



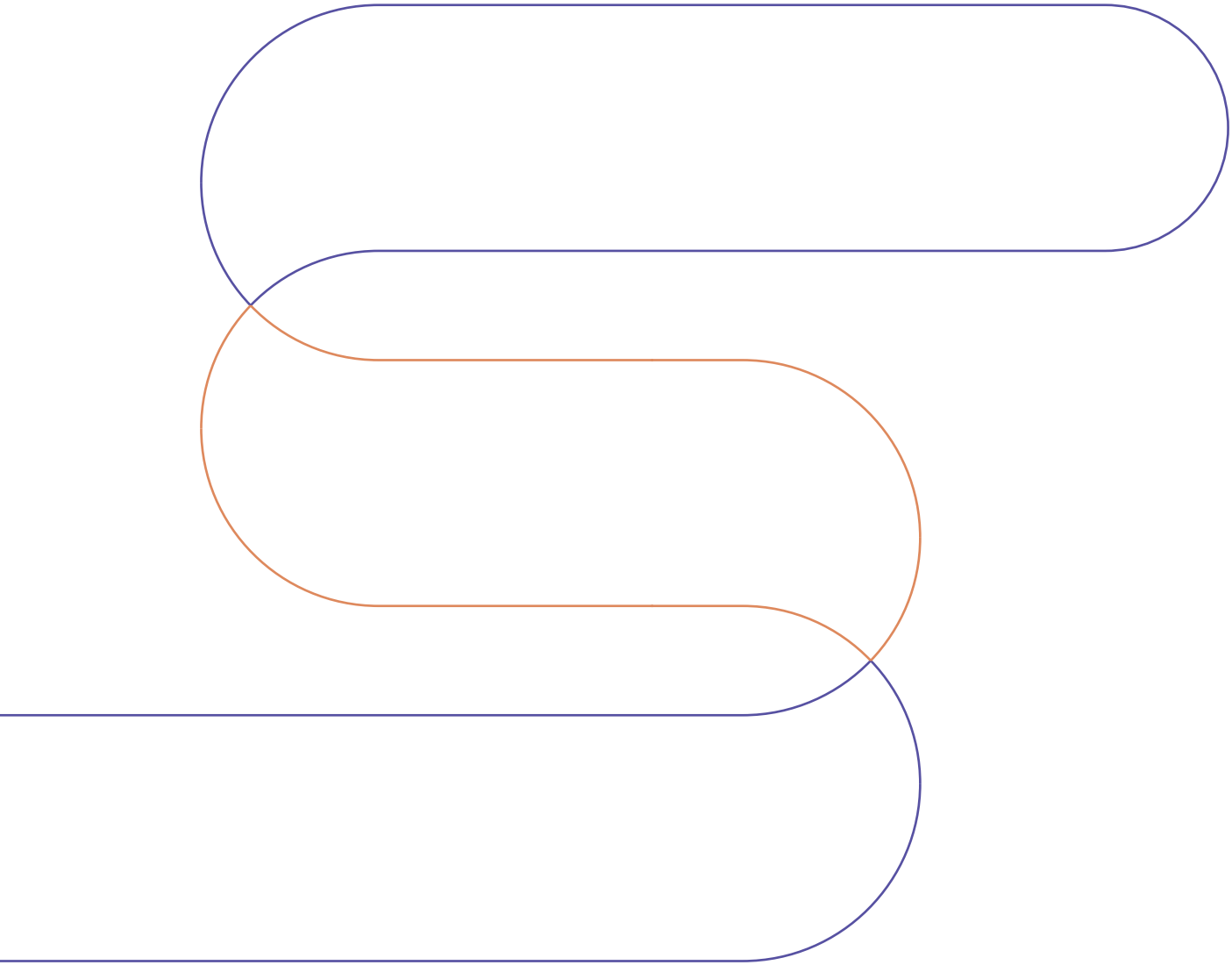
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# Public Sector-CSO Relations within the Scope of the Ministry of Family and Social Services 2022-2023 Civil Society Vision Document and Action Plan

## Case Study

December, 2024



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This case study aims to evaluate the participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) in decision-making processes at the central level within the framework of the Ministry of Family and Social Services 2022-2023 Civil Society Vision Document and Action Plan (hereinafter referred to as the Vision Document and Action Plan).<sup>1</sup> The principles and standards developed by international organizations—many of which Türkiye is a member of—and CSOs monitoring the civic space to encourage the effective, meaningful, and systematic participation of citizens and civil society organizations in decision-making processes form the primary basis of this study.

The selection of the Vision Document and Action Plan for this study is primarily due to its status as the only national policy document adopted in 2022-2023 that focuses on public sector-CSO cooperation and the strengthening of civil society participation in policy-making processes. Assessing the extent to which an effective and inclusive participation process was implemented in the development of a policy document and action plan that sets standards for CSO involvement in shaping and implementing national policies will help identify the steps needed to institutionalize and mainstream participatory democratic practices. To answer this question through a data-driven analysis, a request for information was submitted to the Ministry of Family and Social Services, and an interview was conducted with the department responsible for the development and implementation of the Vision Document and Action Plan. Following the interview, a written request was submitted to the Ministry to obtain more detailed information on the academics, public institutions, and CSOs involved in the preparation and implementation processes of the Vision Document and Action Plan and to broaden the scope of interviews; however, no positive response was received. As a result, the analysis was largely based on publicly available information and documents concerning the preparation and implementation of the Vision Document and Action Plan.

Today, CSOs are playing an increasingly important role in combating social inequality and discrimination, ensuring public accountability, and safeguarding legal certainty, human rights, and democracy. Fulfilling this role depends on the removal of barriers to freedom of association and civic participation, and the adoption of structured approaches and models to strengthen public sector-CSO relations. To ensure sustainable dialogue and cooperation, and ultimately to render decision-making processes democratic and participatory, numerous international organizations—including the United Nations (UN), the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the European Union (EU)—have developed guidelines, recommendations, and principles. These documents aim to establish fundamental procedures and standards for civic participation at central/local government levels or in electoral/non-electoral processes, and also focus on the participation of social groups subject to discrimination in accessing the social or political sphere—such as women, persons with disabilities, children, and migrants. Another method used in the development of principles and standards is to define the steps to be followed in decision-making processes within thematic areas such as environmental rights or budgeting. As a result of social and technological developments and especially growing skepticism toward representative democracy and public institutions since the 2000s, not only have participation mechanisms diversified and evolved, but so have the standards governing them. A wide range of tools has been developed to democratize decision-making processes and enable broader public influence through e-participation and hybrid methods. At the same time, it is increasingly evident that the approaches, methods, and tools developed are strongly linked to the creation of an enabling environment for the protection of civic space and the development of civil society.

<sup>1</sup> This case study is the first in a two-part series we have prepared on public sector-CSO relations. The second study focuses on the Karabağlar City Council as an example of public sector-CSO cooperation at the local level and analyzes the function of city councils as local participation mechanisms through this example.

**Table 1. Examples of international principles, approaches, and tools on the right to participation**

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights	Guidelines for States on the Effective Implementation of the Right to Participate in Public Affairs <sup>2</sup>
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes <sup>3</sup>
Council of Europe Committee of Ministers	Guidelines for Civil Participation in Political Decision Making <sup>4</sup>
Council of Europe the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations	Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process <sup>5</sup>
Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe	Guidelines to Promote the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities <sup>6</sup>

Although there are differences among international documents developed on public sector-CSO collaboration and the effective exercise of the right to participation, several principles are commonly agreed upon for fostering meaningful and constructive dialogue:

- » Use of clear and accessible language, and the establishment of communication channels and mechanisms that enable all groups to access the process and relevant information
- » Building transparency and mutual trust
- » Recognition of CSOs' independence and the creation of conditions that allow the expression of critical perspectives
- » Adoption of necessary measures to ensure non-discrimination and inclusivity
- » Development and implementation of measures that ensure accountability throughout preparation, consultation, partnership, and evaluation processes

In line with these principles, the procedures and criteria used to identify stakeholders to be involved in the decision-making process are expected to be clear and transparent, enabling all relevant parties to express their opinions. Notification and two-way communication channels must be established to ensure that target groups can access sufficient information in a timely manner and that the subject matter is comprehensible to all relevant stakeholders. These channels must be capable of meeting the needs of all target groups. Sufficient time must be allocated for the review of relevant information and documents, and for the preparation of opinions. A variety of tools should be employed to allow input to be submitted through different means; the criteria for evaluating the submitted input must be made public, and feedback mechanisms must be established. The reasons for participation, its outcomes, and the impact of the opinions gathered on the final policy or decision must be assessed. The results of these assessments should be shared both with the stakeholders involved in the consultation

2 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Guidelines for States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs, 2018.

[https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/PublicAffairs/GuidelinesRightParticipatePublicAffairs\\_web.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/PublicAffairs/GuidelinesRightParticipatePublicAffairs_web.pdf)

3 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes, 2022. [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2022/09/oecd-guidelines-for-citizen-participation-processes\\_63b34541/f765caf6-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2022/09/oecd-guidelines-for-citizen-participation-processes_63b34541/f765caf6-en.pdf)

4 Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, Guidelines for Civil Participation in Political Decision-Making, 2017. <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=09000016807509dd>

5 Council of Europe The Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process [Revised Version], 2019. <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016802eed5c>

6 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Guidelines to Promote the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities, 2019. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/6/414344.pdf>

and with the public. Similarly, the framework for partnerships to be established between public institutions and CSOs must be defined through publicly accessible, understandable, and accountable rules and instruments.<sup>7</sup>

At the national level, development plans are among the most critical policy documents setting out objectives and measures to strengthen public sector-CSO cooperation and enhance civil society participation in policy-making. In the preparatory phase of the 11th Development Plan (2019-2023), a Specialized Commission on Civil Society Organizations in the Development Process was established for the first time. In the commission meetings, in addition to discussions on strengthening CSOs, regulatory measures to promote their participation in decision-making mechanisms at both local and national levels were also addressed as a dedicated agenda item. The Specialized Commission Report published in 2018 included, among its implementation strategies, the definition of public institutions' relations with CSOs in their respective legislation and the preparation of a framework regulation to support the development, strengthening, and empowerment of CSOs.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, "Civil Society" was recognized as a sub-sector under the "Democracy and Governance Sector" in the 11th Development Plan, with an emphasis on enhancing CSOs' effective participation in the development of public policies and decision-making processes, as well as advancing public sector-CSO cooperation and dialogue. This approach was maintained in the 12th Development Plan covering the years 2024-2028. Development plans also specify the objectives, targets, and measures for the implementation of which the public administration is expected to

collaborate with CSOs. In this context, collaboration with CSOs is particularly emphasized in the development and implementation of policies in fields such as culture and the arts, migration, and education, as well as in relation to social groups considered the primary subjects of social policy, including women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, youth, and people living in poverty.

However, there is no national strategy, code of conduct, or implementation guide specifically dedicated to the development and strengthening of CSOs or to structuring public sector-CSO relations and civil society participation in decision-making processes. Both legislation and development plans grant the public administration broad discretion in planning CSO participation in decision-making processes. Although the Directorate General for Relations with Civil Society under the Ministry of Interior initiated work in 2021-2022 to draft a Civil Society Strategy and Action Plan (2023-2027), this objective had not been realized as of the end of 2024.

In line with the objectives set out in the 11<sup>th</sup> Development Plan, the only policy document enacted in this context in 2022-2023 was the Civil Society Vision Document and Action Plan prepared by the Ministry of Family and Social Services. The objectives set out in the Vision Document and Action Plan are as follows:

- » To establish the necessary infrastructure to effectively identify and respond to the needs, expectations, and demands of civil society regarding the development of their capacities and competencies in the fields of social services and social aid

7 For the monitoring tools, standards, and indicators used in this study to assess the quality of public sector-CSO cooperation and the civic participation environment, see: Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development Tool-Kit 2.0, 2023. [https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/37-6-MM-Toolkit\\_Final.pdf](https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/37-6-MM-Toolkit_Final.pdf)  
Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region, 2021-2027. <https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/EU-Guidelines-for-Support-to-Civil-Society-in-the-Enlargement-region-2021-2027.pdf>

8 [Defunct] Ministry of Development, 11th Development Plan (2019-2023) Specialized Commission Report on Civil Society Organizations in the Development Process, 2018. [Following the transition to the Presidential Government System in 2018, the preparation of development plans was transferred to the Presidency's Directorate of Strategy and Budget.] <https://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/KalkinmaSurecindeSivilToplumKuruluslariOzellhtisasKomisyonuRaporu.pdf>

- » To enhance and strengthen the activities of civil society in the areas under the responsibility of the Ministry
- » To develop the Ministry's policies, programs, and services in collaboration with civil society, based on a shared perspective
- » To enhance the quality and quantity of social services and social aid by increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of Ministry-civil society cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

The five main goals adopted in line with these objectives are:

- » Ensuring the effective participation of civil society in policy-making processes
- » Developing secondary legislation concerning Ministry-civil society collaboration
- » Advancing digitalization within the scope of Ministry-civil society cooperation
- » Strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations in the field of social services and social aid
- » Promoting volunteerism.

To achieve these goals, 28 areas of activity have been identified within the action plan. The principles adopted in the development and implementation of this policy document are defined as participation, pluralism, legitimacy, transparency, accountability, mutual respect, and equality, in alignment with international standards on the exercise of the right to participation.

Preparations for the Vision Document and Action Plan began at the end of 2021 with the launch of the "Civil Society Meetings." Within this framework, five meetings were held in Ankara, Istanbul,

Hatay, and Batman with the participation of 215 CSO representatives, under the thematic areas of "women, children, migration and humanitarian aid, persons with disabilities and older persons, and relatives of martyrs and veterans." Academics also contributed to these meetings alongside ministry officials. The main focus of the meetings was defined as identifying areas of cooperation and engaging in consultations under the themes of "legislation," "system strengthening," and "coordination" through focus group discussions using semi-structured questions. Another method adopted during the preparatory phase to enhance participation was a survey conducted with 500 CSO representatives. The survey was reportedly supported by in-depth interviews with "representatives from 18 different umbrella entities—such as federations, confederations, unions, and platforms operating in the field of social services"—"as well as with senior officials from the Ministry's central administration who implement activities, protocols, or projects in collaboration with civil society organizations". The opinions collected through various methods were analyzed in the Situation Assessment Report; however, this report was not made available to the public. As such, it appears that CSOs and the individuals and organizations following the process were not sufficiently informed about how their input was evaluated. Additionally, TÜSEV's request for information regarding the report itself, the list of CSOs consulted, and the criteria used to select the invited CSOs was not addressed by the Ministry. Based on data obtained through open-source research, it appears that the CSOs participating in the civil society meetings were predominantly those operating with a vision aligned with government policies, while CSOs that carry out significant work in the Ministry's fields of responsibility but generally take a critical stance toward its policies were not included in these meetings. No publicly available data could be found regarding the CSOs that participated in the survey and qualitative interviews. In the preparation process for the Civil Society Vision Document and Second Action Plan covering the years 2025-2027, the

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Family and Social Services, Civil Society Vision Document and Action Plan 2022-2023.  
<https://www.aile.gov.tr/media/100877/aile-ve-sosyal-hizmetler-bakanligi-sivil-toplum-vizyon-belgesi-ve-eylem-plan-2022-2023.pdf>

publication of the Situation Assessment and Outlook Report on the website of the Ministry of Family and Social Services in September 2024, and the inclusion of a summary of evaluations and findings regarding the implementation of the 2022-2023 Vision Document and Action Plan, represent a positive development. However, the consultation process did not fully uphold the principles of openness, transparency, equitable engagement, and the effective use of feedback mechanisms.<sup>10</sup>

One of the key activities in the implementation of the Vision Document and Action Plan was the launch of the Social Stakeholders Cooperation Board, established in 2021 under the Ministry of Family and Social Services to develop and implement cooperation and projects with stakeholders such as CSOs, universities, international organizations, and the private sector. In 2022, the Board convened once with 22 participants, addressing the following agendas: strengthening the capacity of family counseling services; establishing standards and policies for cooperation with social stakeholders in services for children; and enhancing cooperation on women's empowerment. In the 2023 meeting, which was attended by 41 participants, the agendas focused on post-earthquake recovery efforts and issues related to family and children.<sup>11</sup> According to the Directive on the Duties and Working Principles of the Social Stakeholders Cooperation Board, the CSOs to be included in the Board are selected by the Department of Strategy Development under the Ministry and appointed with the approval of the Minister. The criteria taken into consideration in the selection of CSOs include whether the CSO has public benefit status, its membership size, financial magnitude, the number of projects it carries out

using national and international funds, the number of branches and representative offices it has, and its engagement in activities that provide solutions to the problems of the community at the local and national levels.<sup>12</sup> However, the list of selected CSOs is not shared with the public. In Türkiye, only a limited number of CSOs hold public benefit association or tax-exempt foundation status, and these organizations do not sufficiently represent the diversity and perspectives of Türkiye's civil society. The conditions required to apply for these statuses are restrictive, and the criteria and procedures for evaluating applications are neither sufficiently clear nor objective. Moreover, when factors such as challenges in member-based organizing and access to financial resources are also taken into account, the criteria applied to select CSOs for the Board do not align with international standards of inclusivity, pluralism, independence, and transparency.

According to the Civil Society Vision Document 2022-2023 Action Plan Implementation Report, published in September 2024, policy documents such as guidelines and action plans, as well as regulatory instruments such as directives and regulations, were developed in various areas of the Ministry's work as a result of thematic events and meetings held with CSO participation under five different strategic goals. The report also provides information on training activities organized to strengthen CSO capacities and communication efforts carried out to disseminate<sup>13</sup> When assessed against the performance indicators of the action plan, it is evident that the plan achieved quantitative success in adopting dialogue and consultation with CSOs as a standard method in the preparation of policy and regulatory documents.

10 Ministry of Family and Social Services, Civil Society Vision Document and Action Plan [2025-2027] Situation Assessment and Outlook Report, 2024. <https://sosyaltaraf.aile.gov.tr/media/xa0ijrd0/stvb-ii-eylem-planı-2025-2027-durum-değerlendirme-ve-beklenti-raporu.pdf>

11 Ministry of Family and Social Services, Civil Society Vision Document 2022-2023 Action Plan Implementation Report, 2024. <https://www.aile.tr/media/182004/stvb-2022-2023-eylem-planı-gerçekleşme-raporu.pdf>

12 Ministry of Family and Social Services, Directive on the Duties and Working Principles of the Social Stakeholders Cooperation Board, 2021. <https://www.aile.gov.tr/media/95217/sosyal-taraflarla-is-birligi-kurulu-gorev-calisma-usul-ve-esaslari-hakkinda-yonerge.pdf>

13 Ministry of Family and Social Services, Civil Society Vision Document 2022-2023 Action Plan Implementation Report, 2024. <https://www.aile.tr/media/182004/stvb-2022-2023-eylem-planı-gerçekleşme-raporu.pdf>

However, from the perspective of ensuring the meaningful and effective participation of CSOs in consultation and decision-making processes, there remains a need for clearly defined procedures and standards that guarantee a fair and transparent selection method for participating CSOs, as well as equal, sustained, and two-way communication with those involved in the consultations. Consultation meetings are not announced with sufficient advance notice to allow CSOs adequate time to prepare, and participating CSOs are selected through an invitation-based process. Some CSOs reported being informed of consultation meetings in their field of work at the last minute, with no budget allocated to facilitate participation (e.g., for travel), while others stated that they were not informed at all. It appears that, in most cases, sufficient time (at least 15 days) is not provided for reviewing draft documents and preparing input, and that different versions of the drafts are not published in a manner accessible to all interested parties. There is no two-way feedback mechanism in place that clearly informs CSOs of how and to what extent their input has been considered, or why certain suggestions have been disregarded.

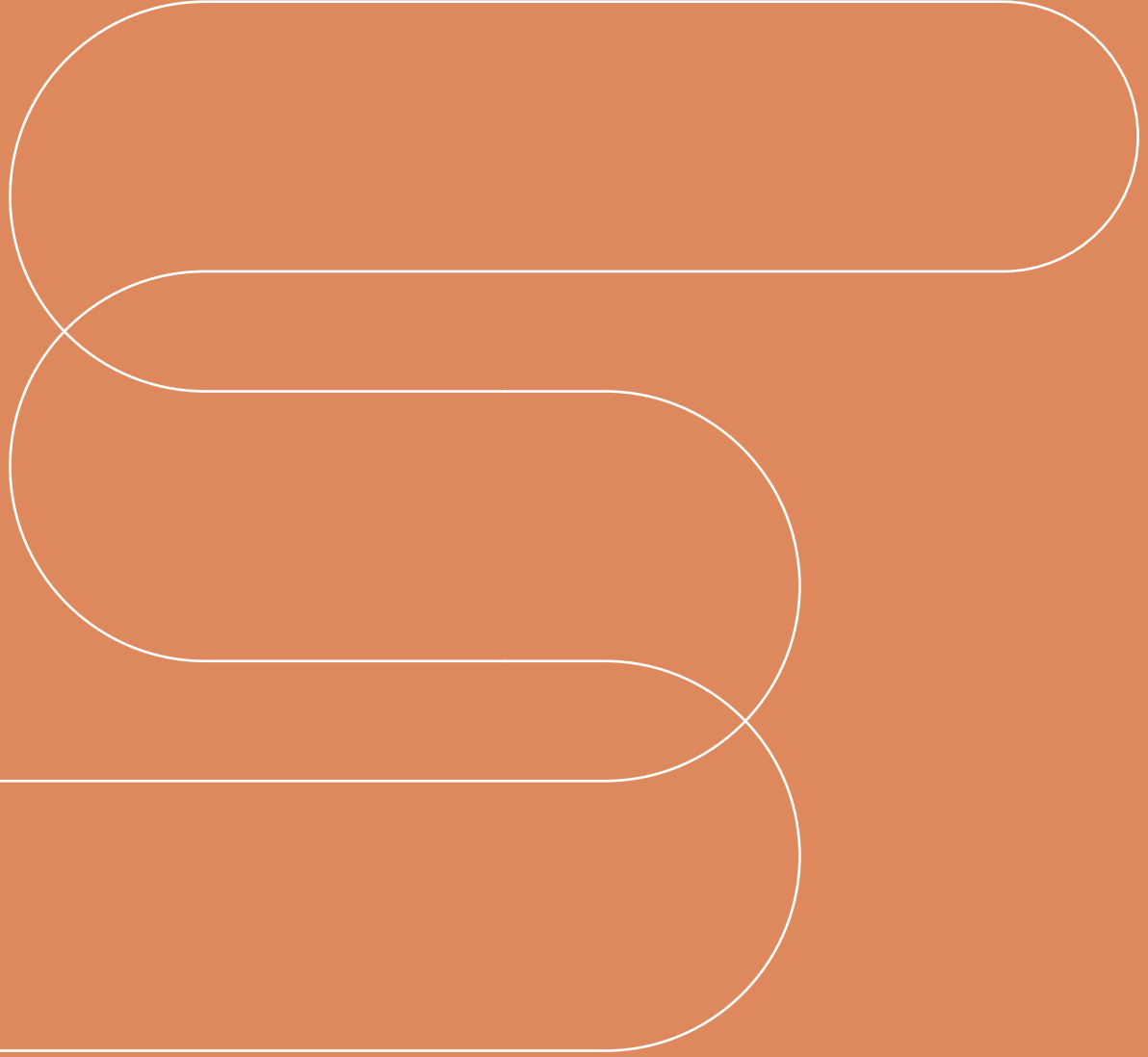
To oversee the monitoring and evaluation of the action plan, a Monitoring and Evaluation Board was established under the coordination of the Department of Strategy Development of the Ministry of Family and Social Services, consisting of representatives from other departments of the ministry responsible for the activities outlined in the action plan. CSO representatives were not included in the Board; however, evaluation meetings were held with CSO participation. In addition, with the technical support of UNICEF, a study was conducted to assess both the impact of the implementation and the relevance of the topics and objectives. The study was carried out by Prof. Dr. Emine ÖZMETE and the research team of Dr. Melike PAK and Dr. Serdarhan DURU, using a combination of surveys and in-depth interviews. The research report was not made public;

however, the Civil Society Vision Document and Action Plan (2025-2027) Situation Assessment and Outlook Report provides a limited summary of the findings.<sup>14</sup> According to the results, approximately 85% of CSO representatives emphasized the need for secondary legislation to regulate cooperation between the Ministry and CSOs. In addition, CSO representatives identified the following principles as important in relation to cooperation and consultation processes: sustainability (66.2%), inclusivity (55.8%), transparency (55.8%), cooperation and coordination (50.6%), accountability (40.3%), equality (36.4%), volunteerism (28.6%), and equal opportunity (27.3%). The qualitative findings indicate that the Vision Document and Action Plan provided a defined framework for strengthening cooperation with CSOs and contributed to the maturation of perspectives on this issue within both the public sector and civil society. Among the key outcomes noted are the inclusion of CSO input in the preparation of action plans, the Ministry's openness to cooperation and its organization of thematic meetings, the development of standard texts for protocols, and the establishment of a shared perspective. Another significant view expressed is that references to civil society in regulations and directives have helped lay the groundwork for cooperation. During the impact assessment phase, input was also gathered on the objectives, principles, and goals of the Second Action Plan, which will cover the years 2025-2027. While this report provides a framework for monitoring and evaluating the action plan and highlights the positive impacts of greater civil society involvement in decision-making processes, it does not address the shortcomings of the process or the findings indicated by potential criticisms. During the preparation of the Civil Society Vision Document and Second Action Plan (2025-2027), a method similar to the initial process was used to gather input and suggestions from CSOs, and the scope of the action plan was expanded in line with the impact and evaluation findings from the previous phase.<sup>15</sup>

14 Ministry of Family and Social Services, Civil Society Vision Document and 2nd Action Plan (2025-2027) Situation Assessment and Outlook Report, 2024. <https://sosyaltaraf.aile.gov.tr/media/xa0ijrd0/stvb-ii-eylem-planı-2025-2027-durum-değerlendirme-ve-beklenti-raporu.pdf>

15 Ministry of Family and Social Services, Civil Society Vision Document and 2nd Action Plan 2025-2027, 2024. <https://ulusaleyem.aile.gov.tr/media/p3pf4yfo/stvb-ii-eylem-planı-2025-2027.pdf>

In conclusion, the Civil Society Vision Document and Action Plan (2022-2023) provides positive support for the role attributed to CSOs in the development of policies within the areas of responsibility of the Ministry of Family and Social Services. As a requirement of participatory democracy, there remains a need to structure all stages of participation—information-sharing, consultation, broad-based dialogue, and partnership—in line with commonly agreed international principles and methods, and to ensure that participation tools and channels are clearly and transparently defined for all. Steps taken in this direction will enable civil participation to become an embedded component of decision-making in public policy design. A minimum first step toward ensuring that CSOs can act as effective, influential, and equal stakeholders with a legitimate voice and role in public policy is the establishment of clearly defined standards and operating procedures that safeguard their independence and guarantee that critical views and recommendations can be freely expressed in consultation settings without obstruction.



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