



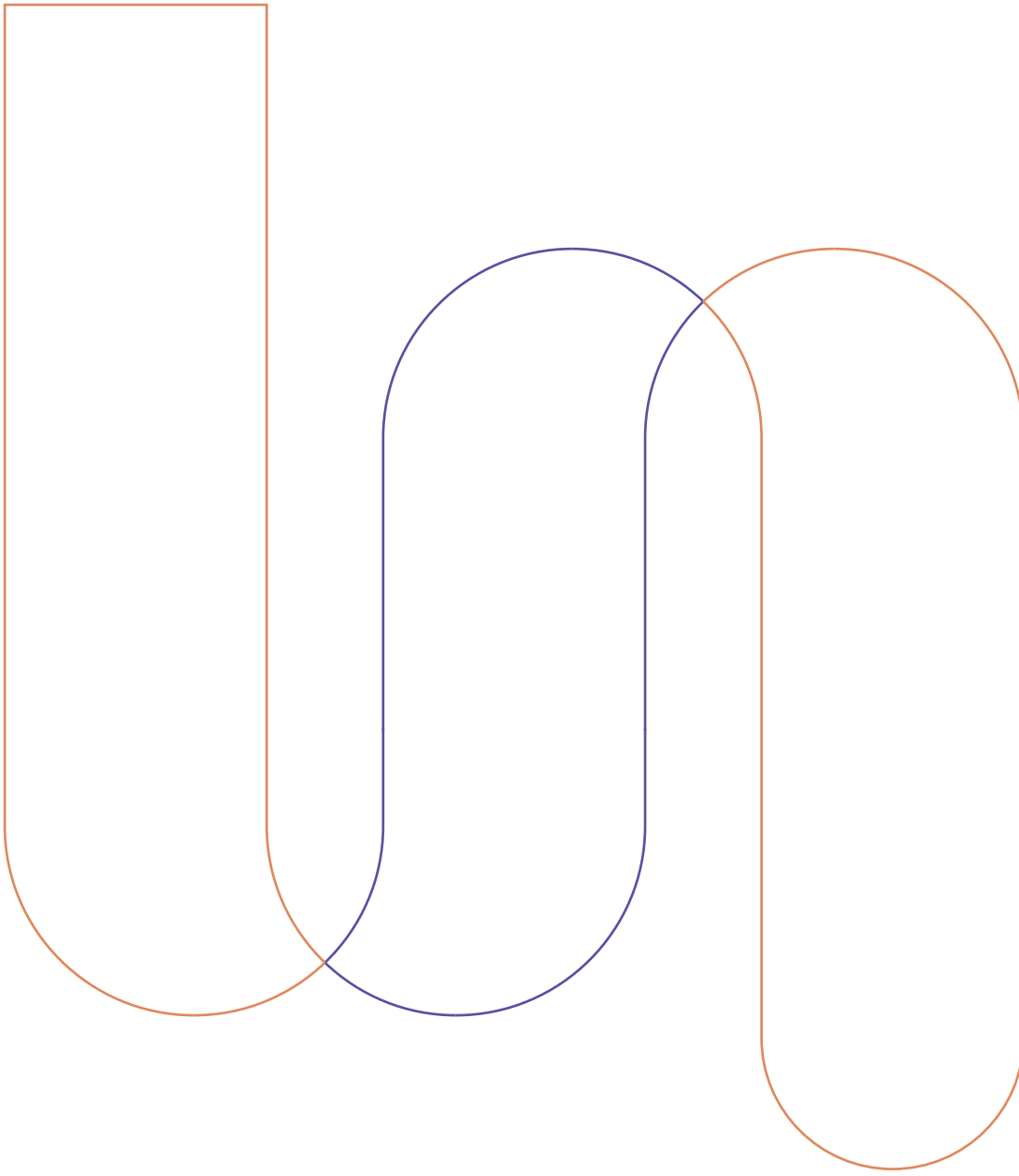
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# Karabağlar City Council: An Example of Good Practice in Public Sector-CSO Cooperation

## Case Study

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The participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) in public policymaking is considered one of the fundamental elements of democracy. Ensuring participation not only strengthens democratic legitimacy but also makes policymaking processes more inclusive, effective, and responsive to societal needs. Especially at the level of local governments, participation mechanisms such as city councils enable citizens and civil society to be effectively involved in decision-making processes.

In Türkiye, city councils were granted a legal basis under Article 76 of Law No. 5393 on Municipalities and serve as platforms for dialogue between municipalities and civil society. However, how these councils function as participation mechanisms, the extent to which civil society can influence policymaking processes, and the degree to which these processes have been institutionalized remain important research questions. This case study has been prepared to contribute to this broader discussion by examining the Karabağlar City Council as an example of good practice in public sector-CSO cooperation and analyzing the extent to which the Council fosters participation at the local level.

As part of this study, in addition to a detailed review of news articles published in the local press and content from the websites of the City Council and Karabağlar Municipality, in-depth interviews were conducted with five individuals who actively served in the Karabağlar City Council over the past decade. The interviewees include the City Council president, members, and volunteers, as well as municipal council members and municipal staff. Several interviewees have held various roles, both within the City Council and in different positions within the Municipality. In addition to publicly available sources, press releases, general assembly and congress minutes, motions, strategic plans, interviews, and documents related to social events and workshops shared by the interviewees were also comprehensively reviewed.

This case study is the second in a two-part series we have prepared on public sector-CSO relations. The first publication, titled "A Case Study on Public

Sector-CSO Relations within the Scope of the Ministry of Family and Social Services 2022-2023 Civil Society Vision Document and Action Plan," examines the extent and nature of CSO involvement in the preparation, implementation, and impact assessment phases of the Vision Document and Action Plan.

The publication also examines the legal and institutional framework for strengthening freedom of association and the right to participation, evaluates the international standards and fundamental principles governing the right to participation, and analyzes participation mechanisms in accordance with the guidelines, principles, and recommendations established by international organizations. In addition, the publication discusses how fundamental principles such as inclusivity, pluralism, independence, transparency, accountability, and equality should be applied to democratize civic participation processes.

It also evaluates policy documents and legal regulations aimed at strengthening public sector-CSO cooperation in Türkiye and elaborates on the targets set for civil society participation in decision-making mechanisms as outlined in development plans and public strategy documents. Furthermore, the case study focuses on how CSOs can be more effectively included in decision-making processes and discusses the legislative work and governance models necessary to institutionalize this participation.

For a detailed analysis of the issues, as well as the fundamental standards and regulations on participation addressed in the first publication, please refer to the relevant document.

## An Overview of City Councils

City councils are regarded as important mechanisms that contribute to the implementation of participatory democracy at the local level and shape the relationship between civil society and local governments within an institutional framework. These mechanisms, through enabling

citizens to be directly involved in governance, aim to promote active public participation in decision-making processes and to create spaces for direct engagement beyond democratic representation.

In Türkiye, the legal framework for city councils is defined under Article 76 of Law No. 5393 on Municipalities and the City Council Regulation. Each city council also has its own directives governing its procedures and principles. Established to strengthen local democracy and enable direct public participation in governance, these bodies aim to bring together municipalities, professional organizations, organizations with public institution status, trade unions, political parties, academic circles, and civil society organizations to engage in local policymaking. Although Article 4/c of the City Council Regulation defines city councils as “... *democratic bodies and governance mechanisms based on collective reasoning and consensus, where the city’s development priorities, problems, and visions are determined, discussed, and solutions are developed on the basis of sustainable development principles,*” the legislation provides only one structured mechanism for city councils’ participation in municipal decision-making processes: the submission of motions adopted by the council’s general assembly to the mayor, who is then required to present them for discussion at the next municipal council meeting. Article 76 of the Municipal Law explicitly requires that the recommendations adopted by city councils be placed on the municipal council’s agenda. However, in practice, it is observed that this requirement is not effectively enforced and is at times left to the discretion of the mayor. In this context, questions such as how effectively city councils participate in decision-making processes, whether the dialogue between the council and the municipality remains merely consultative, and to what extent councils can act independently of municipalities have become important topics of discussion regarding the democratic functionality of these structures.

Participatory democracy offers a model in which citizens are directly involved in decision-making processes and public policies are shaped through the engagement of broad segments of society. Under the traditional model of governance, the state is defined not primarily as a direct policymaker and implementer, but as a coordinator that brings together various stakeholders and steers the process. However, this model has been criticized for carrying the risk of shifting the state’s social responsibilities onto the private sector and civil society. The participatory democracy approach, while maintaining the state’s social responsibilities, advocates for citizens and civil society organizations to move beyond being merely consulted parties and become essential actors in decision-making processes. In this context, city councils should be regarded not merely as consultative bodies, but as mechanisms through which citizens and civil society organizations can directly influence policymaking processes.

City councils or similar structures are implemented in various forms around the world. Local governance mechanisms developed in Europe to strengthen participatory democracy bear similarities to city councils in Türkiye. For example, Neighbourhood Councils in France are institutional mechanisms established within municipalities to promote public participation in local governance<sup>1</sup>. However, unlike city councils in Türkiye, they hold certain powers and may be directly involved in decision-making processes. Community Councils in the United Kingdom operate at the neighborhood and district levels and stand out as structures that directly contribute to municipal decision-making processes. Municipal Advisory Boards in Germany represent another model that supports participation mechanisms. However, these boards hold greater authority in developing targeted policies for specific communities.<sup>2</sup>

1 Şinik, B. [2009]. Türkiye’de Yerel Katılım: Fransa ile Karşılaştırmalı Bir Değerlendirme. *Çağdaş Yerel Yönetimler*, 18[3], 1-22.

2 Valmorbida, A. [Ed.]. [2014]. *Citizens’ participation at the local level in Europe and Neighbouring Countries*. Peter Lang.

One of the primary criticisms directed at city councils in Türkiye is that they remain under the influence of central and local governments and fail to function as meaningful participation mechanisms for CSOs and citizens. The study titled “A Qualitative Perspective on City Councils from the Perspective of NGOs in Turkey” analyzes CSOs’ perceptions of these councils. It highlights that city councils are often perceived as extensions of municipal administrations, that civil society is not sufficiently enabled to act independently, and that these structures frequently operate under the influence of municipal leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Another criticism concerns the issue of representation within city councils. Participation in city councils is often determined by municipalities and certain CSOs, resulting in limited involvement from broader segments of the public. In particular, the influence of mayors over city councils and the fact that council budgets are allocated by the municipality raise questions about the independence of the process. The tendency of municipalities to treat city councils not as mechanisms for public participation but as instruments to legitimize their own policies can weaken the democratic integrity of the process.

While there is an extensive body of literature on city councils, as outlined above, this study approaches the topic within the context of public sector-CSO cooperation, using the Karabağlar City Council as a case study. The aim of this study is not to address all aspects of city councils, but rather to present a limited example that illustrates how this mechanism operates within a specific context.

City councils, on the other hand, do not engage solely with municipalities; they also maintain relationships with governorships, district governorships, and other units of the central administration. They may also engage with metropolitan municipalities or, in provinces without metropolitan status, with provincial general councils. However, such relationships fall outside the scope of this study, which instead focuses

on the forms of engagement between the city council and the municipality in the specific case of Karabağlar.

## Structure and Functioning of the Karabağlar City Council

Karabağlar is the second most populous district of İzmir, with high levels of incoming migration and pronounced socioeconomic inequalities. Therefore, establishing mechanisms that can serve as a bridge between local government and the public is of great importance. City councils have the potential to play a critical role in addressing such inequalities and advancing participatory mechanisms.

The Karabağlar City Council was established in 2010 and, under the leadership of Seniye Nazik Işık between 2015 and 2021, took significant steps to enhance civic participation, strengthen women’s organizing, and develop neighborhood-based participation models. In this process, working groups, assemblies, and direct cooperation mechanisms with the municipality were developed, aiming to transform the city council from a merely representative body into one that contributes directly to decision-making processes.



The march organized by the Karabağlar City Council Women’s Assembly on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, November 2024

3 Kestelloğlu, G. [2023]. Türkiye’de STK’ların Gözünden Kent Konseylerine Nitel Bir Bakış. İdealKent Dergisi.

The core operational mechanisms of Karabağlar City Council for fostering public sector-CSO cooperation are as follows:

**1. Assemblies:** In addition to the Women's and Youth Assemblies mandated by the relevant regulation, various thematic assemblies have been established, including the Disability Assembly, Retirees' Assembly, Mukhtars' Assembly, and CSO Assembly.

The example of the Karabağlar City Council Women's Assembly demonstrates the development of a model that enables women to engage directly in local policymaking processes. Comprising numerous CSO representatives and residents of Karabağlar, the Assembly receives training to deepen its members' knowledge of gender issues through a joint protocol with the Women for Women's Human Rights Association and the İzmir Women's Solidarity Association. The Assembly conducts strategic litigation monitoring by following cases involving femicide, violence against women, and child sexual abuse and exploitation. Through workshops and social events, the Assembly provides a platform for women living in Karabağlar to come together and collectively discuss their priorities and expectations from the municipality. It has been observed that CSO participation in the City Council is strong, with active membership or ongoing dialogue from numerous organizations operating in Karabağlar, including the Association for Supporting Women Candidates (KA. DER), Women for Women's Human Rights Association,

Turkish Women's Union, Association for Supporting Contemporary Life, Equal Life Association, Women Writers Association, Consumer Protection Association, and women's cooperatives. Nurcan Pirgan Çakır, elected president of the City Council Women's Assembly in 2024, emphasized that the City Council must receive support from civil society in its activities, stressing that no city council can fulfill its function without the strength and experience of CSOs. She noted that, for this reason, they actively engage with relevant CSOs in the work they carry out (Nurcan Pirgan Çakır, 2024). As noted by Funda Özdemir, a member of the Karabağlar City Council Executive Committee, the Women's Assembly organizes neighborhood meetings under the title "Kahve Bahane" – using having coffee as a pretext to foster direct engagement between women and local authorities (Funda Özdemir, 2024). Nazık Işık, in turn, referred to similar meetings they organized under the title "Çay Şeker Bizden, Sohbet Hepimizden" ("Tea and Sugar on Us, Conversation from All of Us"), which aimed to inform citizens about the municipality's social assistance and counseling services and to increase their access to these services. Another key initiative of the Women's Assembly has been the set of recommendations submitted to the municipality within the scope of the Women-Friendly Cities initiative. As a result of these efforts, proposals such as improving women's access to social services, expanding childcare facilities, and developing policies that promote women's employment have had a direct impact on municipal policies (Nazık Işık, 2024).



The Women's Assembly Working Group on Combating Violence conducting strategic litigation monitoring on violence against women





Protest in the streets of Karabağlar against the child abuse case in Karaman, 2016

**2. Participation in Working Groups:** The council hosts various working groups including the Ecological Balance and Animal Rights Working Group, Neighborhood Center Working Group, Basic Disaster Awareness Working Group, Mental Health Working Group, Information and Digital Communication Working Group, Mothers of Children with Disabilities Working Group, Free, Scientific, and Secular Education Working Group, Climate Change Working Group, and Retiree Support and Solidarity Working Group. Working groups are shaped by the needs and demands of local residents, and new ones may be established—or existing ones dissolved—over time in response to shifting priorities and recommendations. For instance, the Migrants Working Group, LGBTI+ Working Group, Children’s Rights Working Group, and Life Anew Solidarity Working Group were active during certain periods but later ceased to operate. It was also noted that scale-based working groups composed of neighborhood residents can be formed to discuss local needs. These working groups carry out activities in their respective focus areas, identify issues, and share their proposed solutions with the City Council.

### 3. Participation in Strategic Planning Processes:

One of the key functions of city councils is to ensure the involvement of civil society in municipalities’ strategic planning processes. Karabağlar City Council played an active role in the revision of the 2014-2019 Strategic Plan and the preparation of the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan, facilitating the direct contribution of CSOs in the form of policy proposals. In this process, the City Council itself organized the consultation

meetings with civil society—including those attended by the Mayor—ensuring that the perspectives of civil society as external stakeholders were included in the discussions and taking on a leading role in facilitating the process (Alev Ağrı, 2024), (Nazik Işık, 2024). Another member stated that the Council also contributed to the preparation of the annual budget in parallel with the strategic plan. It was noted that, by decision of the Executive Board, all Councils and Working Groups within the City Council were invited to prepare annual work plans, which were then submitted to the Municipality no later than the beginning of August. In this way, the City Council not only planned its own budget but also took part in the annual budgeting processes of various municipal departments, ensuring alignment with the strategic plan. The member summarized the outcomes of this practice as follows: “Each year, we asked the CSOs represented within the Council’s Assemblies or Working Groups to prepare an annual plan related to their specific area of work. Thanks to these plans, we as the Council were able to be included in the municipality’s annual budget in alignment with the strategic plan. Indeed, our contributions were formally recognized under the heading “Collaborative Work with the City Council” in the municipality’s strategic plan outcome reports. The direct involvement of CSOs in strategic planning and budgeting processes enables local governments to make more democratic and inclusive decisions. However, to ensure a more systematic process, it is crucial for municipalities to establish a participation mechanism with city councils based on predefined rules and to enhance the transparency of their decision-making processes.

#### 4. Institutional Dialogue with the

**Municipality:** Direct communication mechanisms have been established between the municipality and CSOs, enabling proposals and demands to be conveyed to the Municipal Council. Resolutions discussed and adopted at the non-elective general assemblies held by the City Council every six months are submitted to the mayor and subsequently placed on the Municipal Council's agenda. However, there have also been efforts to establish this dialogue on a more frequent basis. For example, Nazik Işık noted that they attempted to convene meetings with Municipal Council members at least once every three months and organized a workshop with relevant municipal departments and members of the Municipal Council's Committee on Gender Equality to explore ways of strengthening women's employment. On the other hand, the City Council holds monthly meetings with the Deputy Mayor responsible for the budget, during which a work and expenditure planning document is reviewed and discussed. Since Municipal Council meetings are open to the public, it was noted that at least one member from both the Executive Committee and the relevant Assemblies of the City Council attends these sessions. The Disability Assembly and the Gender Equality Assembly have occasionally convened with relevant committees of the Municipal Council to review ongoing initiatives and explore potential joint projects. Ahead of the 2019 local elections, the City Council conducted a study with more than 100 CSOs on their expectations from the Municipality and publicly shared the findings through a joint press release with the participating organizations. Following the elections, the Reconciliation Committee established within the Municipal Council held a session to hear the City Council's input specifically on the four key issues highlighted in the press release. At the metropolitan level, Karabağlar City Council contributed as an external stakeholder to the preparation of the 2030 Transportation Master Plan, the 2019 Strategic Plan, and the Local Equality Action Plans. Additionally, it organized dedicated sessions with relevant departments of the Metropolitan Municipality to identify public transport challenges and gather community input—particularly important in a

district served exclusively by rubber-tired transit. [Nazik Işık, 2024]. Nurcan Pirgan Çakır states that representatives from the City Council, along with other CSOs, were invited to participate in the Disability Assembly Committee—of which she is a member—as well as in other committees such as the Resilient Cities Committee and the Environmental Sustainability Committee, where their views were taken into consideration [Nurcan Pirgan Çakır, 2024]. However, CSOs are invited only when committee members request their input. There appears to be no binding regulation to ensure participation in this context either. These initiatives have been criticized for being dependent on the initiative of the parties involved, with no institutional dialogue mechanisms formally secured. The absence of structured mechanisms poses the risk that this dialogue may weaken in the event of changes in the city council or municipal administration. At present, direct communication is possible between the municipality and CSOs, and the City Council's opinions, proposals, and requests are conveyed to the municipal council. However, the lack of a structured and rule-based framework for dialogue remains a notable gap.

### Principles of Participation in the Karabağlar City Council

Monitoring how internationally recognized principles of participation are applied in the Karabağlar City Council provides a strong tool for assessing the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms.

Transparency is one of the cornerstones of democratic accountability in local governance. The transparency of a city council depends not only on publicly announcing its decisions but also on demonstrating how stakeholders were involved in the decision-making process. The Karabağlar City Council presents a relatively successful model in this regard by making both the content of meetings and the proposal processes accessible to the public. However, the lack of adequate digital tools has limited the Council's ability to effectively communicate these processes to a broader public.



For example, in one of the interviews, it was noted that although the proposals of the Women's Assembly were brought to the municipality's agenda, the feedback mechanism lacked effectiveness. At this point, it may be advisable for the City Council to establish an independent monitoring mechanism to track whether the decisions adopted are actually implemented. Moreover, just as the Council posts monthly Executive Board decisions, publicly displaying and publishing the minutes of meetings related to participation processes—both on bulletin boards and online platforms—would be a significant step toward improving transparency in its decision-making processes.

Accountability is critically important for ensuring the sustainability of democratic participation mechanisms. For a city council to be accountable, it must not only report to the municipality but also establish clear and transparent mechanisms for informing civil society. The Karabağlar City Council monitors the proposals it submits to the Municipal Council; however, feedback mechanisms that

would inform CSOs about the extent to which their views are taken into account and facilitate their ability to follow the process have yet to be fully institutionalized.

It has been observed that some of the proposals submitted to the municipality were either not brought before the Municipal Council, not implemented, or modified during implementation. To address such issues, the City Council should go beyond statements made at non-elective General Assemblies and instead publish periodic accountability reports, regularly disclosing the extent to which its proposals have been implemented.

One of the Karabağlar City Council's strongest achievements is its development of an inclusive model that enables the representation of diverse segments of society through its various assemblies and working groups. Bodies such as the Women's Assembly, the Disability Assembly, and the Youth Assembly offer important opportunities for expanding democratic participation.



Certificate ceremony for the 2024-2025 trainings on KİİEP, KSEF, social media, and digital addiction



Protest against the transfer of 88 hectares of land in Uzundere to TOKİ without compensation, 2019

In particular, the initiatives led by the Women's Assembly serve as a strong example in advancing gender equality. According to Nazik Işık, the Women's Assembly's proposals—such as gender equality trainings and women-friendly city initiatives—were adopted by the Municipality and implemented across various projects (Nazik Işık, 2024).

However, in a district like Karabağlar, where socioeconomic inequalities are pronounced, expanding neighborhood-based meetings would be a critical step toward increasing the participation of disadvantaged groups in the process. Although efforts have been made to establish Neighborhood Assemblies for this purpose, Nazik Işık noted in her interview that these initiatives have not achieved the desired level of success, and that the Mukhtars' Assembly has fallen short in facilitating participation at the neighborhood level.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the public sector-CSO cooperation model employed by the Karabağlar City Council as a valuable reference point for understanding the operational dynamics of city councils in Türkiye. While city councils serve as an important mechanism for fostering institutional dialogue between local governments and civil society—acting as a bridge between municipal authorities and the civic sphere—their effectiveness in practice varies significantly in Türkiye, depending largely on the approach of municipal administrations and the internal dynamics of the councils themselves.

The thematic assemblies and working groups established by the Council provide a structure that facilitates the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes. In particular, bodies such as the Women's Assembly, the Disability Assembly, and the Youth Assembly offer positive examples of efforts to strengthen social representation in the face of representational inequality. The Women's Assembly's efforts to introduce a gender perspective into local governance, along with its policy proposals developed within the framework of the Women-Friendly Cities initiative, highlight the influence of CSOs on local government policymaking. However, this success is closely tied to the initiative of the Council's leadership, the organized efforts of CSOs, and the extent to which the local administration embraces the process.

In Türkiye, city councils are generally viewed as advisory bodies, with limited direct influence over decision-making processes within local governments. As in the case of the Karabağlar City Council, some councils are able to develop strong cooperation with local administrations and gain greater influence in policy processes, whereas in many other cities, councils remain largely symbolic structures. This situation stems from the lack of an institutional framework governing the relationship between city councils and municipal administrations. The absence of institutionalization and legal enforceability in these mechanisms poses a significant risk to the sustainability of processes. To ensure that city councils across Türkiye function in a more systematic and sustainable manner, the legal framework must be strengthened, and municipalities must demonstrate greater institutional commitment to these processes.

In conclusion, city councils remain one of the key instruments for strengthening participatory democracy. However, transforming city councils from symbolic bodies into mechanisms that genuinely shape decision-making will require comprehensive legal and administrative reform. The Karabağlar City Council offers a valuable framework for understanding how such structures can be made more effective, while also shedding light on the steps needed to strengthen public sector-CSO cooperation in Türkiye.

## Requirements for Strengthening CSO Participation in Decision-Making in the Context of City Councils in Türkiye

In light of the study's findings, several structural changes are needed to make the functioning of city councils more effective and democratic.

» *The influence of city councils on municipal council decision-making should be enhanced.* Article 76 of the Municipal Law requires that the recommendations adopted by city councils be placed on the municipal council's agenda. However, in practice, it is observed that this requirement is not effectively enforced and is at times left to the discretion of the mayor. The role of city councils in decision-making processes should be made more prominent. On the other hand, the fact that general assemblies convene only every six months limits the effectiveness of the process, as it reduces both the number and frequency of proposals that can be submitted to the municipal council, even when decisions have been made. By contrast, instances such as the Metropolitan Municipal Council's adoption of proposals put forward by the İzmir City Council, or the inclusion of a 2024 agenda item based on the Karabağlar City Council's recommendation for the municipality to partner with a women's production cooperative, highlight the potential influence city councils can exercise in local governance. Therefore, regulatory measures are needed to enhance the functionality of decision-making mechanisms.

» *Participation mechanisms should be made transparent and accountable.* The Karabağlar City Council makes its meetings and decisions publicly accessible and formally submits its proposals and requests to the municipality in writing as part of its follow-up process. However, there is no adequate feedback mechanism in place to inform the Council of how its proposals are received or acted upon by the municipality. Annual

monitoring and evaluation reports should be prepared to demonstrate the extent to which the proposals of CSOs and citizens are incorporated into local government policies, and the process should be conducted with full transparency.

- » *Participation mechanisms within city councils should be made more inclusive.* Assemblies made up of organized groups or citizens with strong organizing capacity are more frequently engaged in policy development processes. However, access to participation processes remains limited for other social groups and individual citizens. Municipalities should make more effective use of digital platforms and participatory tools to open council meetings to broaden citizen participation and to expand engagement in decision-making.
- » *International good practices should be taken into account.* Local participation mechanisms in Europe tend to have a more institutionalized and empowered structure compared to city councils in Türkiye. Models such as neighbourhood councils in France and community councils in the United Kingdom are able to exert direct influence on municipal decision-making processes. City councils in Türkiye should likewise be positioned not merely as advisory bodies but as more empowered and effective actors in decision-making processes.



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