

From Faith to Prosperity: The Relationship Between Increasing Secularisation in Türkiye and Sustainable Development Goals*

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ABSTRACT

Secularisation, a multidimensional process that refers to the transformation of religion's position in the social, political and cultural spheres of modern societies, has long been debated in sociological literature. In this context, data from the sixth wave (2010–2014) and seventh wave (2017–2022) of the World Values Survey (WVS) are examined. The Inglehart–Welzel culture map created with these data evaluates secularisation within the framework of the traditional–secular-rational (vertical) and survival–self-expression (horizontal) axes. The findings show that Türkiye experienced a significant shift towards secular-rational values on the vertical axis between WVS 6 and WVS 7; however, no significant transformation occurred in terms of self-expression values on the horizontal axis. The study discusses the findings obtained by Inglehart–Welzel in a relational framework with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) “People” dimension, namely SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) within a relational framework. Accordingly, the increase in secularisation in Türkiye in the first quarter of the 21st century appears to follow a trajectory that coincides with indicators related to the human dimension of sustainable development.

Keywords: Secularisation in Türkiye, World Values Survey, Sustainable Development Goals.

Received / Accepted: 01 February 2026 / 18 April 2026

Citation: Garan, Ö. (2026). From Faith to Prosperity: The Relationship Between Increasing Secularisation in Türkiye and Sustainable Development Goals, *İmgelem*, 19, 374-402.

İnançtan Refaha: Türkiye’de Artan Sekülerleşme ile Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Amaçları Arasındaki İlişki

ÖZ

Modern toplumların sosyal, siyasi ve kültürel alanlarında dinin konumunun dönüşümünü ifade eden çok boyutlu bir süreç olan sekülerleşme, sosyoloji literatüründe uzun süredir tartışılmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, Dünya Değerler Araştırması'nın (WVS) altıncı dalgası (2010–2014) ve yedinci dalgası (2017–2022) verileri incelenmiştir. Bu verilerle oluşturulan Inglehart–Welzel kültür haritası, sekülerleşmeyi geleneksel-seküler-rasyonel (dikey) ve hayatta kalma–kendini ifade etme (yatay) eksenleri çerçevesinde değerlendirmektedir. Bulgular, Türkiye'nin WVS 6 ile WVS 7 arasında dikey ekseninde seküler-rasyonel değerlere doğru önemli bir kayma yaşadığını göstermektedir; ancak yatay ekseninde kendini ifade etme değerleri açısından önemli bir dönüşüm gerçekleşmemiştir. Çalışma, Inglehart–Welzel tarafından elde edilen bulguları, Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Amaçları'nın (SKA) “İnsan” boyutu, yani SKA 1 (Yoksulluğa Son), SKA 2 (Açlığa Son), SKA 3 (Sağlık ve Kaliteli Yaşam), SKA 4 (Nitelikli Eğitim) ve SKA 5 (Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği) ile ilişkisel bir çerçeve içinde ele almaktadır. Buna göre, 21. yüzyılın ilk çeyreğinde Türkiye’de sekülerleşmedeki artış, sürdürülebilir kalkınmanın insan boyutuyla ilgili göstergelerle örtüşen bir yörünge izliyor görünmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye’de Sekülerleşme, Dünya Değerler Araştırması, Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Amaçları.

*Bu araştırma makalesinin verileri anket veya mülakat teknikleri kullanılarak elde edilmediğinden etik kurul izni gerekmemiştir. / In this research article, ethics committee permission was not required as the data were not obtained using survey or interview techniques.

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Başvuru / Kabul: 01 Şubat 2026 / 18 Nisan 2026

Atıf: Garan, Ö. (2026). İnançtan Refaha: Türkiye’de Artan Sekülerleşme ile Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Amaçları Arasındaki İlişki, *İmgelem*, 19, 374-402.

INTRODUCTION

Secularisation is a multidimensional process at the heart of modern social transformations, signifying the redefinition of religion’s position in social, political and cultural spheres. In its broadest sense, it is the process whereby the social prestige and influence of the “supernatural realm” (religions, folk beliefs, magic, etc.) that prevails in a given society and time period undergo a relative decline; furthermore, classical secularisation theory, pioneered by thinkers such as Max Weber and Bryan Wilson, establishes a non-coincidental link between the process of modernisation and the decline of supernatural beliefs (Ertit, 2024). According to this theory, modernisation dynamics such as industrialisation, urbanisation, rationalisation and increased education weaken the authority of religious institutions over public and private life and trigger a process of “differentiation” in which social spheres become autonomous from religion (Awass, 2023). This situation necessitates that secularisation be considered not only in terms of changes at the level of individual beliefs, but also in conjunction with institutional structures, public regulations, and cultural value systems.

The relationship between socio-economic development and secularisation is also explained by the “existential security” theory. According to Norris and Inglehart, as levels of education, health and welfare rise, individuals feel more secure, thereby reducing the demand for religious solace (Blanton, 2025). In the case of Türkiye, the state’s consolidation of its roles in areas such as education and the law, and the replacement of religious structures by secular institutions, has strengthened rational-legal authority (Ertit, 2024). Furthermore, increased purchasing power driven by economic growth is directing individuals towards consumption-oriented and secular leisure activities rather than religious practices, leading to the transformation of traditional value systems through ‘value inversion’ (Ertit, 2024).

Türkiye constitutes a unique case for observing this multidimensional transformation within the context of secularisation debates. The transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic brought with it a modernisation process in which the principle of secularism was rapidly established at the institutional level, and the legal system, education and public sphere were reorganised by the state. However, religious practices, identities and value systems at the social level did not always adapt to this institutional transformation in a synchronised manner. This situation has led to secularisation in Türkiye taking on an asymmetrical character,

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progressing through regional, class and cultural differences rather than being homogeneous. Therefore, secularisation in Türkiye is considered a case that both tests classical secularisation theses and informs contemporary approaches.

Secularisation trends in Türkiye are directly linked not only to the visibility of religious symbols in the public sphere but also to the rationalisation of society and improvements in indicators of human development (Dhima & Golder, 2021). Modernity lays the cultural foundations for sustainable development by promoting individual autonomy, gender equality and democratic values (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). This study aims to analyse the trajectory of secularisation in Türkiye in the 2000s within a relational framework that connects cultural value change and human development indicators. More specifically, it asks the following research question: To what extent can the observed shift towards secular-rational values in Türkiye be interpreted in relation to the indicators of the “People” dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive comparative approach based on secondary data derived from the sixth (2010–2014) and seventh (2017–2022) waves of the World Values Survey (WVS). These data are analysed through the Inglehart–Welzel cultural map, focusing on changes along the traditional–secular-rational and survival–self-expression axes. In addition, selected SDG indicators -namely SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality)- are incorporated into the analysis to provide a broader socio-economic context.

The main contribution of this study is twofold. First, it offers a conceptual bridge between secularisation period and sustainable development literature by examining how shifts in cultural values relate to human development indicators. Second, it contributes to the literature on secularisation in Türkiye by proposing the notion of “asymmetric secularisation”, highlighting the divergence between institutional-cognitive transformations and the limited development of self-expression values. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the conceptual and theoretical framework of secularisation. This is followed by a discussion of the Turkish context and the methodological approach. The findings section analyses the relationship between secularisation trends and SDG indicators. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections evaluate the implications of the findings within the broader debates on secularisation and development.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of secularisation is etymologically based on the Latin term *saeculum*; this term carried the meanings of “worldly” or “belonging to time/era” in Medieval Latin (Taylor, 2007, p. 21). In the social sciences, secularisation, in its most basic form, is a multi-layered conceptual framework that refers to the process of the decline or transformation of religion’s influence on social institutions, collective identities and individual practices (Berger, 1967, p. 113). The development of the concept in sociological literature is closely linked to the emergence of Enlightenment thought and modernisation theories. The modern conception of society, built on themes such as reason, science, progress, and individual emancipation, has gradually repositioned the role of religious authority as a constituent element of social order.

The classical sociological tradition has approached secularisation from different angles. Comte’s positivist line presented a linear model of progress, predicting that religion would give way to science in modern societies (Comte, 1974), while Marx argued that religion was a superstructural institution that reproduced social alienation and would lose its function with the dissolution of capitalist production relations (Marx, 1844/1975). In contrast, Durkheim emphasised that religion is not merely a metaphysical realm of belief but also provides a symbolic framework for social solidarity and collective consciousness; therefore, he stated that religion would not disappear entirely with modernisation but could continue its social functions in new forms (Durkheim, 1912/1995, pp. 44-47). Max Weber, on the other hand, approached the debate on secularisation through the concept of the “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*) of the modern world and argued that bureaucratic regulations based on rationality had replaced the religious-dogmatic worldview in modern society (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 506).

The common point of these classical approaches is that secularisation is considered to be causally and structurally related to modernisation. The design of modern society is shaped by processes such as the secularisation of law, the secularisation of education, the autonomy of science, the rationalisation of the economic sphere, and the institutional separation of state-religion relations. Thus, secularisation is conceptualised not merely as a decline in the social influence of religion, but as the functional autonomy of social spheres *vis-à-vis* one another (Bruce, 2011, p. 24). According to Parsons, contrary to the claims of theorists of secularisation, religion has not disappeared from society during the processes of modernisation and secularisation; on the contrary, there is continuity in the relationship between religion and modernisation and secular society (Karaşahin, 2024). In today’s secularisation, rather than a dichotomy between religion and the secular sphere, what is at stake is an approach and structure

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that transforms and reproduces the religious sphere in a way that is integral to itself, as seen in the concept of ‘godless Christianity’ or in new spiritual/energy movements (Yeşilmen, 2026).

Casanova (1994) notes that the concept of secularisation is used in the literature to denote three different processes: the institutional separation of religion from social subsystems, the decline in religious beliefs and practices, and the withdrawal of religion from the public to the private sphere. The structural-differentiation approach, which refers to the separation of social spheres, is based on the idea that in modern societies, functional subsystems (education, law, science, economics, etc.) become independent of religious references and begin to operate according to their own internal logic (Luhmann, 1982). According to this perspective, secularisation occurs through the differentiation of social spheres; religion is positioned from the centre to the periphery of the social system.

Cultural secularisation, on the other hand, focuses on the transformation of religious beliefs and practices at the individual level. Within this framework, as the authority of religion within institutional structures weakens, individuals’ religious affiliations take on a more personal, selective and flexible form. Thomas Luckmann (1967) states that “invisible religion” forms have emerged in modern societies, whereby individuals have developed personalised belief systems instead of institutional religion. Thus, secularisation is reinterpreted not as the disappearance of religion, but as its displacement and reshaping.

Political-institutional secularisation, on the other hand, concerns the state’s autonomy from religious norms, the independence of citizenship rights from religious affiliation, and the principle of secularism becoming the fundamental principle governing the political sphere. Models of secularism vary across different national contexts: the French understanding of *laïcité* is based on a strict separation of the public sphere, while the Anglo-Saxon model offers a more pluralistic and flexible framework (Casanova, 1994). Criticisms of mainstream secularisation theory focus on three points: (1) The theory’s assumption that religion will inevitably decline in modern society is not always confirmed by empirical data (Berger, 1999). (2) The universalist view that secularisation applies to all societies disregards cultural and historical diversity (Asad, 2003). (3) The theory’s reading of modernisation as a linear, forward-backward process conflicts with the multi-centred and fragile structures of contemporary societies (Eisenstadt, 2000). These criticisms led to the emergence of the concept of the post-secular society. Habermas (2008) argues that religion has not been completely pushed out of the public sphere in modern societies; on the contrary, it can play a public role on the basis of

rational communication and democratic deliberation. This perspective suggests rethinking the religion–secularism relationship not as a zero-sum power struggle, but through an ethic of mutual recognition.

The relationship between secularisation and the economy can be examined particularly in the context of capitalist modernisation and market rationality. In *The Protestant Ethic* (1905), Weber argued that a worldly success, discipline and rationality-focused understanding of life nourished the spirit of capitalism, and he assessed secularisation as both a cause and a consequence of economic transformation. Capitalist production relations brought about the independence of the economic sphere from religious norms and its organisation on the basis of rational pragmatism. Consumer culture, meanwhile, accelerates the privatisation of religiosity by leading to the construction of individual identities through symbolic values produced in the market (Bauman, 2007). In his article, in which Jörg Hausteine outlines the broad contours of the long history of international development, he argues that academia must move beyond simplistic assessments of the presence or absence of religion in development discourse; instead, he emphasises that development ideology tends to follow narratives concerning progress and values that are closely linked to global discourses on religion and secularism (Hausteine, 2021).

In modern consumer societies, some of the symbolic frameworks previously provided by religion, such as happiness, meaning, and belonging, are being reproduced through the market; this situation shifts the cultural dimension of secularisation onto an economic ground. Furthermore, secularisation trends in economic policies are noteworthy. With the institutionalisation of the welfare state, functions traditionally associated with religious institutions, such as charity, mutual aid, and social solidarity, have been secularised and redefined within a secular context through state policies and market mechanisms (Esping-Andersen, 1990). This process can be interpreted not as religion losing its social function, but rather as a transfer of function. However, in their studies shedding light on the causes and consequences of failed secular revolutions and religious revivals in Latin America and Egypt, researchers have shown that unexpected shifts in religious demand can lead to the emergence of new and more extreme religious organisations and may reverse previous trends towards secularisation (Carvalho et al., 2024).

Ronald Inglehart’s work centres on his “Existential Security” theory and his revised theory of modernisation, which have reshaped debates on secularisation and social change in modern sociology (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Unlike the classical theses that directly link the decline of religion to scientific progress, Inglehart and Pippa Norris have focused on the extent

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to which individuals feel physically and economically secure (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). According to this theory, the reduction in life-threatening risks as education, health and welfare levels rise weakens the need for solace from supernatural powers and the predictability provided by religious rules (Corcoran et al., 2025). Drawing on data from the World Values Survey (WVS), Inglehart analyses cultural change in societies along two main axes: the transition from Traditional values to Secular-Rational values (the industrialisation phase) and the transition from Survival values to Self-Expression values (the information society phase). With this concept, developed from the 1970s onwards, Inglehart argued that new generations growing up in economic and physical security prioritised ‘post-materialist’ values—such as individual autonomy, environmental protection and freedom of expression—over material gains (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

This study aims to examine the direction of secularisation trends and the dynamics of transformation in Türkiye during the 2000s within the framework of these theoretical discussions. To this end, data from the sixth wave (2010–2014) and seventh wave (2017–2022) of the World Values Survey (WVS) have been analysed. The findings were interpreted using the Inglehart–Welzel cultural map; the secularisation process was assessed along the traditional–secular-rational values axis (vertical dimension) and the survival–self-expression values axis (horizontal dimension). The analysis results reveal that, during the transition from WVS 6 to WVS 7, Türkiye has shifted distinctly towards secular-rational values along the vertical axis. In contrast, no significant change has been observed regarding self-expression values on the horizontal axis. This study was designed to explore the possible reasons for this and to examine whether there is a correlation between the findings of Inglehart and Welzel and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Transformation of Secularization and Modernization in Türkiye

The process of secularisation in Türkiye should be understood not merely as a simple separation of church and state, but as a radical project of social engineering and modernisation that lay at the heart of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic. The reforms of the early Republican era brought about a top-down transformation in critical areas such as law, education, family structure and the regulation of the public sphere, and institutionalised secularisation through state intervention (Zürcher, 2004). However, as emphasised in Şerif Mardin’s (1973) “centre-periphery” theory, this process led to a profound disconnect between the state’s cultural codes and the belief systems of broad sections of society (the periphery). According to Mardin,

during this period, religion functioned not merely as a belief system, but as a focal point of resistance against the modernity imposed by the centre and as a social “map of meaning”. Consequently, secularisation never constituted a linear and unproblematic progression on the social ground; rather, it has been a constantly negotiated sphere.

This process of negotiation has taken shape, particularly in the post-1980 period, through the new interactions between religiosity and modernity. Whilst it was long assumed in the literature that modernisation would eliminate religion, Hakan Yavuz (2003) reinterprets this situation through the concept of “Islamic modernisation”. According to Yavuz, religious actors have constructed their own public identities by utilising the tools of modernisation (market economy, mass media, urbanisation). From this perspective, Islam and modernisation are not opposing poles, but rather harmonious processes in which religiosity is reproduced within modern forms. Similarly, Ayşe Saktanber (2002) argues that religiosity is not merely a political demand but a “lifestyle” established within modern daily life. Saktanber’s emphasis on “lived Islam” is critical for understanding how secular and religious identities hybridise in everyday life.

Fluctuations in the social manifestations of secularisation are also evident through women’s visibility in the public sphere. Nilüfer Göle (1997) defines the headscarf struggle not as traditional resistance, but as the devout woman’s effort to integrate her identity into modernity. This situation, as Alev Çınar (2005) puts it, represents a struggle between two rival modernity projects (secularism and Islamism) in Türkiye to control the public sphere and define national identity. Both projects utilise the tools of the modern state and seek to transform society according to their own vision. Binnaz Toprak (1981), however, attributes this strong presence of religion in the political sphere to its capacity to function both as a language of opposition and as a tool of identity politics. According to Toprak, the power of religion in social mobilisation serves to alleviate the pains of modernisation.

On the other hand, the institutionalisation of secularisation has been supported not only by legal regulations but also by ideological constructs. Umut Azak (2010), by analysing the “fear of reactionary forces” and the process by which secularism was constructed as a kind of “national myth” in Türkiye, reveals how this shaped the public perception of religiosity. This ideological hegemony, as conceptualised by Cihan Tuğal (2009), has resulted in the radical Islamist challenge being integrated into the system and transformed through a “passive revolution”. According to Tuğal, this process does not signify the complete disappearance of

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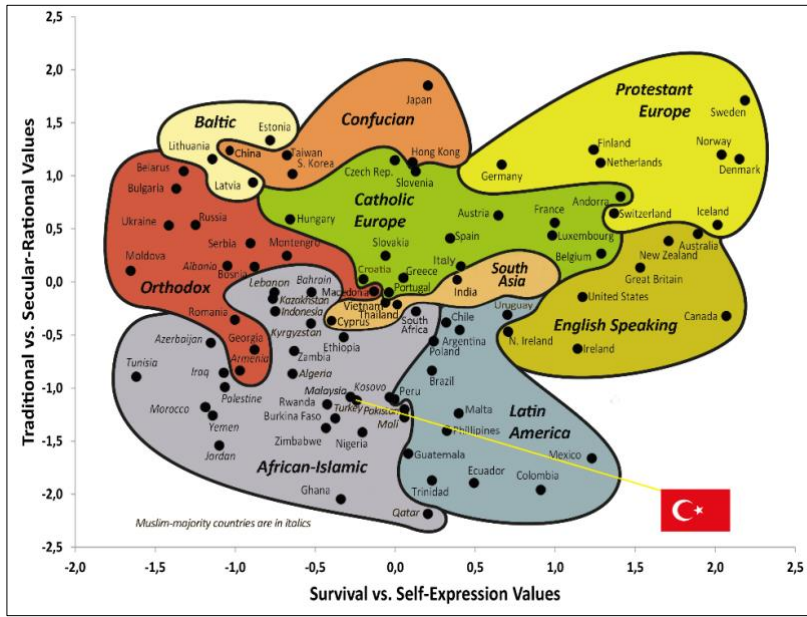
secular hegemony, but rather the establishment of a new equilibrium as religious actors adapt to the capitalist and secular bureaucratic order.

Methodology

Measuring secularisation involves interdisciplinary methodological challenges. Variables such as level of belief, frequency of worship, community affiliation, degree of secularisation of institutions, visibility of religious references in public policies, individual value orientations, and attitudes towards gender can be considered indicators of secularisation within different theoretical frameworks (Davie, 2000). However, none of these indicators alone is sufficient to explain the holistic structure of secularisation. Data from the World Values Survey and the European Social Survey (ESS) show that secularisation trends are closely related to economic prosperity, educational attainment, democratisation, gender equality, living standards, and generational differences (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). However, this relationship is not deterministic; for example, while economic development accelerates secularisation in some societies (Northern Europe), religious identities can gain strength in the political arena in others (e.g., the United States, Türkiye, India). This situation necessitates a contextually sensitive approach to measuring secularisation.

This study uses the sixth (2010–2014) and seventh (2017–2022) waves of the World Values Survey (WVS) to examine the trajectory of secularisation trends in Türkiye over time. The analytical focus of the study is to evaluate the change between these two periods in the context of the Inglehart–Welzel cultural axes. These axes present a two-dimensional conceptual space, with the vertical axis ranging from traditional values to secular-rational values and the horizontal axis ranging from survival-oriented values to self-expression-oriented values (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010a). Thus, the study addresses the change in Türkiye's position not only as an absolute increase/decrease but also as a transformation on the cultural axis.

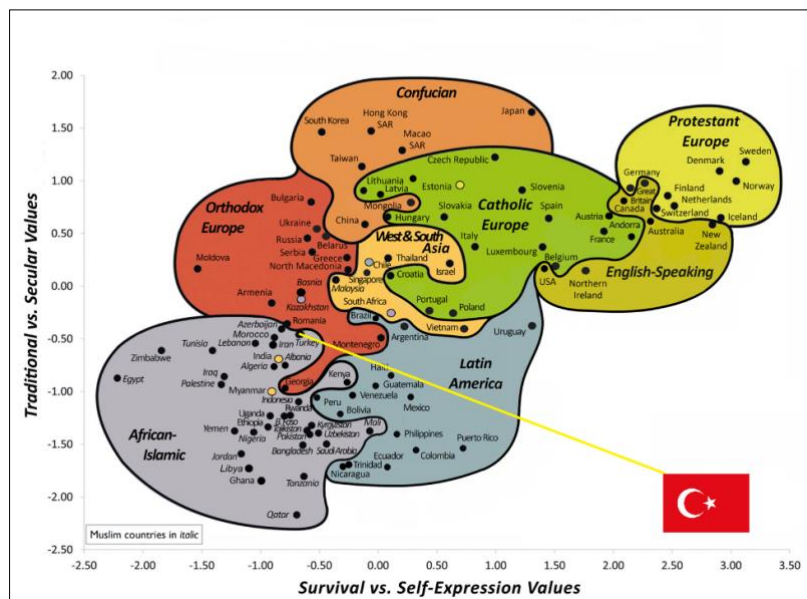
Figure 1. The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map-2014 (WVS Wave 6: 2010-2014)



Source: World Values Survey Association & European Values Study, 2014

Figure 1 shows the position of countries on the Inglehart–Welzel cultural values map between traditional–secular-rational values (vertical axis) and survival–self-expression values (horizontal axis) during the period covering 2010-2014 (Wave 6). Türkiye is positioned in the lower-middle region of the vertical axis on this map and has a relatively limited level of self-expression on the horizontal axis. Considering geographical and cultural clusters, Türkiye is in the Africa-Islam group.

Figure 2. The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map-2023 (WVS Wave 7: 2017-2022)



Source: World Values Survey Association & European Values Study, 2022

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Figure 2 shows the Inglehart–Welzel cultural values map from the 7th wave of the WVS, which indicates that Türkiye is positioned higher on the traditional–secular-rational values axis compared to the previous period. However, it is clear that there has been no significant development on the survival–self-expression axis. In this wave, Türkiye clearly diverges from the high secularism–high self-expression domain represented by Protestant Europe and English-speaking countries; on the other hand, it occupies an intermediate and transitional position, almost outside the African–Islamic countries cluster. This situation reveals that Türkiye does not exhibit a fully traditional or fully post-materialist structure in terms of cultural values. Compared to previous waves, Türkiye shows an upward movement on the vertical axis (traditional–secular-rational), but no significant progress on the horizontal axis (survival–self-expression). This research highlights that the shift towards secular-rational values observed on the vertical axis in Türkiye presents a specific transformation dynamic that differs from the limited change on the horizontal axis. In this context, the study discusses how this transformation can be interpreted in conjunction with Türkiye’s performance indicators, particularly those related to the “People” dimension within the Sustainable Development Goals.

The research design adopted a descriptive comparative analysis approach; trends in social values were assessed through changes measured between two waves. First, the Turkish sample in the WVS data was examined through vertical axis mobility, and a shift towards secular-rational values was identified in the transition from the sixth to the seventh wave. This finding has been interpreted as indicating that secularisation in Türkiye exhibits a non-linear trend, but one that is accelerating and becoming more pronounced in certain areas (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). However, no significant change in position was observed on the horizontal axis, i.e., the survival–self-expression dimension. This study attempts to interpret the reasons for this divergence in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework. The study focuses on SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) are assumed to be linked to the asymmetric change on the cultural axis. Based on this, it is accepted that secularisation cannot be considered independently of economic, class, educational and gender-based dynamics, along with the decline of religion’s social determinism; that is, based on Habermas (2008), secularisation is not only a cultural transformation but also an area of change shaped in interaction with social policy and development processes.

During the analysis process, data processing was conducted solely on secondary data; the relationship between WVS and SDG indicators was addressed within an interpretative and theoretical context. Ultimately, the methodological approach aims to demonstrate that the phenomenon of secularisation in Türkiye has emerged as an area of change progressing vertically but remaining limited horizontally; this appearance is directly linked to the social dimension of sustainable development goals.

Findings

The United Nations has developed the “5P” (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, Partnership) approach to ensure a more comprehensive and analytical assessment of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The “leave no one behind” approach, a fundamental principle of the 2030 Agenda, forms the normative basis for this categorical distinction. SDGs 1–5, under the heading of People, aim to establish the fundamental conditions for a life with human dignity, such as ending poverty and hunger, ensuring health, education and gender equality. These goals focus on meeting the basic needs of individuals and, in particular, empowering women and girls. The Planet category, through SDGs 6, 12, 13, 14 and 15, aims to protect natural resources, promote sustainable consumption and production, combat climate change and ensure the continuity of ecosystems. These goals emphasise that protecting the planet is essential for the well-being of both current and future generations. SDGs 7–11 under the Prosperity heading focus on areas such as economic growth, employment, innovation, infrastructure, urbanisation and reducing inequalities. These goals emphasise that economic development must be compatible with environmental sustainability and that energy production and use are central to this balance. The Peace dimension addresses the building of peaceful, just and inclusive societies within the framework of SDG 16. It thus draws attention to the interdependence between sustainable development and peace, while arguing that strong and just institutions are the cornerstone of peace. Partnerships, through SDG 17, emphasises the importance of global solidarity and cooperation. It states that achieving sustainable development goals requires the joint efforts not only of states but also of civil society, the private sector and all stakeholders.

Türkiye’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) profile, when assessed within the framework of the 5P approach, indicates a distinct asymmetric performance structure. In the People dimension, SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) generally show moderate performance and a trend towards improvement in some areas. While signs of progress are particularly noticeable in the field of education, it is understood that structural problems persist

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in areas such as poverty and gender equality, and that the targets have not been fully achieved. This situation shows that, despite partial gains in human-centred development areas, inclusiveness remains limited.

Figure: 3. Turkish Sustainable Development Profile (2025)

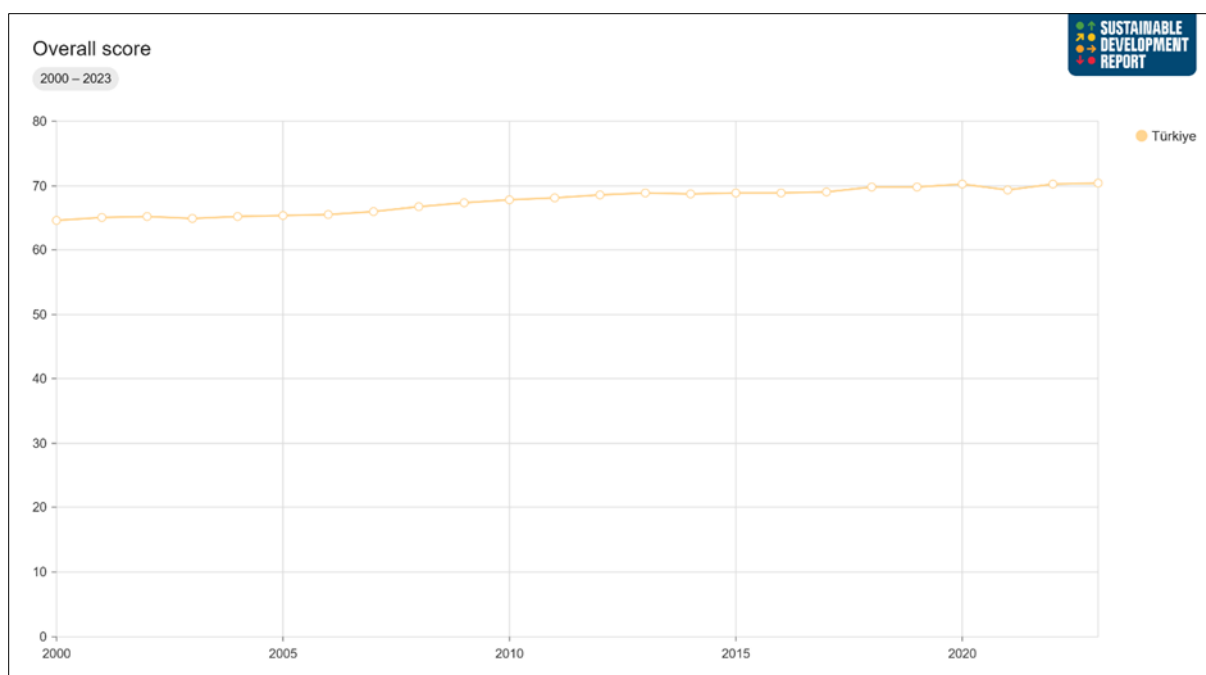


Source: Sachs et al., 2023

Türkiye's performance in the SDGs included in the Prosperity dimension -SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)- presents a heterogeneous picture. While progress trends are observed in targets related to industry, infrastructure and economic growth, significant challenges persist in the areas of sustainable cities and communities and energy transition. This situation reveals that economic and technological capacity has strengthened to a certain extent, but that this capacity has not been sufficiently integrated with environmental and spatial sustainability.

The dimensions of Planet, Peace and Partnership stand out as the most vulnerable areas in Türkiye's SDG performance. In the Planet dimension, SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) show serious challenges and declining trends. Similarly, there is stagnation in SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) in the Peace dimension and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) in the Partnership dimension. This situation indicates that structural problems persist in the areas of environmental sustainability, institutional capacity and multi-stakeholder cooperation, and that Türkiye's sustainable development agenda requires more comprehensive and long-term policies in these dimensions.

Figure 4. Turkish Sustainable Development Performance (2000-2025)



Source: Sachs et al., 2023.

Figure 4 indicates a long-term but limited upward trend in Türkiye’s overall sustainable development performance. The overall SDG score, which hovered around 64–65 in the early 2000s, rose gradually, particularly after 2005, reaching 68–69 by the mid-2010s. This increase indicates progress in certain policy areas within the field of sustainable development. However, the low slope and slow pace of this increase suggest that this progress has been achieved through incremental improvements rather than structural transformation. It is noteworthy that the score has plateaued significantly since 2015. Between 2016 and 2023, the overall score fluctuated between 69 and 71, with minor declines and recoveries observed in some years. This indicates that progress in sustainable development has lost momentum and that preserving existing gains has become a priority. Factors such as global economic fluctuations, the pandemic process and environmental pressures can be said to have contributed to this stagnation.

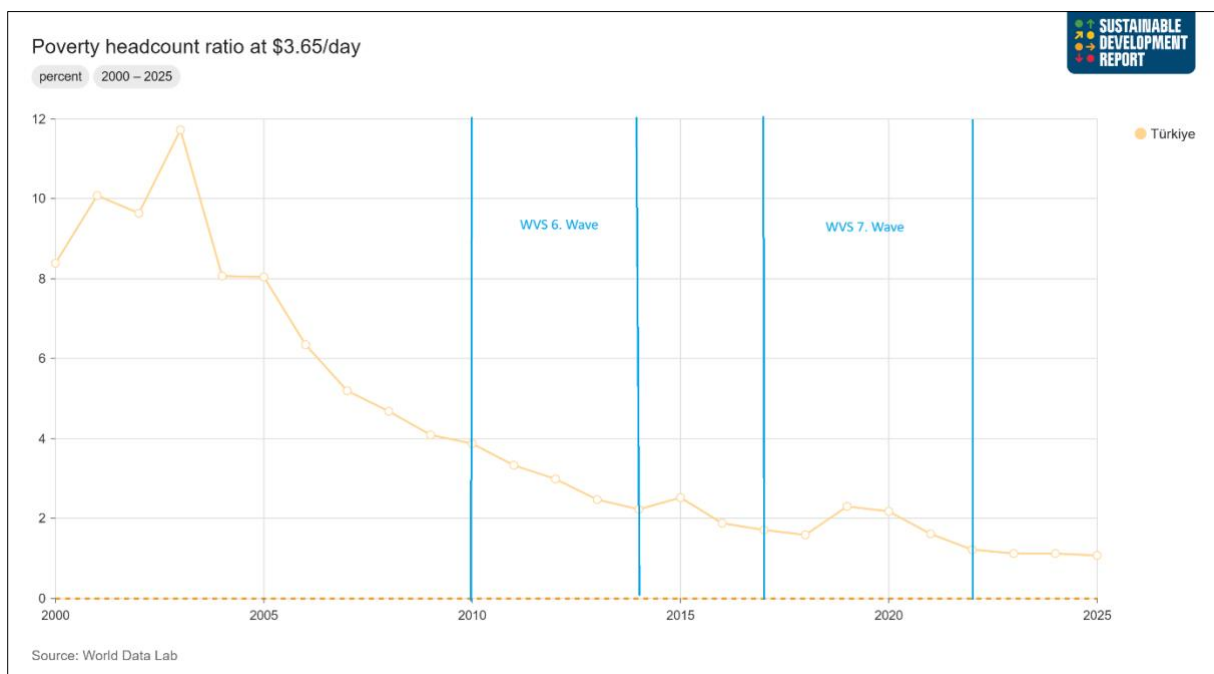
Secularisation and “SDG 1: No Poverty”

Figure 5 shows the trend in the proportion of the population living on less than \$3.65 per day in Türkiye during the period 2000-2025. The extreme poverty rate, which fluctuated between 8-12 per cent in the early 2000s, entered a marked downward trend after 2005; it fell below 2 per cent, particularly from the mid-2010s onwards, stabilising at a relatively low level. This long-term trend indicates that significant progress has been made in reducing absolute poverty in Türkiye.

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The 2010-2014 period covered by the 6th wave of the WVS corresponds to a period of steady decline in poverty rates. Similarly, the years 2017–2022 covered by the 7th wave of the WVS also represent a period in which absolute poverty remained at relatively low levels. This suggests that the increase in secular-rational values identified in the study occurred against a backdrop of relatively improved material conditions, at least in terms of the absolute poverty indicator. In other words, the trend towards secularisation observed on the vertical axis in Türkiye emerged not in a context of widespread absolute poverty, but during a period of relative economic recovery.

Figure: 5. SDG 1-Poverty headcount ratio at 3.65/day



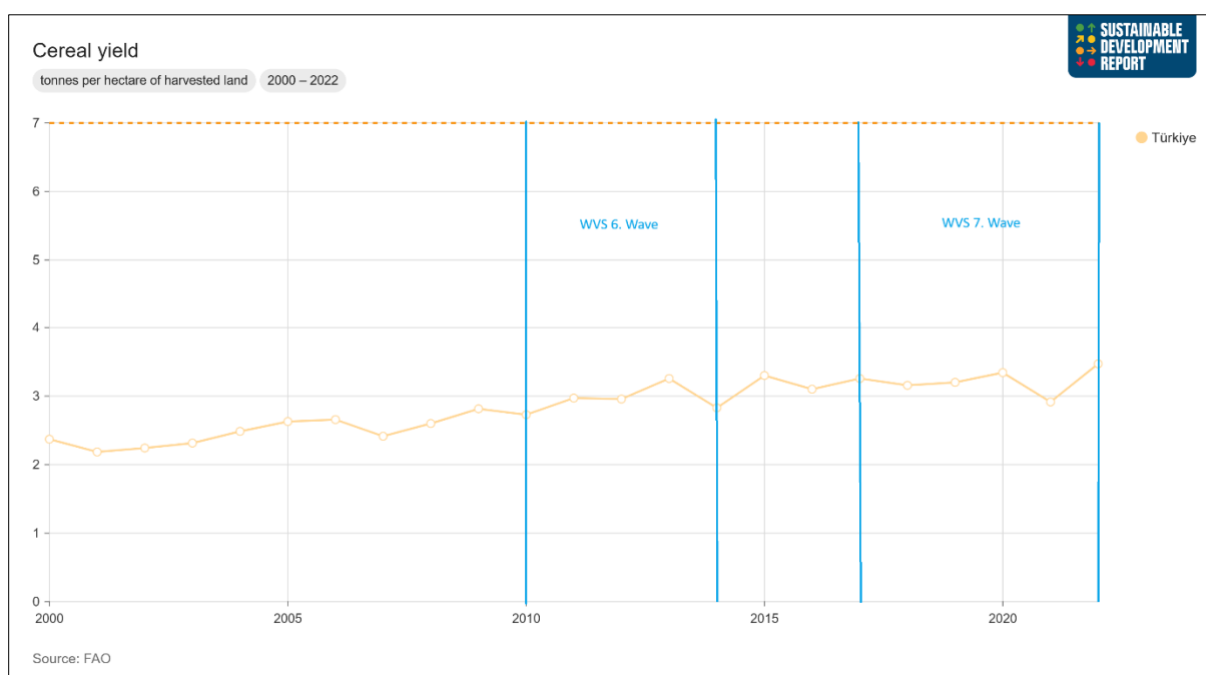
Source: Sachs et al., 2023.

However, the visual also provides important clues as to why secularisation has remained limited on the horizontal axis (self-expression values). Despite the decline in absolute poverty, the relative dimensions of poverty, such as income security, precarious employment and living costs, are not directly reflected in this indicator. Therefore, the progress achieved under SDG 1 may have fallen short of producing a broad-based sense of existential security that would support individuals' shift towards post-materialist values such as self-expression, autonomy, and participation. This situation explains why the “transition from survival values to self-expression values” emphasised in the Inglehart–Welzel approach has not occurred.

Secularisation and “SDG 2: Zero Hunger”

Figure 6 shows the trend in grain yield per unit of agricultural land in Türkiye between 2000 and 2022. The general trend indicates a moderate and gradual increase in the long term. Grain yield, which was approximately 2.2-2.4 tonnes per hectare in the early 2000s, rose to around 3 tonnes in the 2010s, showing a relatively steady increase during the 2010-2014 period covered by WVS Wave 6. During the 2017-2022 period covered by the 7th wave of the WVS, yields fluctuated between 3 and 3.4 tonnes, but did not show any significant increase. This situation is important for understanding why the spread of post-materialist values such as self-expression and autonomy has remained limited, as individuals have not been able to completely overcome uncertainties regarding their basic economic and food security.

Figure: 6. SDG 2-Cereal yield



Source: Sachs et al., 2023.

According to the Inglehart-Welzel approach, the transition from survival values to self-expression values is only possible not only when the risk of hunger is eliminated, but also when the sense of continuous, equal and predictable access to food is socially internalised. The limited and fluctuating increase in cereal yields indicates that perceptions of food security have not fully strengthened, particularly among vulnerable groups. In this context, the progress observed under SDG 2 has accompanied the advancement of secularisation at the institutional and cognitive levels; however, it has not produced a broad-based sense of existential security that

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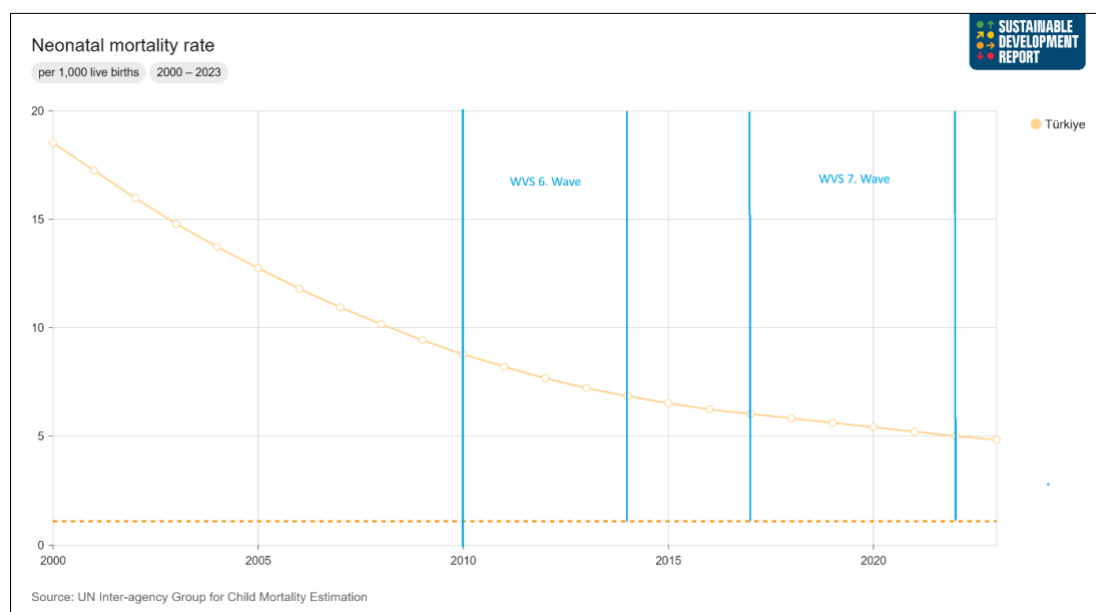
would support individuals' orientation towards post-materialist values such as self-expression, autonomy, and participation.

Secularisation and “SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being”

Figure 7 shows that the infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births) in Türkiye has shown a steady and marked downward trend throughout the 2000-2023 period. The infant mortality rate, which hovered around 18-19 in the early 2000s, had fallen to approximately 9 by 2010; the downward trend continued during the 2010–2014 period covered by the 6th wave of the WVS. During the 2017-2022 period covered by the 7th wave of the WVS, this rate fell to the 5-6 range. This long-term trend indicates a significant improvement in Türkiye's health infrastructure, maternal and child health services, and basic medical access.

In this context, SDG 3 indicator presents stronger and more sustained progress compared to SDG 1 and SDG 2. The decline in the neonatal mortality rate demonstrates the relative success of state-centred and institutional policies in the health sector in Türkiye. This steady improvement in health indicators, particularly during the transition from WVS 6 to WVS 7, supports the finding that the increase in secular-rational values identified in the study took shape on an institutional basis. This progress in the health sector has created a context that encourages individuals to turn to scientific and rational health practices rather than supernatural explanations

Figure: 7. SDG 3-Neonatal mortality rate



Source: Sachs et al., 2023.

However, this positive picture in health indicators alone is not sufficient to explain why secularisation has not produced a significant transformation on the horizontal axis (self-expression values). Within the framework of the Inglehart–Welzel approach, improvements in health contribute to a reduction in survival risks; however, for self-expression values to strengthen, access to healthcare services must not only exist but also be experienced in an equitable, sustainable, and reassuring manner. Despite the increase in the institutional capacity of the health system, it is difficult to say that dimensions such as perceived health security, quality of life, and psychosocial well-being have been internalised equally and widely at the societal level.

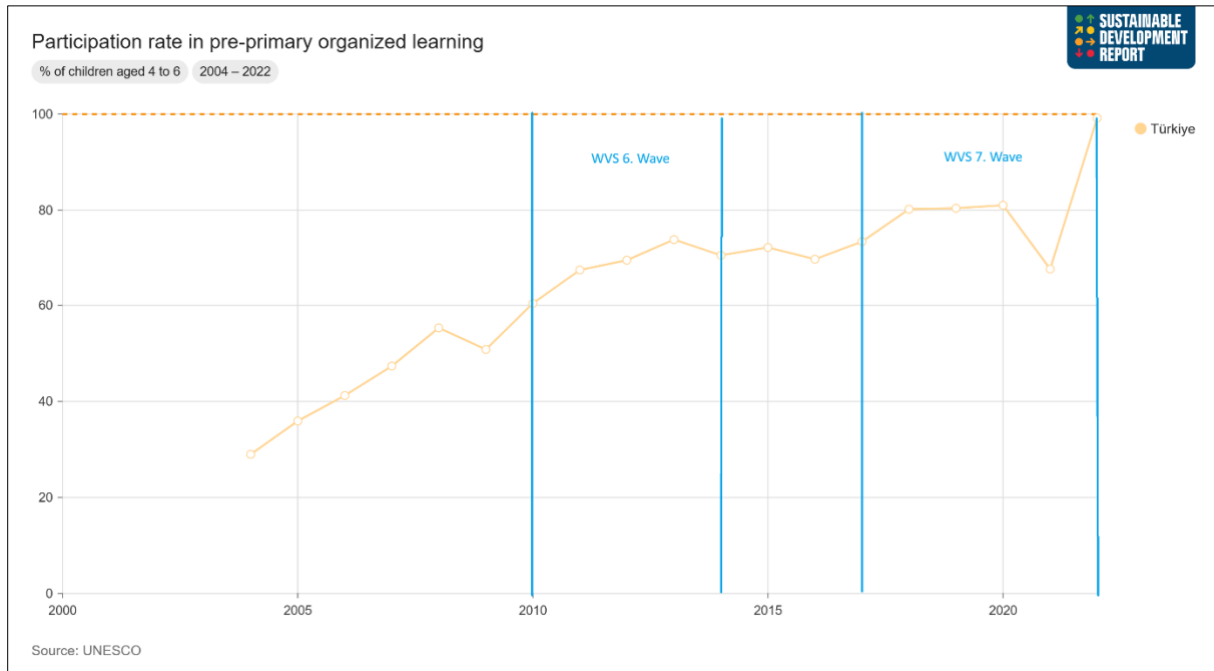
Secularisation and “SDG 4: Quality Education”

Figure 8 shows the trend in participation rates in formal pre-school education (4-6 age group) in Türkiye between 2004 and 2022. The data indicate a clear and long-term upward trend, particularly since the mid-2000s. The participation rate in pre-school education, which was around 30 per cent in 2004, reached 60 per cent by 2010; this upward trend continued during the 2010–2014 period covered by the 6th wave of the WVS. Throughout the 7th wave of the WVS, participation rates generally hovered between 70% and 80%, approaching 90% by the end of the period. This picture shows that early childhood education has been institutionalised and widespread in Türkiye.

This development can be considered one of the areas where Türkiye has made the strongest progress under SDG 4. The expansion of pre-school education ensures that individuals come into contact with a formal, rational and science-based education process from an early age. This creates a critical foundation for the strengthening of secular-rational values. Indeed, the trend of secularisation observed on the vertical axis during the transition from WVS 6 to WVS 7 in the study is consistent with this institutional expansion in education. The institutionalisation of the education system from an early age stands out as one of the fundamental mechanisms supporting the cognitive and normative dimensions of secularisation.

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Figure 8. SDG 4-Participation rate in pre-primary organised learning



Source: Sachs et al., 2023.

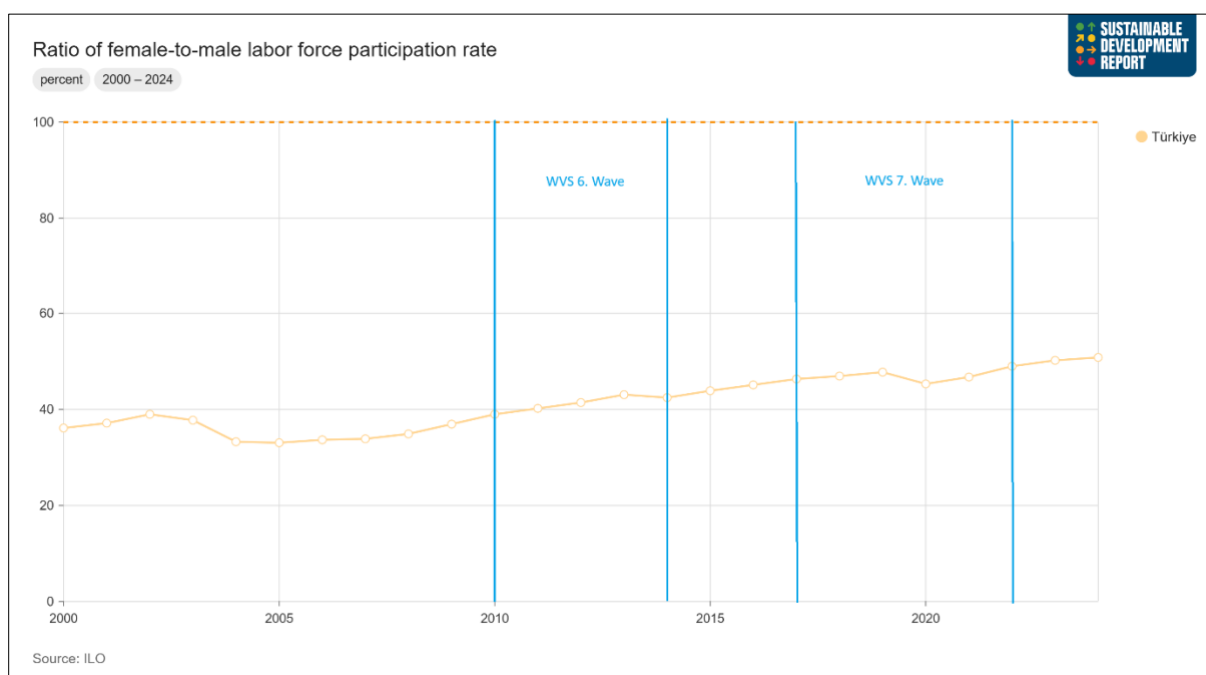
However, the figure also indirectly reveals why education does not nurture self-expression values to the same extent as secularisation. Within the framework of the Inglehart-Welzel approach, education is a necessary condition for the transition to secular-rational values, but it is not a sufficient condition for the strengthening of self-expression, individual autonomy, and participation values. Despite the quantitative increase in access to pre-school education, the quality of education, its capacity to encourage critical thinking, its power to reduce inequalities, and its potential to transform gender norms remain decisive factors. Therefore, progress in education has strengthened the institutional dimension of secularisation but has not supported the expected cultural transformation.

Secularisation and “SDG 5: Gender Equality”

Figure 9 shows the ratio of women’s labour force participation to men’s labour force participation in Türkiye over the period 2000-2024. The general trend indicates a slow, limited and fluctuating increase in the long term. The rate, which hovered around 35-38 per cent in the early 2000s, approached 40 per cent around 2010; it showed a relatively limited increase during the 2010-2014 period covered by the 6th wave of the WVS. Although this rate rose to the 45-50 per cent range during the 7th wave of the WVS, there has been no transformative leap in terms of gender equality.

This picture indicates partial but fragile progress in Türkiye under SDG 5. Although there has been an increase in women's participation in the labour force, neither the pace nor the level of this increase is strong enough to transform structural inequalities based on gender. In particular, factors such as care work, informal employment, low-paid jobs and insecurity continue to limit women's position in the labour market. This situation shows that gender equality in Türkiye has progressed more at the level of political discourse and institutional goals; it has found limited resonance in everyday life practices.

Figure: 9. SDG 5-Ratio of female-to-male labour force participation rate



Source: Sachs et al., 2023.

The SDG 5 indicator plays a critical role in the secularisation debate. In the Inglehart-Welzel approach, gender equality is considered one of the strongest indicators of self-expression values. Women's equal participation in the public sphere, employment, and decision-making processes demonstrates that individual autonomy and freedom values have been internalised at the societal level. In the case of Türkiye, the limited increase in women's labour force participation stands out as one of the key factors explaining why secularisation has not produced meaningful progress on the horizontal axis (survival-self-expression).

Discussion

This study attempts to analyse the transformation of secularisation in Türkiye between the 2010–2014 (WVS 6) and 2017–2022 (WVS 7) periods through the Inglehart-Welzel cultural

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values map and the targets included in the “People” dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The findings reveal that secularisation in Türkiye has progressed mainly along the traditional–secular-rational (vertical) axis; however, it has not produced a significant transformation along the survival–self-expression (horizontal) axis. This asymmetrical pattern indicates that secularisation in the Turkish context is a process that is concentrated at the institutional and cognitive levels but remains limited in its cultural and subjectivity dimensions.

This finding is not consistent with the expectations of linear and holistic transformation predicted by classical secularisation theories. On the contrary, it supports the context-specific, multi-layered and non-simultaneous approaches to secularisation emphasised in contemporary literature (Casanova, 1994; Berger, 1999; Asad, 2003). The increase in secular-rational values observed in the Turkish case does not indicate that religion's influence in the social sphere has completely disappeared; rather, it shows that relatively autonomous, rational institutional structures, independent of religious references, have strengthened in areas such as public regulations, education, and health. This situation reveals that secularisation is a transformation that operates primarily through state capacity and policy areas.

SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) indicators provide important clues about the material basis of this institutional secularisation. The decline in absolute poverty and partial stability in agricultural production indicate that survival risks in Türkiye, while not entirely eliminated, have been limited to a certain extent. However, it is understood that these improvements have not produced an inclusive and lasting sense of existential security. As Inglehart and Welzel (2010b) emphasise, the strengthening of self-expression values depends not only on the reduction of poverty but also on the internalisation of predictability, equality, and social trust. From this perspective, the limited and fragile progress observed in SDG 1 and SDG 2 areas can be considered one of the fundamental structural factors explaining why secularisation has not deepened along the horizontal axis.

Findings in the areas of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) explain why secularisation has strengthened particularly along the vertical axis in Türkiye. The steady decline in infant mortality rates and the spread of pre-school education point to a strong institutional rationalisation in the fields of health and education. The progress observed in these areas ensures that individuals come into greater contact with scientific knowledge, expertise and secular institutional arrangements in their daily lives. In Weberian terms, this situation creates a context that supports the process of the “disenchantment” of

modern society (Weber, 1922/1978). Therefore, the increase in secular-rational values is closely related to this institutional infrastructure established in the fields of health and education.

However, the SDG 5 (Gender Equality) indicator most clearly reveals why secularisation has remained limited at the level of self-expressed values. The slow and fragile pace of women's participation in the labour force indicates that the gender regime has not passed a transformative threshold. In the Inglehart-Welzel approach, gender equality is one of the strongest indicators of individual autonomy and self-expression values. The limited progress in this area in the case of Türkiye explains why secularisation has not been reflected to the same extent in the areas of individual subjectivity, participation and freedom of expression. This situation shows that, despite the progress of secularisation at the institutional level, more conservative patterns persist in everyday life practices and power relations.

One of the study's key arguments is that these trends towards secularisation are closely linked to transformations in Türkiye's material institutional structures and socio-economic relations, rather than being merely an abstract cultural shift. The rise of secular-rational values in Türkiye is a reflection of material processes such as the rationalisation of the state bureaucracy, the massification of the education system, and the integration of legal and institutional structures with the modern world. In particular, the urbanisation momentum and class mobility experienced in the 2000s have shifted individuals' relationship with the state and institutions from traditional/communal bonds to a rational/instrumental basis. However, due to polarisation within the socio-economic structure and the limited scope for action offered by political institutions, this material transformation has not fully evolved into the stage of individual autonomy and emancipation (the horizontal axis).

The results of the analysis indicate that the secularisation process in Türkiye is not a linear progression, but rather a process of 'negotiation' between the rationalisation imposed by material structures and the identity barriers imposed by socio-economic relations. The processes interpreted by Hakan Yavuz through the lens of "Islamic modernisation" or by Cihan Tuğal through that of the "passive revolution" are grounded in material reality by the data from our study: The integration of religious actors and institutions into the modern socio-economic structure (market economy, urban bureaucracy) has rationalised them; however, this material integration has failed to create a socio-economic climate conducive to the rise of liberal-individualist values (self-expression).

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Consequently, whilst examining the relationship between sustainable development goals and secularisation in Türkiye, this study moves beyond ideological debates to situate the issue within an institutional and structural framework. The stagnation Türkiye has experienced along the horizontal axis is not merely a matter of cultural resistance, but is also directly linked to the capacity of socio-economic relations and democratic institutions to support individual autonomy. Future research that links secularisation trends more deeply with changes in material production relations and property structures will continue to be of critical importance for understanding Türkiye's modernisation paradoxes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that secularisation in Türkiye did not exhibit a unidirectional transformation at the level of values; rather, it produced a clear asymmetry between institutional progress and individual subjectivity. Theoretically, this finding challenges approaches that view secularisation as an inevitable outcome of modernisation and reveals that secularisation is a context-specific process dependent on the nature of human development. The Turkish example demonstrates that the strengthening of secular-rational values does not automatically guarantee the widespread adoption of self-expression values.

The most critical aspect of the research is the link between this asymmetrical structure and the goals of sustainable development. Our findings reveal that whilst Türkiye's rational-bureaucratic capacity has increased, there has been no expansion in values such as individual autonomy, trust and tolerance-which form the heart of 'human development'. This picture demonstrates that secularisation trends in Türkiye are not merely a shift in the realm of ideas, but the result of transformations in material institutional structures and socio-economic relations. Whilst urbanisation and educational attainment necessitate rationalisation (vertical axis), the fragility of democratic institutions and economic uncertainties hinder individuals' transition towards post-materialist values (horizontal axis).

At the policy level, the findings reveal that sustainable development cannot be limited to economic growth or institutional capacity building alone. Despite advances in education and health, structural limitations in areas such as gender equality and the reduction of inequalities hinder the strengthening of individual autonomy and participation values. Therefore, for secularisation to deepen at the societal level, social policies need to be re-examined within a more inclusive and egalitarian framework.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that secularisation cannot be considered a singular indicator of modernisation in the case of Türkiye; rather, it is a process of social transformation that must be evaluated in conjunction with the inclusiveness of development and social policy regimes. This finding offers a context-sensitive and multi-layered perspective to the literature on secularisation.

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Appendix

SDG 1-2-3-4-5 (PEOPLE) INDICATORS (2025)		Türkiye's Performance			
Criteria		Value	Year	Degree	Trend
SDG 1	SDG 1: No Poverty			●	↑
	Poverty headcount ratio at \$2.15/day (%)	0.65	2025	●	↑
	Poverty headcount ratio at \$3.65/day (%)	1.08	2025	●	↑
	Poverty rate after taxes and transfers (%)	13.20	2022	●	↑
SDG 2	SDG 2: Zero Hunger			●	→
	Prevalence of undernourishment (%)	2.50	2022	●	↑
	Prevalence of stunting in children under 5 years of age (%)	6.0	2018	●	●
	Prevalence of wasting in children under 5 years of age (%)	1.70	2018	●	●
	Minimum dietary diversity among children aged 6-23 months (%)	●	●	●	●
	Prevalence of obesity, BMI ≥ 30 (% of adult population)	33.30	2022	●	↓
	Human Trophic Level (best 2-3 worst)	2.25	2017	●	●
	Cereal yield (tonnes per hectare of harvested land)	3.47	2022	●	↑
	Sustainable Nitrogen Management Index (best 0-1.41 worst)	0.64	2018	●	↓
	Yield gap closure (% of potential yield)	●	●	●	●
	Exports of hazardous pesticides (tonnes per million population)	1.54	2022	●	●
SDG 3	SDG 3: Good health and well-being			●	↗
	Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	14.63	2023	●	↑
	Neonatal mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	4.86	2023	●	↑
	Mortality rate, under-5 (per 1,000 live births)	12.79	2023	●	↑
	Incidence of tuberculosis (per 100,000 population)	13.00	2023	●	↑
	New HIV infections (per 1,000 uninfected population, all ages)	●	●	●	●
	Age-standardized death rate due to cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, or chronic respiratory disease in adults aged 30 to 70 years (%)	15.40	2021	●	↑
	Age-standardized death rate attributable to household air pollution and ambient air pollution (per 100,000 population)	46.00	2019	●	●
	Traffic deaths (per 100,000 population)	6.50	2021	●	↑
	Life expectancy at birth (years)	77.16	2023	●	→
	Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 females aged 15 to 19)	12.00	2022	●	↑
	Births attended by skilled health personnel (%)	97.00	2019	●	●
	Surviving infants who received 2 WHO-recommended vaccines (%)	95.00	2023	●	→
	Universal health coverage (UHC) index of service coverage (worst 0-100 best)	75.59	2021	●	↓
	Subjective well-being (average ladder score, worst 0-10 best)	5.26	2024	●	↓
Gap in life expectancy at birth among regions (years)	4.70	2020	●	●	
Daily smokers (% of population aged 15 and over)	28.30	2022	●	↓	
SDG 4	SDG 4: Quality education			●	↑
	Participation rate in pre-primary organized learning (% of children aged 4 to 6)	99.18	2022	●	↑
	Net primary enrollment rate (%)	99.74	2022	●	↑
	Lower secondary completion rate (%)	96.03	2018	●	●
	Literacy rate (% of population aged 15 to 24)	100	2019	●	●
	Tertiary educational attainment (% of population aged 25 to 34)	41.70	2023	●	↑
	PISA score (worst 0-600 best)	461.73	2022	●	↑
	Variation in mathematics performance explained by socio-economic status (%)	12.59	2022	●	↓
	Underachievers in mathematics (% of 15-year-olds)	38.68	2022	●	↗
SDG 5	SDG 5: Gender Equality			●	→
	Demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods (% of females aged 15 to 49)	62.20	2024	●	→
	Ratio of female-to-male mean years of education received (%)	84.39	2022	●	→
	Ratio of female-to-male labor force participation rate (%)	50.88	2024	●	→
	Seats held by women in national parliament (%)	19.90	2025	●	→
	Gender wage gap (% of male median wage)	9.98	2018	●	●

Dashboards		Trends	
●	SDG achieved	↑	On track or maintaining SDG achievement
●	Challenges remain	↗	Moderately improving
●	Significant challenges remain	→	Stagnating
●	Major challenges remain	↓	Decreasing
●	Information unavailable	●	Trend information unavailable

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Makale Bilgileri/Article Information

<i>Etik Beyan:</i>	Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan edilir.	<i>Ethical Statement:</i>	It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.
<i>Çıkar Çatışması:</i>	Çalışmada kişiler veya kurumlar arası çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.	<i>Conflict of Interest:</i>	The authors declare that declare no conflict of interest.
<i>Yazar Katkı Beyanı:</i>	Çalışmanın tamamı yazar tarafından oluşturulmuştur.	<i>Author Contribution Declaration:</i>	The entire study was created by the author.
<i>Mali Destek:</i>	Çalışma için herhangi bir kurum veya projeden mali destek alınmamıştır.	<i>Financial Support:</i>	The study received no financial support from any institution or project.
<i>Yapay Zekâ Kullanımı:</i>	Bu çalışmada herhangi bir yapay zekâ tabanlı araç veya uygulama kullanılmamıştır.	<i>Use of Artificial Intelligence:</i>	This study did not utilize any artificial intelligence-based tools or applications.
<i>İntihal:</i>	Bu makalede intihal taraması yapılmış ve intihal içermediği teyit edilmiştir. – İntihal.Net	<i>Plagiarism:</i>	This article has been scanned for plagiarism and it has been confirmed that it does not contain plagiarism. – İntihal.Net