles of governance, including transparency, accountability, participation, and locality. 2-Assess the balance between central government control and local stakeholder involvement. 3-Explore how RDAs integrate with local socio-economic dynamics and influence policy formulation and implementation. 4-Investigate common criticisms related to their funding, staffing, and performance, and propose recommendations for improvement.

2. Examination of Development Agencies in Türkiye From a Governance Perspective

Following the transformation of the State Planning Organization (DPT) into the Ministry of Development under Decree Law No. 641, Development Agencies were designated as relevant institutions affiliated with this ministry. According to Law No. 3046, which governs the establishment of ministries, relevant institutions include economic state enterprises, public economic institutions and their subsidiaries, partnerships and affiliates established by special laws or statutes, as well as institutions subject to the principle of decentralization in terms of service. Within this framework, Development Agencies are also categorized as institutions established by law and operating under the principle of service decentralization (Övgün, 2017: 30).

The Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye does not include explicit provisions regarding Development Agencies (Şinik, 2010). In other words, Development Agencies are not directly enumerated as institutions or organizations in the Constitution in terms of their legal personality. However, the multifaceted, dynamic, and evolving nature of the concept of development, along with the necessity for public support and guidance in private sector economic activities, has influenced the establishment of institutional frameworks aimed at fostering development (Tamer, 2008: 103).

In this context, Regional Development Agencies are public institutions designed to stimulate regional development by leveraging local potentials, as outlined in legal regulations. Rather than directly delivering services, these agencies play a facilitative role, supporting regional actors in implementing their own initiatives and promoting capital investments within the region (Övgün, 2017: 31).

Although Development Agencies possess legal personality, they cannot be classified as "regional administrations" within Türkiye's administrative structure. While they are empowered to achieve their designated objectives, they do not function in the same manner as provincial branches of the central government or regional units in federal systems. Development Agencies are regarded as unique entities that resist straightforward classification. Nevertheless, some researchers argue that these agencies may inadvertently reinforce centralization tendencies by limiting the autonomy of local governments (Keleş, 2010: 29). This critique has prompted discussions about the impact of Development Agencies on the dynamics between local and central governments.

Governance is characterized by a management process emphasizing mutual interaction and collaboration over hierarchical relationships and top-down control mechanisms between central structures and local units. It involves local and regional actors engaging in cooperative efforts (Ansell, 2000). This concept envisions a participatory management model in which administrative decision-making is not solely shaped by the state or central government but also includes local actors, the private sector, and civil society organizations. Governance seeks to make decision-making processes more inclusive by fostering harmony and coordination among diverse stakeholders, including those with differing or conflicting interests (Fulda et al., 2012).

Governance is distinguished by its reliance on multidirectional interactions rather than linear causality (Karataş, 2021). It emerges as a process shaped by the attitudes and behaviors of public institutions, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and individuals involved in management. Governance emphasizes a model where conflicting interests are reconciled through collaboration and compromise (Tortop et al., 2016: 561).

This approach has been proposed as an alternative to classical public administration, which often struggles with inefficiencies in service delivery. Governance leverages the knowledge, resources, and experiences of diverse actors to enhance the quality-of-service delivery. Consequently, it offers a more inclusive and effective management framework (Lockwood et al., 2010).

2.1. Evaluation of Agencies from the Perspective of Governance in Decision-Making and Executive Bodies

Regional development agencies employ a multi-stakeholder governance model designed to promote the participation of diverse actors—such as public institutions, private sector organizations, universities, and civil society organizations—in decision-making processes. This model aims to reduce intra-regional and inter-regional development disparities while ensuring the effective and efficient use of local resources. The approach is grounded in the activation of regional dynamics through cooperation and collective action (Şimşek, 2013: 16; Toksöz, 2008: 17).

The organizational structure of development agencies comprises four primary components: the development board, which supports cooperation among regional actors and serves as an advisory body; the board of directors, which acts as the primary decision-making mechanism; the general secretariat, responsible for implementation processes; and the investment support offices, operating at the provincial level. These components collectively aim to foster cooperation among public, private, and civil society sectors, as defined in Article 190 of Presidential Decree No. 4 (CBK No. 4, 2018).

2.1.1. The Development Board

This board functions as an advisory body contributing to the creation of a regional development vision, fostering collaboration, and guiding the agency's activities. Comprising representatives from public institutions, the private sector, civil society organizations, universities, and local governments, the board plays a pivotal role in shaping strategies for regional development by harnessing regional unity (Arslan, 2016: 35). The board's broad-based participation facilitates the representation of various sectors within the region, enabling a comprehensive analysis of regional challenges and the formulation of effective solutions. It collects data on regional strengths and weaknesses, presenting this information, along with proposed solutions, to the agency's board of directors. This process supplies critical input for the development of policies and enhances the effectiveness of regional development goals (Çelen, 2011: 137–138).

The development board embodies the core philosophy of development agencies, which is to unite the public sector, private sector, and civil society organizations to activate regional dynamics and contribute to economic and social development. As an institutionalized mechanism, the development board exemplifies this goal by facilitating cooperation and providing recommendations on regional development strategies. Its role is critical to the success of development agencies (Akpınar, 2017b: 303; Dura, 2007: 148).

However, while the development board's multi-stakeholder structure and high participation levels support effective governance, its advisory-only role significantly limits its influence. Moreover, the appointment of board members based on criteria determined by the central government undermines the governance mechanism, preventing it from achieving full functionality (Arslan, 2016: 36).

2.1.2. The Board of Directors

As the decision-making body, the board of directors oversees the management and administration of the agency, adhering to principles such as participation, inter-provincial cooperation, and equitable representation. In single-province regions, the board comprises the governor, metropolitan mayor, president of the chamber of industry, president of the chamber of commerce, the agency's secretary general, and three representatives from private sector or civil society organizations elected by the development board. These members serve a two-year term (CBK No. 4, 2018).

In multi-province regions, the board includes provincial governors, metropolitan mayors (or provincial center mayors in non-metropolitan provinces), presidents of provincial general councils, presidents of chambers of commerce and industry, and the agency's secretary general. In such cases, the governor chairs the board (CBK No. 4, 2018).

The board of directors, by involving local government and sectoral representatives such as governors, mayors, and chamber presidents, reflects a governance model similar to that of the development board. However, its effectiveness is constrained by several factors. Notably, many board decisions require approval from the Ministry of Industry and Technology, which limits the board's capacity for swift and flexible decision-making. This dependency also weakens accountability, often relegating the board to an intermediary role with limited authority. This situation underscores the need to restructure the board of directors into a more autonomous and effective decision-making body, directly accountable for its decisions (Akpınar, 2017a; Arslan, 2016).

Additionally, the limited representation of development board-origin members on the board of directors, coupled with the dominance of public-sector representatives, undermines governance principles. This imbalance may weaken checks-and-balances mechanisms and hinder the advancement of governance practices within the agency (Arslan, 2023: 36; Arslan, 2021: 835).

2.2. The Role of Development Agencies Between the Central Government and Local Dynamics

The administrative autonomy of development agencies is closely linked to their relationship with the political structure and the central government. A strong centralized governance system often restricts the authority of local and regional development agencies, as the central government is reluctant to delegate powers to these entities (Kutlu and Görün, 2016). These dynamic transforms development agencies into organizations operating under the direction and control of the central government, thereby significantly diminishing their autonomy. The close association between development agencies and the central government reinforces their positioning as extensions of the central administration. For instance, the governor serving as the chairperson of the board of directors, the governor determining the institutions represented on the development board, and the predominance of public administration representatives—such as the governor, mayor, and provincial council members—on these boards illustrate the centralized influence over the agencies (DPT, 2000: 118).

Development agencies are intended to weaken centralized governance and strengthen local autonomy by adopting a participatory approach to regional development. These agencies are designed to empower local and regional government units administratively in their interactions with the central administration as part of broader localization efforts. By collaborating with local stakeholders, development agencies aim to formulate strategies tailored to the unique characteristics of their respective regions. Their overarching purpose is to foster synergy between central and local governments in planning and implementing regional development initiatives. By incorporating the input of local governments into regional development plans, development agencies introduce a participatory dimension to central planning, enhancing the plans' relevance to regional needs and improving their feasibility (Türkoğlu, 2015).

The relationship between development agencies and local governments ensures that development plans are not prepared solely under the unilateral direction of the central government but instead reflect local dynamics. In this regard, development agencies act as coordinators, bridging central and local units to ensure that regional development plans benefit from both perspectives (Kutlu and Görün, 2016). This collaboration facilitates a more effective sharing of authority between central and local governments during both the preparation and implementation of regional development plans (Arslan and Çetiner, 2021).

3. Criticisms of the Structural and Functional Characteristics of Development Agencies

One of the most common criticisms of development agencies is the concern that the concept of "region" in their name has the potential to undermine Türkiye's unitary state structure. It has been argued that transferring authority from the central government to local governments through regional development agencies could strengthen local governments in a manner that threatens the unitary structure, potentially fostering regional separatist movements (Sobacı, 2000: 61). To address these concerns, the term "region" in the draft law was replaced with "development agencies" during the enactment process. This change was also incorporated into Law No. 5449 and retained in Presidential Decree No. 4 (Özmen, 2008: 336).

However, despite the passage of approximately 15 years since the establishment of development agencies, the claim that these agencies have increased regionalist tendencies in Türkiye appears to lack objectivity. The tension between preserving the country's unitary structure and the potential for development agencies to promote localization has led to biases against these agencies. Such biases are rooted in the belief that development agencies could weaken the central government and contribute to Türkiye's division (Özmen, 2008: 336).

Concerns about the excessive delegation of authority and power to local governments through Regional Development Agencies (RDAs)—potentially undermining Türkiye's unitary state structure, fostering national fragmentation, or even encouraging a transition to a federal state model—have been debated in Turkish public discourse for many years (Berber and Çelepçi, 2005: 154).

Unlike central government institutions, RDAs possess a semi-autonomous or autonomous structure, with their boards of directors shaped by the participation of local actors from the regions they serve. This structure often results in conflicts among local actors, creating various challenges in the management of RDAs. For example, while civil society organizations may advocate prioritizing social programs, chambers of commerce and industry often emphasize economic projects. These conflicts complicate the effective management of RDAs and can impede efficient development processes (Özmen, 2008: 337).

Another criticism of development agencies is that their establishment is perceived as being shaped by globalization and influenced by the interests of multinational corporations. Some argue that the European Union (EU) encouraged the establishment of these agencies to weaken national governments and promote the interests of local and regional actors over those of international entities (Kavruk, 2010). While it is true that Türkiye's development agencies emerged as a regional development tool under EU influence, they hold significant potential for fostering international integration if reorganized in alignment with the country's socio-economic structure and governance model.

The inability of Türkiye's development agencies to sufficiently benefit from EU regional investment funds makes it unlikely that they will eliminate regional disparities in the short term. This underscores the importance of sustaining the central government's investment and incentive policies to reduce regional inequalities (Berber and Çelepçi, 2005: 157).

A further criticism of development agencies is that they reinforce a centralized structure rather than promoting localization. While these agencies are expected to contribute to development processes by empowering local-level initiatives, their strong ties to the central government in Türkiye limit their autonomy. This dependency hinders the adoption of an effective governance model. For instance, the requirement for close coordination with the Ministry of Industry and Technology—regarding key decisions such as the selection of the general secretary, appointments, and budget approvals—reduces the agencies' autonomy and contradicts their intended governance approach (Dedeoğlu and Sertesen, 2011: 5).

The income of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) is influenced by the economic circumstances of the regions in which they operate; factors such as tax revenues and the size of chambers of commerce play a significant role in determining these incomes. However, despite the stated aim of addressing regional inequalities, the draft law does not explicitly prioritize allocating greater funds to less developed regions. Furthermore, the absence of clear regulations regarding the principles governing the use of funds by RDAs is considered a significant issue (Özmen, 2008: 338). RDAs established in regions with physical and social advantages are likely to benefit from superior resources, such as income, expertise, technical personnel, and political influence, thereby strengthening the structural advantages of these regions over time. This trend increases the appeal of already advantaged regions, leading to a concentration of investment in these areas. Consequently, investors are likely to exploit the benefits of investing in advantaged regions while avoiding disadvantaged ones. Those who do choose to invest in disadvantaged regions may struggle to compete with other regions, even when incentives are offered (Cankorkmaz, 2011: 127).

Audits conducted by the State Supervisory Board and the Court of Accounts, the primary institutions responsible for overseeing state development agencies, have identified numerous critical issues (Devlet Denetleme Kurulu [DDK], 2014: 775–799):

These findings highlight significant deficiencies in the effectiveness of regional development and the operational functionality of RDAs. These include the adoption of a uniform agency model for regions with diverse economic, social, cultural, and geographical characteristics, hierarchical dependence on the Ministry of Industry and Technology, and issues related to administrative oversight. Additional challenges, such as conflicts among regional actors, inadequate collaboration, and poor communication, are emphasized in the audit reports. Other notable shortcomings include the agencies' limited utilization of EU regional investment funds and governance-related weaknesses. Structural deficiencies in the management and development boards, inadequacies in legislative frameworks, weaknesses in financial structures, and the central government's administrative control over the agencies further hinder their effectiveness. Mistakes in regional delineation and difficulties in accessing reliable data also present substantial obstacles to effective regional development management.

Rather than reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies, the establishment of RDAs has, paradoxically, introduced new bureaucratic layers and ambiguities in the distribution of duties and authorities between RDAs and other institutions. Additional criticisms include weaknesses in regional planning processes and challenges in auditing the agencies, as highlighted in audit reports.

Criticisms directed at RDAs reveal significant constitutional, administrative, and functional shortcomings in their establishment and operation. These can be summarized as follows (Cankorkmaz, 2011: 128–129):

- RDAs lack compatibility with constitutional definitions, failing to conform to the categories of local, central, or special administration, resulting in an ambiguous structure.
- According to the constitution, the executive branch is authorized to legislate only in areas explicitly defined by law. Consequently, granting the Council of Ministers the authority to establish or dissolve RDAs may violate constitutional principles.
- Public agencies utilizing public resources are not defined as legal entities, creating a legal ambiguity.
- Governors, as Chairs of RDA Boards of Directors, could potentially direct funds to specific groups, undermining their role as impartial public servants.

- The adoption of the "follower state" model by RDAs may lead to interference in the jurisdictions of other public institutions.
- The legal framework lacks clarity regarding the principles and policies governing the use of RDA funds, including public resources and EU aid.
- The allocation of tax revenues from the central budget does not adequately consider criteria such as regional development levels.
- The administrative structure of RDAs, which involves public power and resources, remains outside the scope of public audits.
- RDAs are not subject to the State Procurement Law, Public Procurement Law, or Public Financial Management and Control Law. Instead, their audits are conducted by independent external auditors rather than through comprehensive internal oversight or Court of Accounts audits.
- The intended reduction in bureaucracy has resulted in additional administrative layers, conflicts among provinces and regions, and the establishment of new administrative and spending units.
- RDA management boards fail to align with the structure of economic and social councils. For example, in regions where agriculture is predominant, key stakeholders such as the Chamber of Agriculture, Commodity Exchange, or Chamber of Agricultural Engineers are often excluded.
- The proposed closure of the GAP Regional Development Administration raises uncertainties regarding the continuation of GAP-related services and resource allocation for regional investments.

These criticisms underscore the need for significant structural and functional reforms to enhance the effectiveness of RDAs. Clearer legal frameworks and well-defined operational guidelines are essential to address the shortcomings and ensure these agencies fulfill their intended roles effectively.

The criticisms outlined above and the institutional challenges faced by development agencies can be categorized under the following headings:

1. Failure to Achieve Regional Development Goals: Although the primary aim of establishing development agencies is to reduce disparities between regions, achieving this goal has proven challenging in practice. Insufficient allocation of funds and resources, particularly to less developed regions, has been highlighted as a critical issue (Cankorkmaz, 2011: 127).

2. Management and Coordination Problems: The management structure of development agencies relies on the participation of local actors. However, a lack of coordination and conflicts of interest among these actors hinder the agencies' ability to function effectively (Özmen, 2008: 337). Furthermore, inconsistencies between national development plans and local agency strategies often result in resource misallocation and reduced progress toward development targets.

3. Centralization and Autonomy Discussions: Although development agencies are intended to operate independently of the central government, the oversight of central institutions, such as the State Planning Organization (DPT), restricts their autonomy (Övgün, 2017: 31). This limitation prevents agencies from developing innovative and tailored solutions to address local needs.

4. Inadequacy of Financial Resources: The financial resources of development agencies are heavily influenced by the economic conditions of their respective regions. Developed regions, benefiting from stronger economies, have access to greater resources, whereas underdeveloped regions face significant disadvantages. Additionally, the lack of transparency in the allocation and utilization of funds has drawn substantial criticism (Arslan, 2016: 45; Cankorkmaz, 2011: 127).

5. Political Interventions: Although development agencies are intended to contribute impartially to local development policies, their effectiveness is often undermined by political interference. Concerns have been raised about the risk of agencies being perceived as politically motivated employment hubs, resulting in inefficiencies and bureaucratic inertia (Gençyürek, 2006).

6. Lack of Participation from Public and Local Actors: The absence of representation from key sectors—such as agriculture—within agency management reduces the alignment of agency decisions with local realities (Başak, 2006: 60). Limited involvement of local communities and the private sector in decision-making processes exacerbates the misalignment between development goals and regional needs.

7. Incompatibility with European Union Policies: Development agencies' inability to effectively utilize the European Union's regional development funds diminishes their potential to address regional disparities (Berber and Çelepçi, 2005: 157).

These challenges hinder the efficient operation of development agencies and significantly impede their capacity to achieve regional development objectives. To address these issues, reforms are needed that prioritize sensitivity to local needs, equitable resource distribution, and the prevention of political interference. Such measures are essential to enhance the effectiveness of development agencies and ensure their alignment with their intended goals.

4. Structural and Functional Suggestions for Development Agencies

Development agencies are strategically significant institutions that contribute to the economic, social, and cultural development of specific regions. They achieve this by facilitating coordination among the private sector, local governments, and civil society organizations. Furthermore, these agencies aim to enhance the accessibility of technology and information resources for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), thereby supporting their growth and development. Through their governance-oriented structures, development agencies effectively leverage public authority via legal entities that represent private sector and civil society organizations (Özer, 2012: 41).

Regional development agencies hold a pivotal role in contemporary regional development processes, serving as key actors in fostering sustainable growth. They support strategic planning and management processes by employing various tools to maximize regional potential. In the increasingly competitive global environment, these agencies perform critical functions, such as activating economic potential and identifying opportunities for development. They develop regional strategies in diverse areas, including transportation, culture, and tourism, with a particular focus on achieving sustainable development goals. In addition, they formulate policies to enhance human resources and implement actions to achieve these objectives (Engin, 2011: 72).

A distinctive feature of development agencies is their ability to directly implement development plans within their respective regions. This capacity enables them to analyze regional challenges effectively and propose tailored solutions to meet local needs. Operating at the local level enhances their ability to ensure that resources are utilized efficiently, making them an indispensable element of regional development efforts (Polat and Özdemir-Yılmaz, 2014: 137).

Despite facing various criticisms and challenges, development agencies in Türkiye continue to operate with high expectations. Their fundamental functions are centered on fostering local development and activating regional dynamics. These functions can be summarized as follows (Zengin, 2015: 186–187):

a) Facilitating the effective mobilization of local resources and their efficient use by promoting collaboration among local actors and stakeholders.

b) Serving as coordinators, organizers, and catalysts among organizations operating in the region and local actors.

c) Enhancing planning, project development, and implementation capacities at the local level.

d) Providing strategic contributions by fostering competition and development awareness at regional and local levels.

e) Strengthening integration into local, national, and global markets through support for SMEs and local entrepreneurs.

f) Encouraging entrepreneurial initiatives in regions facing developmental challenges to stimulate economic growth.

g) Ensuring that regional plans and programs are realistic and actionable.

h) Coordinating regional programs supported by the European Union's pre-accession grants at the local level.

These functions underscore the strategic importance of development agencies not only for local and regional dynamics but also for national and international development processes.

To enhance the effectiveness and success of development agencies, several critical factors must be addressed (Uzay, 2010: 19). These factors are integral to improving agency performance and achieving regional development goals. First and foremost, clearly defining the goals and responsibilities of agencies is essential. Additionally, securing adequate financial resources, ensuring a sufficient regional population size, and maintaining a qualified workforce significantly enhance the potential for success.

Collaboration between central and local governments, alignment with local actors in formulating regional development strategies, and the adoption of shared objectives are crucial for achieving effective outcomes. Moreover, evaluating local entrepreneurial potential, fostering cooperation with entrepreneurs, and considering the unique sectoral composition of regions are critical for adapting agency activities to regional needs.

Finally, the ability to devise practical solutions is essential for the effective operation of development agencies. This necessitates establishing strong relationships with local actors, actively involving them in development processes, and making concerted efforts to achieve regional development objectives. By addressing these factors comprehensively, development agencies can ensure their contributions to regional development are both tangible and sustainable.

4.1. Recommendations for Ensuring More Active Participation of Local Stakeholders

The effective involvement of local stakeholders in the management processes of development agencies in Türkiye is crucial for achieving regional development goals. Strengthening this participation can be achieved through a combination of strategies aimed at improving both the institutional structure and operational practices of these agencies.

1. Integration of Local Stakeholders into Decision-Making Processes: To ensure active participation, local stakeholders must be directly involved in the decision-making processes of development agencies. This can be achieved by increasing the representation of local government officials, civil society organizations, and private sector representatives on agency boards. Additionally, regular consultation mechanisms, such as periodic meetings or advisory committees, should be established to gather feedback and input from local stakeholders.

2. Transparency and Accountability: Promoting transparency is essential to building trust and fostering participation among local stakeholders. Development agencies should ensure that their activities, budgets, and strategic plans are shared with the local community in an accessible and comprehensible manner. By providing opportunities for stakeholders to monitor activities and offer constructive feedback, agencies can enhance accountability and stakeholder engagement.

3. Training and Capacity-Building Programs: Local stakeholders often require knowledge and skills to effectively participate in the management processes of development agencies. To address this, tailored training and capacity-building programs should be organized. These initiatives will help local actors better understand the operational areas, funding mechanisms, and project management processes of development agencies, empowering them to contribute meaningfully.

4. Identifying Local Needs: Development agencies must prioritize understanding and addressing local needs. Regular surveys, forums, and workshops should be conducted to gather input from local stakeholders. The insights and perspectives gained through these activities should serve as critical inputs for shaping regional strategies and development plans, ensuring they align with the specific needs and aspirations of the community.

5. Supporting Local Initiatives: Encouraging and supporting local initiatives is a key step toward increasing stakeholder engagement. Development agencies should provide financial and technical support to local entrepreneurs, small businesses, and cooperatives. By fostering closer collaboration with these groups, agencies can build stronger relationships and stimulate local economic activity.

6. Leveraging Technological Infrastructure and Digital Platforms: Technological advancements can be harnessed to create digital platforms that facilitate stakeholder participation. These platforms can serve as interactive spaces where local stakeholders can submit suggestions, raise concerns, and access up-to-date information about ongoing development projects. By leveraging technology, agencies can streamline communication, ensure accessibility, and enhance stakeholder engagement.

Implementing these measures will enable development agencies to foster stronger collaborations with local stakeholders, making regional development initiatives more inclusive and sustainable. By ensuring that local actors are actively involved in decision-making, equipped with the necessary resources and knowledge, and supported through transparent and accessible mechanisms, development agencies can more effectively achieve their regional development objectives.

4.2. Recommendations for Organizing Relations with the Central and Local Governments

For development agencies in Türkiye to operate more effectively, it is essential to establish well-organized and efficient relations between the central government and local governments. The following strategies are proposed to ensure a harmonious and productive relationship:

1. Strengthening Coordination and Cooperation Mechanisms: Regularly organized joint meetings, workshops, and seminars can enhance coordination between the central and local governments. These platforms provide opportunities for both parties to stay informed about the activities of development agencies and regional needs. Moreover, they allow local governments to communicate their priorities and challenges directly to the central authorities, fostering mutual understanding.

2. Ensuring Two-Way Information Flow: Maintaining regular, two-way communication between the central government and local governments is crucial. The central government can share national strategies and policies with local authorities to align development plans, while local governments can provide insights on regional needs, opportunities, and challenges. This exchange will enable development agencies to design and implement more effective projects.

3. Increasing Participation of Local Governments: Local governments should play a more active role in the management processes of development agencies. The central government can encourage this by promoting local government representation on agency boards of directors. Such involvement ensures that local needs are better understood and that the demands of the local population are more accurately reflected in agency activities.

4. Inclusive and Flexible Project Design: Development agencies should adopt flexible approaches that align with both national strategies and the specific needs of local governments. While the central government outlines overarching regional development goals, project designs should incorporate regional particularities. This balance will ensure alignment between national objectives and localized priorities, promoting effective outcomes.

5. Local Capacity Development and Training: Capacity-building programs are essential for empowering local governments to engage effectively with development agencies. The central government should provide training and consultancy services focused on fund utilization, project management, and strategic planning. Strengthening local capacities will enable governments to collaborate more independently and effectively with development agencies.

6. Strengthening Digital Infrastructure and Communication Channels: Digital platforms can facilitate smoother interactions between the central and local governments. These platforms should enable local governments to monitor development agency activities, access relevant data, and provide feedback efficiently. Enhanced digital communication will improve transparency, coordination, and project oversight.

7. Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Processes: Monitoring and evaluation of development agency activities should be a collaborative effort between the central and local governments. Regular joint assessments can identify areas of success and opportunities for improvement. This collaborative approach ensures that projects are aligned with both local and national goals and that adjustments are made as needed.

8. Supporting Local Initiatives: To encourage greater local involvement, the central government should support initiatives proposed by local governments and actors. Flexibility in resource allocation for locally driven projects will empower local governments to address specific regional challenges effectively. This support will strengthen the role of local governments in driving regional development.

By fostering stronger cooperation between the central and local governments, these strategies can significantly enhance the effectiveness of development agencies. A well-coordinated relationship ensures that agencies operate in a manner that is both locally responsive and nationally strategic, leading to more sustainable and impactful regional development outcomes.

4.3. Recommendations for Increasing the Financial Capacity of Development Agencies

Strengthening the financial capacity of development agencies is crucial for achieving regional development goals and implementing impactful projects. Below are strategies aimed at ensuring financial sustainability and enhancing the effectiveness of these agencies:

1. Increasing Budget Allocations: Securing increased allocations from the state budget is a critical step in bolstering the financial resources of development agencies. By prioritizing agencies that actively support regional development, the central government can ensure that these resources are effectively utilized in local development projects.

2. Promoting Cooperation with the Private Sector: Development agencies can diversify their financial resources by establishing strategic partnerships with private sector entities. Collaborations with local and national enterprises not only provide additional funding but also promote regional development through social responsibility initiatives. Such partnerships can increase the private sector's investment in development projects while offering promotional and branding opportunities.

3. Accessing National and International Funds: Agencies should actively seek grants and loans from national and international organizations, such as the European Union, United Nations, and World Bank. Facilitating awareness and guiding local governments in applying for project-based funds can enhance their capacity to secure financial support.

4. Strengthening Fund Management Capacity: Robust financial monitoring and reporting systems are essential to ensure the efficient and transparent use of resources. Development agencies must build their fund management capacity to gain trust from local governments, international donors, and private sector partners.

5. Developing New Revenue Models: To diversify their income streams, development agencies can introduce innovative revenue models. These might include offering consultancy, training, and project management services or initiating social entrepreneurship projects. Such initiatives can generate income that is reinvested in further development activities.

6. Leveraging Local Resources: Agencies can capitalize on local resources—such as natural assets, cultural heritage, and unique regional products—to generate income. By focusing on sectors like tourism, agriculture, and innovation, agencies can mobilize local potential and create self-sustaining revenue streams.

7. Introducing Tax Incentives: The central government can implement tax reductions or incentives for businesses and entrepreneurs involved in development agency-supported projects. These measures not only attract investment but also encourage greater participation in regional development initiatives.

8. Utilizing Social Investment Funds: Social investment funds provide an avenue for financing long-term, sustainable development projects. Development agencies can engage with investors who prioritize social impact, using these funds to support projects with significant community benefits.

9. Engaging with Social and Cultural Investors: Collaboration with social and cultural investors can expand the financial base of development agencies. Corporations involved in social responsibility projects can partner with agencies, contributing resources to projects that align with their corporate values and objectives.

10. Implementing Hybrid Financing Models: Hybrid financing models, such as public-private partnerships (PPP), can significantly enhance financial capacity. These models combine public resources with private sector investments, enabling the execution of large-scale development projects. Additionally, joint financing arrangements between local governments and agencies can foster collaborative approaches to funding.

By adopting these strategies, development agencies can strengthen their financial capacity, enabling them to undertake larger and more impactful projects. These measures will not only ensure the sustainability of regional development efforts but also increase the agencies' ability to address local needs and foster long-term economic growth.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the role of development agencies within the Turkish Public Administration framework, emphasizing their underlying philosophy and regional focus. By nature, these agencies aim to advance regional development rather than national growth in its entirety, relying on localized decision-making and the active involvement of local actors. As institutions shaped by modern governance approaches such as new public management, they are grounded in principles like participation, decentralization, and subsidiarity.

Despite their theoretical promise, the practical performance of development agencies often deviates from these foundational principles. Criticisms have emerged regarding their alignment with governance ideals, suggesting that, in practice, they fall short of their intended participatory and decentralized nature (Karataş, 2019). This disconnect necessitates a reevaluation and restructuring of these institutions to align their operations with their theoretical underpinnings and improve their efficiency and effectiveness (Karataş, 2020).

Audit reports from institutions like the Court of Accounts reveal that development agencies often act as financiers for activities unrelated to genuine regional development. This diversion underscores the need for substantial structural and functional reforms. The recommendations provided in this study aim to enhance the governance and operational efficiency of development agencies, enabling them to better address regional needs and foster sustainable development (Akbaş, 2015; Özhan & Keser, 2021; Sobacı, 2008).

In addition to these recommendations, establishing development agencies with specialized functional purposes, rather than adhering strictly to statistical region classifications, could prove beneficial. Such purpose-driven agencies would focus on delivering targeted services and addressing specific regional challenges more effectively (Arslan, 2016).

Given the importance of economic development in Türkiye, technical and financial reforms are imperative to strengthen these institutions and mitigate their criticized shortcomings. By prioritizing their participatory approach, enhancing accountability, and refocusing on their core mission, development agencies can transition from being mere financial supporters to proactive leaders in regional growth. Their role in attracting foreign investments and pioneering impactful projects will be crucial in achieving sustainable development goals and reinforcing their relevance in Türkiye's public administration landscape.

While this study addresses the structural and functional challenges faced by development agencies in Türkiye within the framework of governance principles, several promising avenues for future research emerge. Firstly, empirical and quantitative investigations aimed at measuring the impact of development agencies could offer more robust and evidence-based assessments for policymakers. Moreover, comparative analyses of agency performance across different regions may illuminate the underlying causes of regional disparities and identify the key determinants of success. Field-based research exploring the interactions between local actors and development agencies would facilitate a more nuanced understanding of participation and transparency levels. Additionally, cross-national comparative studies involving similar institutional structures in other countries could yield valuable insights into best practices in governance. Finally, examining the integration of development agencies with European Union funding mechanisms, as well as their alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, may enhance the international effectiveness and legitimacy of these institutions.

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