The Climate Crisis and the City:
The Significance of Cities as the Perpetrator and the Victim of, and as "a" Solution to the Climate Crisis

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Let us face it: we are in the midst of a catastrophe, a state of calamity unprecedented in human history. We are living in those scenarios that once depicted a terrible future due to "global warming". Extreme weather events, not-so-natural disasters have become the new norm. Given the fact that more than half of the world's population now live in urban areas, it is fair to say that these new climate norms pose an especially dire threat to cities. On the one hand there is the tendency of cities becoming humongous and increasingly unlivable; on the other hand, there is the climate crisis that feeds on our endless love for fossil fuels, and becomes increasingly monstrous and complex by the day. As two symptoms of a systemic logic that fetishizes nothing but economic growth, these processes have fundamentally disrupted the already delicate balance of the earth in the 20th century. With the neoliberal-era commodification of everything, every natural thing from mountains to rocks, from water to soil, the disruption has gained momentum. Researchers estimate that the amount of energy and natural resources we have consumed within the last thirty-five-year period (when neoliberal governance has reached its peak), is larger than the total amount consumed in the entire human history until the 1980s[1].

One must remember that cities (our shrines to consumption) are responsible for 75% of all natural resource use, 60 to 75% of all energy use, and 70% of all greenhouse gas emissions[2]. As they transform land-use practices, grow by pushing urban peripheries further out, and require more and more energy as they grow; cities become perpetrators of the climate crisis, as well –not just victims of it.

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We must keep in mind that the interaction between cities and the climate crisis is not one-sided. The climate crisis is an extension of our urbanization practices –hungry for carbon emission, and of our urbanite condition that values consumption greatly. In return, the climate crisis affects cities in significant ways, causing climate-related suffering in urban areas. Widespread use of heat-absorbing material in cities such as asphalt and cement leads to urban heat-island effects with deadly consequences on hot days. In the Special Report on Global Warming of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), it is predicted that a 1.5°C increase in average temperatures will especially impact the cities in the global South, and that by 2050, 350 million people will have been impacted directly by heat waves[3]. Given that 13 of the 20 largest cities in the world are located by the water, sea-level rise is another serious threat that cities face today. One research estimates that –if we let business run as usual– by 2030, in Istanbul and İzmir alone there will be approximately $330 million per year economic loss, and around $15 billion total economic loss by 2100 in the two cities[4].

Total economic loss aside, we must emphasize the increasingly unequal distribution of the costs of a deepening climate crisis. Two examples from the global North, from the USA, will help reveal the gravity of the situation. Hurricane Katrina, that hit Florida and Louisiana causing over 1,200 deaths, was especially devastating in its effects on socio-economically fragile communities, especially communities of color. Furthermore, 155 thousand of those affected by the hurricane were handicapped. One study suggests that of all evacuees from New Orleans to Houston, 60% were people in need of care.

A contemporary example is from California: As the climate crisis deepens, uncontrolled wildfires increase in frequency and in severity, and often threaten suburban communities. The solution that the rich Californians have come up with is to hire private firefighters. Privately hired firefighters make sure to protect those properties that they have been specifically hired for, and –unlike state firefighters– they do not help out with any fires that may be threatening surrounding communities[5].

Just these two examples from the USA show that we are not all in the same boat. Already fragile communities are doomed to face much greater challenges, as the climate crisis exacerbates those injustices intrinsic to the economic system.

Is it possible to establish an alternative relation between cities and the climate crisis that goes beyond a simplistic perpetrator-victim dualism? Can cities be solutions to the crisis that we are facing? In this piece, while answering these questions, I aim to remind local governments of their responsibilities for combatting the climate crisis. It will be revisited below, but let me stress this: If we want to create just cities in the face of the climate crisis, it is extremely important that climate action plans are integrated comprehensively into urban policy-making processes. It is also essential for local governments to be inclusive of all sectors of the society, especially disadvantaged communities, in urban policy-making.

The Limits of Combatting the Climate Crisis at the Level of Local Governments Alone

I suggest that cities can serve as "a" major front in the war against the climate crisis –thus, moving beyond the perpetrator-victim type of dualistic reductionism in understanding cities in relation to the crisis. In suggesting that, the importance of the indefinite article "a", however, cannot be stressed enough. As expressed in the 1.5°C Special Report on Global Warming of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations, in order to keep temperature change at the 1.5°C level, we must cut greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030, and by 2050 we must be producing 49 to 67 percent of all energy from renewable sources[6].

This means that there must be absolutely no new investment in any fossil fuel (including coal, petroleum, shale gas, natural gas), and that existing energy infrastructure running on fossil fuels must be gradually deactivated. Put simply, if we want a livable future, we must fundamentally transform our energy production and consumption practices.

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This is a radical transition that requires significant national- and global- level policy change (imagining a world where there is no fossil fuel-dependent wars, even if for a moment, can fill one's heart with joy) –and therefore it would not be realistic to expect a solution from cities alone.

Another significant limitation is due to the overwhelming influence of central authority over local governments. Especially in countries like Turkey where central governments may get directly involved in local policy, cities are not left with much room for maneuver. As I will describe below, this comes up as the greatest barrier to comprehensive policy-making by local governments for tackling the climate crisis.

Positioning the Fight Against Climate Crisis in Envisaging New Cities

The future we envisage directly depends on the types of cities we design. Well-known urban theorist Robert E. Park famously notes that the city is "man's most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart's desire"; and adds:

> If the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself.[7]

As cities expand further out, and as rural areas are colonized to feed increasingly large cities, we must pause and re-evaluate our urbanite condition in conversation with the climate crisis. This is not a task only for local governments and trade associations responsible for urban planning. It is also a task for those organizations that struggle for the right to the city regarding the urban commons, and indeed, for all urbanites. If we want to build a world that is just, that is equitable, then we need –as never before– an urban imaginary that is proactively engaged in the fight against climate crisis.

Local Governments and Climate Action Plans

In this framework, climate action plans of cities emerge as important tools with potential to comprehensively include all actors. Climate action plans, official documents of commitment by cities to develop policies for fighting climate change, are "a roadmap of steps that cities are going to take for tackling climate change in a quick and just manner, and to prepare for the effects of climate change."[8] Based on greenhouse gas inventories of cities, and also taking into account their geographic, social, economic, and political characteristics, climate action plans are designed to serve two distinct goals:

1) Mitigation: Aims at reducing greenhouse gas emissions that is the root cause of the climate crisis. Protecting / increasing carbon sinks, pushing for greater availability of renewable energy options, and advocating for energy-efficient systems are examples of mitigation policies.

2) Adaptation: Aims at reducing the effects of the climate crisis on cities. It includes adjustment policies, steps taken to protect urban communities from extreme weather events. Increasing the resilience of urban infrastructures against disasters, taking steps for reducing the urban heat-island effect such as increasing urban green spaces are examples of adaptation policies.

Steps to be taken under the two headings presented above need to be designed based on detailed analyses of locally specific conditions. The two sets of policies must also be complementary in nature.

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Climate Action Plans
Must Be Comprehensive

Climate action plans may focus on a wide range of topics including, but not limited to, transition into renewables, environmentally-friendly buildings, electric-powered public transit, increasing of urban green space, waste management, urban planning, advocating for environmental-consciousness of urbanites. What is important is that they must be designed in a comprehensive manner, with all sub-sections of the plan being complementary to one another. The common practice in Turkish municipalities of simply leaving climate action plans to the directorate of environmental protection is, therefore, a seriously limiting practice. A comprehensive climate action plan requires all departments of a municipality to be involved and to be in the conversation. Despite not having prepared a climate action plan yet, İzmir Metropolitan Municipality's newly established Department of Climate Change, expected to promote dialogue within the municipality, can be taken as an example of good practice.

Climate Action Plans Must
Focus on Climate Justice

As described above, climate action plans that are a set of concrete steps for combatting the climate crisis include many technical aspects. At the same time, city-wide efforts for tackling climate change must come with a new urban imaginary to include aspects of justice and equality. In this respect, the preparation and supervision of climate action plans is too serious an issue to be left to local governments alone. Mechanisms that promote civil society participation in the preparation and supervision of climate action plans must be in place. Such mechanisms should go beyond the typical practice of paying lip service to civil society inclusion. They must really promote inclusion for climate justice advocacy.

Many cities all across the world are placing the issues of inclusion and climate justice at the core of their climate action plans. In Barcelona where

10% of the urban population is "energy poor" and where heat waves in recent years began seriously affecting the children and the elderly, the city's climate action plan sets a good example addressing all these issues. While aiming to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 45% from 2005 to 2030, and to completely cut emissions out by 2050, Barcelona's climate action plan is centered on the concept of climate justice. They have set as their goal the addressing of urban inequalities through empowerment of disadvantaged communities all the while fighting the climate crisis. Thus, one can suggest, Barcelona has located the climate crisis not only as a technical, environment issue; but also as a social justice issue in its climate action plan. The city has embraced a collaborative approach to the development of their climate action plan, working together with CSOs, such as the Citizen Council for Sustainability.[9]

Although the concept of climate justice does not currently get the attention it deserves in Turkish politics, one good example is the participatory approach that Kadıköy Municipality has embraced in preparation of its climate action plan which was ready by 2018. During the development phase of the plan, the municipality has announced an open call for inclusion in the process, and eventually led the establishment of a citizens' network called Kadıköy Climate Change Ambassadors. This network works in collaboration with the citizens' assembly of Kadıköy. It helps facilitate various projects addressing the climate crisis, leads awareness-raising campaigns, and serves as a bridge between the people and the local government in Kadıköy.

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In Lieu of a Conclusion

As argued above, our main goal in combatting the climate crisis should be the fundamental transformation of our energy production and consumption practices so that fossil fuels remain in the ground. Turkey is the thirteenth country in the world with the largest number of active coal plants, and the third in the number of new coal plant projects, right behind China and India. Turkey has not yet ratified the Paris Agreement, and its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) is subpar. Thus, Turkey must first develop a comprehensive and realistic national climate policy. This is crucial because as a Mediterranean country, Turkey is already faced with the early effects of the climate crisis. Extreme weather events already began causing not-so-natural disasters in Turkish cities. As the climate crisis deepens, Turkey is bound to become one of the water poor countries in the next 20 years. These facts should set the alarm bells ringing for our unsustainable, unprepared cities. As we are heading towards a Mad Max-like dystopia, we must raise our voices for combatting the climate crisis, starting from the local-level and reaching all the way up. Despite limitations, we must find ways with our local governments to transform our cities, and to change our urbanite practices so that we can take concrete steps towards addressing the climate crisis at the local-level. We must multiply the examples of good practices. In this context, a feasible first step might be to demand from city governments the preparation of climate action plans through an inclusive, participatory process. We must not forget that those who have contributed the least towards but will suffer the most from the climate crisis, the children and the youth are crying: "Our house is on fire!" In response to the younger generations who tell it like it is and call us out on having stolen their dreams and their futures, it is not only our duty to take action, but our moral obligation.

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