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TESEV
BRIEFS

The Impact of Digital Policy Tools on Local Democracy

TESEV Briefs aim to share with the public different opinions and recommendations on issues that are under TESEV's working areas.





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One of the central arguments in debates on information and communication technologies and democracy is that technology itself cannot be democratising, but that it can facilitate democratisation if political elites choose to adopt a democratic model of governance. This also applies to local democracy. That said, we have recently observed cases where the interaction between technology and local governments has been transformative to a certain degree. This brief analyses how the digital policy tool My Purple Map, developed by TESEV in cooperation with UN Women Turkey and Eskişehir Metropolitan Municipality, has impacted a local government and puts forward a number of recommendations as to how this impact can be further broadened for a stronger local democracy.

Technology and democracy

With the development and widespread use of the Web in the 1990s, e-democracy became an important topic of political debate. In political and academic debates, optimists argued that technology would strengthen democracy through increased access to information, more equal interaction between the governor and the governed, diverse ways of parti-

icipation, timelessness, and ubiquity. Pessimists, on the contrary, argued that technology would undermine democracy because it would lead to surveillance, echo chambers, information overload, disinformation, and the replication of discrimination in offline life. Over time, as the digital divide grew smaller and more people went online, the anti-democratic tendencies in society and technology's anti-democratic impact outweighed its democratic impact.

Meanwhile, with the advent of any new technology, the interrelation between society and technology can have favourable and detrimental consequences depending on its purpose, planners, users and usage. At the local level, where institutional politics and the political (basically everything else) can be closer, problems more concrete and solutions more creative, there is more space for democracy. Here, technology can open the door to new and creative practices if only the actors involved so desire. A case in point is data-driven policy processes in local governments and the use of technology in these processes.

Data-driven policy making and technology

One of the areas where municipalities may use technology is data-driven policy de-

velopment. In line with its commitment to democratic urban governance, TESEV has recently been focusing on this area which is receiving growing attention in Turkey. Data-based decision-making processes help the public sector to make more accurate decisions and use its resources in a more inclusive, effective and transparent manner. By enabling data sharing within and between institutions, they can also contribute to the strengthening of cooperation and accountability. Data-driven policy making might also increase at least participation within and among public institutions through possible cooperations in the planning and implementation stages of data generation, analysis and sharing. This, in turn, potentially might make it easier for actors to collect more disaggregated and more diverse data that more inclusively reflects different problem areas in society from the very beginning. In the case of local policies, increasing the scale of spatial data, for instance, by producing more diverse data at the neighbourhood scale, might make spatial inequalities in a city more visible. When information and communication technologies are used effectively in the collection, analysis and sharing of data, processes might be improved by ensuring interoperability, accessibility, transparency, currency, and diversity.



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Despite all these theoretically democratising features, in real life, data-driven policy making in local governments does not run so smoothly. While technology can facilitate these processes to some extent, it is ultimately the will of political elites and municipal employees that counts.

Digital policy tools for democratic governance

TESEV develops digital policy tools that facilitate the interaction between local governments and technology in order to improve data-driven policy development. For the first time, with the support of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, TESEV developed the [Urban95: Data-driven policy tool](#) in 2016 which aimed at introducing data-driven processes in the development of early childhood policies. The Urban95 website, prepared in collaboration with Kadir Has University Istanbul Studies Center, features synthesis maps created by combining demographic variables with multiple correspondence analysis which show the distribution of different demographic profiles across urban districts and neighbourhoods. Urban95 is a global programme implemented in different cities around the world. The Urban95 tool developed for Istanbul is the first initiative to map the neighbourhoods (or streets in pilot

districts) in which poor children predominantly live. To these maps, municipalities' data on services, aid and assistance, green areas, and parks are pinned. This makes it possible to interactively examine whether the services, aid and assistance, and parks planned for poor (early) children (and their parents) in the city suit their purpose, both spatially and in terms of their content.

The tool was primarily developed to use data to improve municipalities' decision-making processes and thus make public policies and action plans on early childhood more inclusive. For example, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality examined the Urban95 map to decide on the addresses of the day-care centres opened as part of the Yuvamız Istanbul project ("Our Home Istanbul"). Urban95 has been a source of both information and inspiration for civil society organisations and academia. Many academics have added Urban95 to their courses and research projects. Civil society organisations have used the tool for new projects and advocacy. Over time, Urban95 has gained different new stakeholders and expanded considerably. Today, it comprises other cities in Turkey and novel data sets that throw light on other important social issues. The success of Urban95 also gave rise to new projects, including the social risk mapping tool My Purple Map.

My Purple Map – Social Risk Mapping

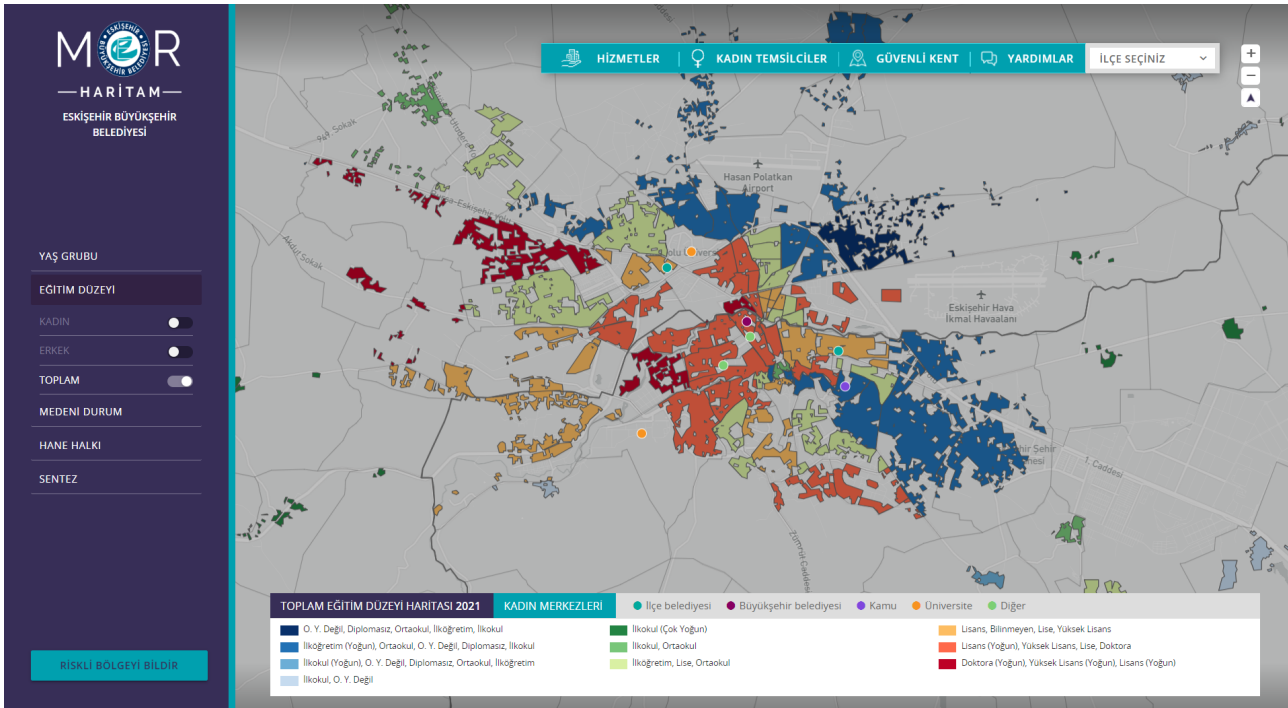
The project My Purple Map – Social Risk Mapping (“My Purple Map”) is implemented as part of UN Women Turkey’s “Gender Equality in Political Leadership and Participation in Turkey” project, funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The project aims at enabling municipalities to use data in developing their gender equality policies and to make this process participatory through the use of data that is partially shared by citizens.

Following the rationale of Urban95, My Purple Map uses multiple variables to map the city according to different demographics and urban profiles. The interactive maps on the My Purple Map website display municipalities’ gender-responsive services such as women’s centres, social

aids, day care centres, etc., allowing them to scrutinise their decisions and providing them with guidance for future decisions. Meanwhile, these maps also act as a source of information for civil society organisations and women in the city. The first My Purple Map was prepared for Ankara Metropolitan Municipality in 2020[1].

My Purple Map Eskişehir

The second city for which a My Purple Map was created is Eskişehir. After UN Women Turkey and TESEV agreed on collaborating with the Women’s Affairs Department of Eskişehir Metropolitan Municipality (EMM) for [My Purple Map Eskişehir](#), TESEV started to develop the website while EMM started to collect data.

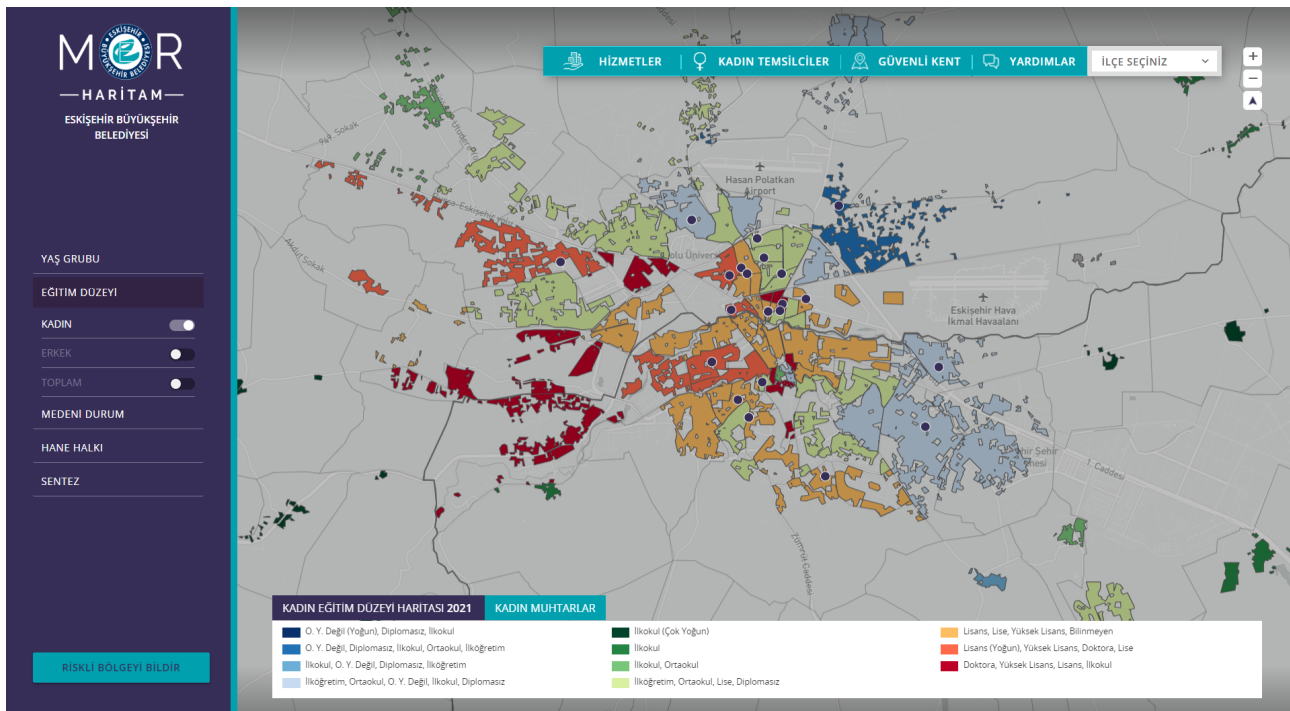


From the very beginning, EMM embraced participation and was open to exchange of information. Firstly, they carried out a comprehensive study to determine which units they could request data from and collected the necessary data. They met with the Women's Affairs Units, Equality Units and relevant deputy mayors of the municipalities of two central districts, Odunpazarı and Tepebaşı, to explain the My Purple Map and ask them for any relevant data they could share.

Meanwhile, TESEV collected demographic data at the neighbourhood scale to map the city based on the age, gender, education, marital status and household data of the population of Eskişehir. Using synthesis maps to combine different variables, TESEV created urban profiles and mapped

the neighbourhoods in which these profiles were encountered particularly often. These maps were then added to the interactive website. EMM procured data on services (women's centres, day care centres, assembly areas, children's services, educational and cultural services), health, nutrition and hygiene-related aids, as well as female mukhtars and municipal council members which were added to these maps.

On My Purple Map Eskişehir, the municipality and all citizens can perform spatial queries concerning the services and aids and assistances provided by EMM and the district municipalities of Odunpazarı and Tepebaşı. This helps to check and confirm whether the decisions made in these areas are accurate or not. For example, providing



diaper aid in the neighbourhood with the largest household size seems to be an appropriate decision. On the other hand, in the neighbourhood with the lowest level of education among women, there are not enough women's centres. The map can thus inform the municipality's decision on where to build the next women's centre.

These inquiries do not only help the municipality, but also enable civil society organisations to rely on data and be more accurate, confident, and vocal in their advocacy. For example, the data on My Purple Map shows that women are more likely to be mukhtars in neighbourhoods where the levels of education of women are higher, whereas they are underrepresented in those neighbourhoods or in municipal assemblies where the

levels of education of women are lower. This clearly indicates in which neighbourhoods and districts women's representation should be improved in the next local elections.

Finally, Eskisehir residents can upload data to the website. They can mark areas where they do not feel safe on the map and fill in a user-friendly form to inform EMM about the reasons why they are not feeling safe in these areas. EMM responds to a communication within 5 working days after submission of the form, and the response can be tracked thanks to the code generated for each message. This allows citizens to use data to communicate their experiences in the city to EMM without having to share their personal data.

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Erkek (40-54) Yaşı (55-65+)

Transformation of municipal data governance

The most important impact of My Purple Map Eskişehir can be observed in the municipality's data governance. Thanks to My Purple Map, EMM is making improvements regarding data production. It uses the application to, first of all, evaluate the existing data in terms of gender equality, and identify deficiencies. In addition, the application allows EMM to identify municipal units that do not collect gender-disaggregated data. Before requesting the data for the new year, EMM explains the importance of updating the application forms and record-keeping systems to the units and asks them to perform these updates. Thus, EMM seeks to ensure that gender-disaggregated data is collected not only within its own organisation but also in the central district municipalities of Odunpazarı and Tepebaşı.

A transformative impact can also be observed in data sharing. EMM ensures that the data collected by the newly established units in the districts are gathered under one roof. As crucial as this is in terms of inter-institutional cooperation this is also one of the major challenges for municipalities in Turkey. My Purple Map allows the metropolitan and central districts municipalities in Eskişehir to see each other's work and shortcomings.

Cooperation with different urban stakeholders

Following the launch of My Purple Map Eskişehir, other collaborations promoting

and strengthening democratic local governance have emerged in Eskişehir. For example, EMM seeks to establish local collaborations to resolve security problems and social risks made visible by the data marked by citizens on My Purple Map. For this purpose, the municipality is holding meetings with the electricity distributor OEDAŞ (Osmangazi Elektrik Dağıtım AŞ) and the Police Department. In these meetings, municipal officials first present My Purple Map to their partners before sitting down to discuss solutions together.

In addition, My Purple Map has led to another cooperation model between institutional politics and the political in Eskişehir - one of the kind which is rare to happen in Turkey. EMM introduces My Purple Map to civil society organisations working in the field of gender equality, which form the primary target group of My Purple Map in the city and promotes the use of the tool in civil society. Moreover, in order to reach out to different youth groups in the city, EMM visits all youth centres to explain My Purple Map and its function.

My Purple Map in decision-making processes

My Purple Map is starting to play an active role in the decision-making processes of EMM. Intended as a tool that strengthens data-driven decision-making, My Purple Map has begun to be utilised by the Women's Affairs Department in selecting priority neighbourhoods when deciding where to do service promotion, awareness raising activities on the International

➔ Not only the My Purple Map website itself, but also the raw data required for its preparation facilitates EMM's decision-making processes.

Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on 25 November and other activities related to gender equality.

Not only the My Purple Map website itself, but also the raw data required for its preparation facilitates EMM's decision-making processes. Thanks to this data, which has not been collected using such a filter before, EMM can for instance more easily select the neighbourhoods that have been benefiting less from services and aids and adapt its planning accordingly: "This allows us to focus on doing not equal but equitable work in our city."

Limitations

My Purple Map certainly offers various features that can catalyse democratic governance in the city, but it is not without limitations. While some of these limitations due to the use of the digital policy tool, others arise from independent

reasons. One independent limitation is the budget. EMM officials state that they use My Purple Map to make decisions on new investments and they would like to use it even more. However, budget limits prevent them from making any new investments in this area in the near future.

Another limitation is citizen use. Although EMM has distributed thousands of brochures in youth centres, mukhtars' offices and its own units, organised many promotional events, and put up permanent visuals at tram and bus stops in order to promote a more widespread use of My Purple Map among civil society, the tool is not yet being used as effectively as expected. Only few residents of Eskişehir use the "report a risky area" button on My Purple Map. Citizens mostly report risks related to lighting, stray animals, and general security problems through the website.

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What should be done next to strengthen local democracy?

My Purple Map motivated metropolitan and central district municipalities to produce gender-disaggregated data, which means that problems around gender equality may now become more visible for different municipal units. This potentially might enable municipalities to make more accurate decisions regarding gender equality and ultimately paves the way for a more inclusive and democratic city. Meanwhile, cooperation between municipalities for data sharing leads to more effective data governance. The meetings held with civil society organisations and groups to promote the use of the tool and the collaboration with different public institutions and the private companies in solving problems indicated in data submitted by citizens are promising steps towards democratic governance. Meanwhile, these developments towards

overcoming two important obstacles to local governance in Turkey confirm once again that technology is rather used for more effective governance, while citizen participation is largely ignored. What makes My Purple Map special in such a context is that the digital policy tool was developed jointly by an international organisation, a municipality and a civil society organization, and then handed over to the municipality. Today, the tool is located under the URL of and lies fully with the municipality. In order for My Purple Map to strengthen local democracy, the following steps need to be taken for its further development and improvement:

Planning the democratisation of data analysis: The municipality should plan to implement the promising innovations in data generation and sharing in data analysis and ensure that the analysis is also inclusive and participatory. To this end, the municipality should regularly update the data and diversify it with new data sets.

My Purple Map should provide open data:

All data available on Purple Map website should be shared in open data format.

Decisions taken based on My Purple Map should be made visible:

Decisions taken and implemented based on the website should be made visible for municipal units and civil society to better understand how the digital policy tool functions and for citizens to regain their (perhaps justifiably) lost faith in participation.

My Purple Map should be used in the preparation process of the 2024-2029 strategic plan:

Following the local elections in March 2024, municipalities should use My Purple Map and the data shared by citizens on this tool in their five-year strategic plans that they are obliged to prepare. Reference should be made to My Purple Map in the plans, and a performance indicator measuring the development of the tool should be included.

Local cooperation should be increased:

The negotiations for local cooperation initiated by EMM with the public and pri-

vate sectors should be extended to civil society organisations and universities. Cooperation should become more concrete and involve all stakeholders in planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Ensuring that more citizens and civil organisations use My Purple Map:

To this end, it is important to plan and carry out continuous, regular, accessible and open to diversities communication and dissemination activities.

Technology – municipality interaction should continue:

Data governance has improved thanks to the design and content of the My Purple Map digital policy tool. The updated data obtained as a result of improved data governance should be added to the tool, and the new design should encourage the municipality to work for new improvements.

NOTES

1. <https://morharitam.ankara.bel.tr/> - this website was transferred to Ankara Metropolitan Municipality after its development.

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