

THE NEOLIBERAL TRANSFORMATION OF TURKISH NGOs: A LEGITIMACY CRISIS PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

The implementation of neoliberal policies can transform the environment in which NGOs operate and potentially undermine their legitimacy and ability to fulfill their roles. This study examines the transformation of NGOs in Türkiye following the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s through the theoretical lens of Jürgen Habermas's concept of legitimacy crisis (Habermas 1975).

The primary goal of this study is to analyze how neoliberal policies have impacted the institutional legitimacy of NGOs in Türkiye. Neoliberalism emphasizes free markets, deregulation, and privatization, which can alter the relationship between citizens, the state, and civic organizations. By exploring these transformations through Habermas's theory, this research aims to provide new insights into the challenges faced by NGOs operating within a neoliberal system.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods are utilized. Qualitative document analysis of relevant literature forms the core methodology to identify prevailing themes regarding neoliberalism's effects. Quantitative data is also incorporated when available to empirically support qualitative findings. Taking a triangulation approach to analyzing material from diverse sources allows for consistent patterns to emerge.

This introduction lays out the problem statement and research purpose. It previews the methodology and provides contextual background on Habermas's theory of legitimacy crisis. The findings promise to contribute an original perspective to understanding NGO transformation in Türkiye in the wake of neoliberal reforms. However, further research is still needed to fully comprehend this complex topic and its broader implications.



While acknowledging the Turkish state's role in NGO transformation, this study primarily examines the changes brought about by external neoliberal influences as dictated by its research purpose. A full understanding of NGO evolution in Türkiye would require a more comprehensive analysis of both neoliberal impacts from the outside as well as the intervening role of the domestic political context. This presents an area for potential future research to build upon the findings of the current study.

Following the introduction section, the conceptual and theoretical framework related to the topic will be presented. In Chapter 3, the methodology of the study will be provided. Chapter 4, will be attempted to reveal through qualitative and quantitative data how NGOs transformed from non-profit organizations serving public benefit to profit-oriented commercial enterprises with the support of project-based funding mechanisms. This transformation will be examined, on the one hand, under the meta-concept of governance, in terms of increasing professionalization, bureaucratization, and corporatization, and on the other hand, in terms of decreasing legitimacy and social responsibility. The last section will open the topic to discussion based on the analysis of the findings and present a general evaluation as well as some solution recommendations regarding resolving the problem.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study uses Jürgen Habermas's concept of legitimacy crisis (1975) as the theoretical framework to analyze changes to NGOs in Türkiye following neoliberal reform. Habermas, a prominent German sociologist and philosopher, developed theories surrounding communication, rationality, and the public sphere. His notion of the legitimacy crisis provides a lens for understanding disruptions to institutions and civic participation under neoliberal policies (Fraser 2015).

For Habermas, legitimacy arises from a system's ability to justify itself through open democratic discussion (Papadopoulou 2006; Landwehr 2012). When the process of rational-critical debate that shapes public opinion and political will is undermined, a legitimacy crisis ensues (Habermas 1975). This can occur if state institutions become unresponsive to citizen interests or if certain groups are excluded from public discourse and decision making (Gaventa 2002; Cornwall–Gaventa 2001).

Habermas argued that neoliberal ideology prioritizes economic efficiency over the democratic process, weakening social integration (Bettache–Chiu–Beattie 2020; Hickel 2016; Moreira 2000). As markets replace politics as the primary mode of social coordination, citizens transition from participants to consumers with less capacity to influence decisions through public debate, and the legitimacy of governance is jeopardized (Ryan 2001).

This impacts both state-society relations and civic engagement. Privatization reduces state accountability while deregulation could limit civic access to the political arena (Beermann 2000; Gilmour–Jensen 1998).



The public sphere, where free discussion of issues shapes public opinion, contracts as economic rationality expands its scope (Frow 1992; Strani 2014; McKee 2005). With a weakened public sphere, opportunities for contesting power imbalances narrow (Fraser 2014).

Through this theoretical framework, the study analyzes how neoliberalism altered NGO legitimacy in Türkiye. It investigates disruptions to open debate, civic participation, and state responsiveness to citizens following reforms. Understanding transformations in this light provides insight into legitimacy crises for both institutions and democratic processes under a neoliberal model.

Neoliberalism

The theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding neoliberalism is grounded in various scholarly perspectives and theoretical approaches. This framework incorporates key concepts and ideas from multiple disciplines, including economics, political science, sociology, and philosophy. It draws upon the works of prominent scholars and thinkers who have contributed to the understanding of neoliberalism and its implications.

Neoliberalism, as an economic ideology, traces its roots to the works of economists such as Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Ludwig von Mises. Their writings emphasize the importance of free markets, individual choice, and limited government intervention in promoting economic growth and efficiency (Hayek 2009; Friedman 2020; von Mises 1949). These foundational theories provide the basis for understanding the core tenets of neoliberalism.

Politically, neoliberalism interacts with theories of government and state-state relations. The concept of the state-private sector, developed by political theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, emphasizes the separation between state-run public institutions and privately owned enterprises.

In addition, sociological perspectives shed light on the social implications of neoliberalism. The work of sociologists such as David Harvey and Pierre Bourdieu highlights the unequal distribution of power and resources that persists with neoliberal policies. Harvey (2005) argues that neoliberalism perpetuates social inequality through mechanisms such as wealth accumulation and the destruction of the social safety net. Bourdieu also highlights changes in social relations.

To examine the specific context of neoliberalism in Türkiye, this study may draw on relevant literature and economic indicators that analyze the country's neoliberal policies and their effects. For instance, works by scholars like Tuğal (2023) and Pamuk (2018) provide insights into the historical development and consequences of neoliberalism in Türkiye. These studies offer valuable perspectives on the political, economic, and social transformations associated with neoliberal policies related to Türkiye.



Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere draws on perspectives from political science, sociology, and communication studies. It includes basic principles and concepts that help us understand the nature, function, and implications of society in democratic societies.

Jürgen Habermas, coined the term to help understand society. In his seminal work, "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," Habermas (1991) argues that society is a place where individuals come together as rational beings, engage in meaningful discourse and protest concerns all open, inclusive, and publicly discussed communication. Demonstrate importance.

Habermas defines the public sphere as a space separate from the state and the market, where citizens can express themselves freely in public, debate, and form public opinion. This space is characterized by a commitment to understanding, equity, and inclusion, where individuals engage in fair and meaningful debate.

Other political theorists such as Nancy Fraser (2014) and Seyla Benhabib (1992) have extended Habermas's ideas, examining the role of power, inclusion, and social justice in society. Benhabib (2021) also emphasizes the importance of acceptance of different points of view and recognition and representation in society to ensure inclusiveness and democratic functioning.

Sociologists also contributed to the concept of civic role. For example, Irving Goffman's work on social networks and symbolic communication provides insight into how individuals perform their roles and identities in societal contexts (Goffman 1959). This approach contributes to understanding the dynamics of civic behavior and civic identity formation in society.

Civil Sphere

A key concept in understanding NGO transformations is Habermas's notion of the civil sphere. Situated between the private sphere of the family and intimate relations and the public sphere of state governance, the civil sphere encompasses spaces for voluntary association, collective will formation, and citizen engagement in public affairs (Calhoun 2001; Bahovec 2023). NGOs operate within the civil sphere by advocating for citizens and representing various social interests (Holmén –Jirström). They promote participation in debates over issues impacting society and help aggregate individual voices on matters of public concern. Through activities like advocacy campaigns, research, and civic education, NGOs enable groups to influence public opinion and government policies.

The civil sphere sits at the nexus between citizens and the state apparatus, facilitating input from diverse viewpoints and marginalized communities (Cohen –Arato 1992). It acts as a buffer that protects citizens and private interests from direct state control while pressuring the government to address valid demands.



A vibrant civil sphere with active NGO participation is crucial for deliberative democracy and political legitimacy (Fung 2003).

However, the civil sphere is vulnerable to disruption. Neoliberal reforms that reduce state capacities and roles while empowering private interests can distort civic spaces (Clark 2011). As commercial imperatives penetrate new areas of social life, non-profit missions clash more with market rationalities (Young 2005). NGOs face difficulties operating independently when their environment shifts toward private-sector logic.

Understanding the civil sphere conceptually provides insight into how organizational legitimacy and public discourse were challenged as neoliberalism restructured relationships between citizens, the state, and civic associations in Türkiye. The ensuing transformations have implications for democracy theory and NGO studies globally.

Governance

The term governance can specifically refer to changes in the nature and role of the government that followed public sector reforms in the 1980s and 1990s (OECD 2019). These reforms are said to have led to a shift from a hierarchical bureaucracy towards greater utilization of markets, quasi-markets, and networks, particularly in the delivery of public services. The impacts of the reforms were intensified by global changes, including an increase in transnational economic activity and the rise of regional institutions such as the European Union (EU). Understood in this way, governance expresses a widespread belief that the government has grown more reliant on other organizations to achieve its goals, implement its policies, and establish rules.

By analogy, governance can also be used to describe any system of rules that arises either when the government depends on others or when the government plays little or no part (Clegg 2019). For example, the phrase international governance often refers to the system of rules at the global level where the United Nations (UN) is too weak to resemble the type of government that can impose its will throughout its territory. Similarly, the term corporate governance refers to systems, institutions, and norms by which corporations are directed and controlled (Chowhan 2015). Understood in this manner, governance conveys a heightened awareness of how dispersed forms of power and authority can ensure order even without government action.

More generally, governance can refer to all systems of rule, including the type of hierarchical state that was often thought to have previously existed before the public sector reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. This broad use of governance allows theorists to explore abstract analyses of social order construction, social coordination, or social practices irrespective of their specific substance. They can separate such abstract analyses from specific inquiries about subjects like the government,



the international system, or corporations. However, this general interpretation necessitates a more specific term, such as new governance, to reference changes in the government since the 1980s (Bevir 2023)

Legitimacy Crisis

In his work "Legitimation Problems in Late Capitalism", published in 1973 Habermas discussed the economic and social crisis tendencies emerging in society at that time (Habermas 1973). He analyzed social integration as occurring between two dimensions – system integration within capitalist market relations, and social integration within the lifeworld of norms and values. This distinction provides an important context for understanding Habermas's overall theoretical perspective on legitimacy crises.

Habermas conceptualized that legitimacy arises from an ongoing process of justification between the administrative system (government, legal institutions) which handles system integration, and the public sphere where citizens engage in democratic will-formation as part of social integration in the lifeworld (Regilme 2016). As long as both spheres remain integrated through open debate and state accountability, the balance between these two mechanisms maintains political legitimacy.

However, he argued that in late capitalism, the expanded role of economic rationalities and priorities within both the system and lifeworld realms disrupts this link (Pan 2014). When market forces and values of efficiency start to dominate not just the system domain but also penetrate political and community spaces traditionally open to democratic influence, it chips away at social integration (Bennett 2023). Citizens then have less capacity to shape decisions through public reasoning and input into governance.

This breakdown in the justificatory process between the state apparatus, public sphere, and citizenry leads to a legitimacy crisis for the overall societal-political organization according to Habermas's conceptualization. NGOs operating within civil society are also impacted, as their environment and role within the public sphere and lifeworld are transformed under growing market logic. Understanding these disruptions through Habermas's legitimacy crisis lens provides a theoretical framework for analyzing impacts on institutions like NGOs.

The Development of Non-Profit Organizations in the Republic of Türkiye

The late Ottoman Empire witnessed the emergence of organizations resembling modern non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These included societies, associations, and foundations established by Ottoman intellectuals, such as the Turkish Hearths, the Red Crescent, and the Turkish Women's Union.



However, these NGOs of the period operated under state control and with state permission.

Following the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, especially in the 1950s with the transition to a multi-party political system, NGOs experienced a revitalization. Professional organizations, labor unions, and associations expanded their activities and began to serve as pressure groups. Yet, in the pre-1980 period, the state maintained a tight control mechanism over NGOs.

The neoliberal policies that emerged in the 1980s brought about significant changes in the structure and functioning of the Turkish state, which also manifested in the structure of non-profit organizations and state-NGO relations. With the advent of neoliberalism, the state began to view NGOs as actors that could undertake and support its functions.

During this period, the influence of international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank also reshaped the scope of activities and structures of NGOs. These institutions, through their policy recommendations and impositions on Türkiye, substantially impacted the organization and functioning of NGOs. Particularly, the emphasis on project-based financing models and the NGOs' role as service providers altered their agenda and foundations of legitimacy.

Consequently, NGOs shifted away from their previous advocacy, critical, and pressure group functions, and instead oriented towards service delivery in areas determined by the state and international institutions. This situation posed problems in terms of NGO autonomy and the independent development of democracy. The increasing dependence of NGOs on the state and international organizations also brought about a legitimacy crisis.

Methodology

This study aims to comprehensively analyze the structural and functional transformations of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Türkiye in recent years. To achieve this objective, the research process adopted a mixed-method approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data sources.

Complementing the qualitative findings, the quantitative data presented in *Table 3* shed light on the changes in the revenue sources of NGOs, highlighting the trend of commercialization. While the comprehensive statistical data on the financial structures of NGOs was limited, the available indicators were leveraged to provide a robust account of the numerical shifts within the sector. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods contributed to a multidimensional understanding of the research problem. This approach enabled the researchers to explore the underlying dynamics driving the transformations of NGOs, as well as observe and report on the numerical changes in the sector.

The use of a mixed-method approach was instrumental in capturing the complex and multifaceted nature of the transformations experienced by NGOs in Türkiye.



The in-depth examination of qualitative data allowed for the exploration of the underlying mechanisms, while the quantitative data facilitated the observation and robust reporting of the numerical variations within the NGO landscape.

Transformation of NGOs from Non-Profit Organizations Serving Public Benefit to Profit-Oriented Commercial Enterprises

This section will first provide historical context around the changes Turkish NGOs underwent after the 1970s economic transition. As Keynesian policies were replaced by neoliberalism, international organizations like the IMF and World Bank altered their funding approaches. They moved away from long-term core grants and towards short-term project funding. This shift heavily influenced NGO activities. With decreasing basic support, NGOs had to pursue more commercial sources of income. They began functioning more like businesses, focusing on securing contracts and delivering contracted services on schedule. This pushed NGOs to prioritize sustainability over advocacy and act more as service providers for projects than social service providers for the well-being of the community. The analysis will explore how international funding changes pressured NGOs to become more business-like, replacing their initial social missions with an entrepreneurial approach. It will examine how this 'NGO commercialization' weakened their independence.

One of the clearest tools demonstrating the transformation of NGOs was the shift from core funding to project-based funding. The 1989 Washington Consensus Agreement marked a turning point in how international financial institutions engaged with and funded developing nations like Türkiye. Through structural adjustment loans, the IMF and World Bank pushed neoliberal economic reforms and austerity measures. This also had ramifications for the NGO sector in Türkiye. Starting in the late 1980s and 1990s, these organizations shifted away from regular or core funding provided to Turkish NGOs. Instead, funding became tied to specific development projects approved by the institutions. This project-based approach aimed to direct NGO activities towards priorities set by the IMF and World Bank, such as privatization, deregulation, and small government. It gave them greater influence and control over how foreign aid money was used within Türkiye. However, it also diminished the NGO's autonomy and pushed them to prioritize fundraising and project implementation over providing social services for the community. The Washington Consensus agreement paved the way for the commercializing transformation of Turkish NGOs through its conditions on future financing.

Their shifted priorities and professionalized operations undermined the perception of NGOs as champions for societal issues, acting instead as administrators of donor policies with less accountability to citizens. In these ways, project-based funding precipitated a crisis of institutional legitimacy for NGOs according to Habermas's theory, with implications for how democracy and popular will formation function.



We will now explore how this shift to project-based funding led to transformations within NGOs, particularly in terms of increased professionalization, bureaucratization, and corporatization on the one hand and decreased legitimization and social responsibility on the other hand.

Changing Policies of Organizations Providing Development and Credit Support from Core Funding to Project-Based Funding

The 1989 Washington Consensus Agreement marked a turning point in how international financial institutions engaged with developing nations like Türkiye (Williamson, 2004; Van Waeyenberge, 2009). This informal agreement between the IMF and World Bank aimed to produce policies furthering neoliberal globalization.

Its 10 core principles focused on fiscal discipline, tax reform, interest rate liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and property rights (Moosa, 2021; Marangos, 2020). While lacking a social dimension, this market-oriented framework helped reshape the public sector in Türkiye through the 1980s–90s. A Post-Washington Consensus then emerged emphasizing social welfare, poverty reduction, and inclusive development (Güven 2008; Lopes 2012; Frettsome 2014).

This neoliberal shift through structural adjustment loans similarly impacted third-sector organizations, which are different organizations with different structures and purposes, belonging neither to the public sector (i.e., the state) nor to the private sector, partnering with the state on projects (Carroll–Jarvis 2015). Critically, both the imposed management paradigm and business concepts propagating at this time pushed for lean, efficient operations with fewer resources.

It directed attention not just to "what" services were provided but increasingly "how" through private sector thinking. This conflicted with traditionally informal, horizontal relationships in civil society and pushed organizations towards a market culture of contracted work over advocacy.

While changes can be examined in various ways, key trends included increased professionalization, bureaucratization, and corporatization on the one hand, and decreased legitimization and social responsibility. The transformative effects of these paradigms went beyond structures to influence third-sector activities and culture more broadly.

Difference Between Core Funding and Project Based Funding

The main difference between core funding and project-based funding for NGOs is how restricted the funds are and what they can support (Kaplan 2023). Core funding provides general, unrestricted financial support that an NGO can allocate at its discretion (Graham 2017; Wiepking–De Wit 2023). This type of funding supports overall organizational costs like salaries, rent, utilities, and other overhead expenses.



It gives NGOs flexibility to focus on their long-term mission and strategic goals rather than chasing individual grants (Bayraktar 2017). Since core funds are not tied to any specific program or donor, they also promote independence (Bräutigam 2000).

Project-based funding, on the other hand, is tied directly to a particular project or activity (Vural 2007). The funds can only be used to cover the specific expenses outlined in the project proposal that was submitted to and approved by the donor (Wallaca 2004). This encourages NGOs to prioritize the goals of individual donors over their strategic plans and missions (Elbers–Arts 2011). Additionally, it creates dependency since the organization must consistently secure new projects simply to cover operating costs (Golini–Kalchschmidt–Landoni 2015). While useful for specific work, it exercises more control and strings from the donor organization through restricted funding.

The shift from traditional core funding models towards more project-based funding for NGOs has been one of the major successes of neoliberalism (Baines 2010). This trend was influenced by the business paradigm prioritizing competition, measurability, and efficiency over accountability and social goals (Scott 2003).

Core funding previously covered major administrative costs, but project funding generally does not (Akbay 2015; Gibson et al. 2007). While core funding allows flexibility, project funding gives donors more control over content (Scott, 2003). Core models also enabled longer-term, stable institutions compared to short-term project cycles (Gibson et al. 2007). This shift occurred not just for domestic NGOs but also impacted local organizations worldwide through international donors and large INGOs (Agg 2006; Cooley–Ron 2002; Pfeiffer 2003; Stoddard 2003).

Project funding prioritizes donor priorities, results-based programs, and contract monitoring over unrestricted support (Akbay 2015). This has pushed NGOs towards project sustainability, efficiency, quantification, and collaboration over advocacy and social goals (Gümüş 2010; Lacey–Ilcan 2006). *Table 1.* shows the differences between core funding and project-based funding.



Table 1. Corporate Finance vs Project Finance

Item	Corporate Finance	Project Finance
Destination of the Financing	Multipurpose	Single Purpose
Duration of the Financing	Variable	Long-term and limited by the lifetime of the Project
Financial Structure	Debt-holders not related	Debt-holders tied by a general agreement
Risk analysis	Highly dependent on financial statements and cash flow	In addition, technical considerations, contractual agreements, and the debt structure are all very important
Liquidity of the financial instruments	Can be high if they are negotiated on capital markets	Generally low, as the financial agreement is private, made to measure, and impregnated with contractual relationships
Financial costs	Relatively low	Relatively high, owing to both the structuring costs and the low liquidity of the instruments
Room for management to make decisions	Plenty if the company has open capital	Little owing to the contractual structure
Agency costs	High if the company has open capital	Low, as the contractual structure leaves little margin for independent action by the partners

Source: Ghersi-Cárdenas (2006).

Governance in Terms of Increased Professionalization, Bureaucratization, Corporatization

There is an inherent link between neoliberal governance models and the conception of non-governmental organizations. Governance goes beyond merely involving NGOs in decision-making, encompassing a deregulated state aligned with neoliberal principles of state-market relations. NGOs are tasked with delivering certain public services, seemingly substituting for the social state. Democratic values referred to also have organic ties to neoliberalism. Transparency, accountability, and effectiveness are framed in marketized terms.

Critical scholars note that governance serves as a metaphor for subjecting societies to market domination (Van Dijck 2021). It functions as an ideological vehicle for neoliberal bombardment (Brown 2002). The connection between governance and neoliberalism is not incidental but organic (Ataay 2006).

Neoliberal policies from the 1980s saw international institutions promote project-based funding for NGOs.



This shifted NGO activities towards donor priorities and technical project cycles. Administrative costs went unpaid, threatening sustainability (Gianni–Michele–Lozza 2021).

Increased bureaucracy and reporting burdens rendered voluntary models unsustainable. NGOs rapidly professionalized, and compelled to hire specialists in management, finance, and project implementation (Jordan 2005; Girei 2023). Decision-making centralized as technical expertise rose to the fore. Activities narrowed to measurable outputs, straying from societal needs (Ghatak 2021). Competition emerged for scarce funding. NGO identity and autonomy faced challenges accommodating donor and market logic under the new governance framework (Mitchell–Schmitz 2014; Midgley 2023).

The primary connection between governance and neoliberalism is defined through the model of the "regulatory state" (Jones–Hameiri 2022). As promoted by the IMF and World Bank in developing countries, this model constrains the state's role in market regulation while excluding economic interventionism and public services.

A distinguishing aspect is that after establishing market primacy through minimal state involvement Hopkin (2020), the need arises to address market regulation. It is here that governance mechanisms become crucial for the state to effectively fulfill this function according to the regulatory framework.

Governance thus emerges as the link between the regulatory state model and neoliberalism. It is presented as a more efficient method for market regulation compared to direct state control. Adopting governance is considered an incremental step that enhances the system's adaptive capacity to market dynamics and change over time. In this sense, the World Bank defines governance as the way authority is used in the management of economic and social resources necessary for the development of a country (DPT (State Planning Organization), 2005).

Another key aspect linking neoliberalism and governance is how democratic principles are conceptualized. Governance encompasses values like "effectiveness", "transparency", and "accountability". At first glance, these appear to be universal democratic ideals. However, international financial institutions define them through a neoliberal lens. "Effectiveness" means running public institutions according to market logic (Virani–van der Wal 2023). "Transparency" focuses on openness towards corporations and foreign capital (Nadesan 2011).

"Accountability" denotes international auditing of public administration. "Rule of law" prioritizes international arbitration over domestic courts for foreign investment disputes. "Subsidiarity" prohibits central governments from providing public services. Rather than their intended democratic essence, these principles are emptied of meaning within neoliberalism (Nalci 2000; Koç 2009). Their inclusion merely obscures neoliberal penetration. The relationship is also apparent through opposition to the welfare state. Neoliberal reforms aimed to commercialize and privatize services formerly provided by the state. While transferred to NGOs, services effectively rely on charitable mechanisms with dwindling state responsibility.



As inequality rises under neoliberal policies, NGO activities become less impactful. Ultimately, governance functions to dismantle social policies by reframing the transfer of "public duties" to voluntary groups as a prudent transition, masking the true impact of commodifying services to benefit capital accumulation (Insel 2005).

According to Harvey (2007), Neoliberalism plays a major role in dismantling social policies and transferring public services to NGOs. The state is portrayed as inefficient, wasting resources and enabling corruption. Voluntary organizations delivering services are presented as more suitable. This links civil society opposition to the state with neoliberal market promotion, justifying state antagonism through an ideology uniting society and markets against the welfare state.

Engaging NGOs in projects also conceals neoliberal implications (Ismail–Kamat 2018). Poverty programs increase entrepreneurship while neoliberalism exacerbates socioeconomic issues. This masks the links between policies, and problems and focuses solutions on individual initiative alone.

Overall, governance was strategically introduced, not coincidentally, by neoliberals to overcome past failings while embedding neoliberal logic in democracy, the state model, and social programs. It aims to subordinate societies to markets disguised as a "neutral" democracy project. The relationship between governance and neoliberalism is organic rather than incidental or temporary.

Governance and Non-Governmental Organizations

It is often claimed that within the governance model, NGOs have emerged as channels for societal demands in response to the crisis of representation in political parties and traditional democracy (Ünlü 2019). Moreover, NGOs are presented as enabling a more pluralist and participatory democracy beyond the limitations of representation (Mirowski 2014). However, this view overlooks that the legitimacy crisis stems fundamentally from liberal democracy's failure to be responsive to societal demands under neoliberal policies, not shortcomings in representation itself (Brenner–Theodore 2002). The economic crisis reduced democracy's pluralist character and restricted political participation (Harvey 2007). Rather than Brown (2003) considering alternatives to address neoliberalism's disconnect from demands, governance strategically implements an appearance of participation and pluralism while maintaining underlying neoliberal priorities. This disguises the principal problem of the state neglecting societal needs (Wedel et al. 2005).

Thus framing NGOs as demand representatives obscures how unresponsiveness arises from neoliberal domination curbing democracy's content, not its form (Peck–Tickell 2002). The governance approach conceptualizes a superficial solution regarding how input is channeled, not the neoliberal roots of the authentic democratic deficit (Amin 2013).

Increased professionalization, bureaucratization, corporatization

The rise of neo-liberalism and the New Public Management (NPM) approach has significantly transformed both the public sector and NGOs. Four prominent trends can be observed in this transformation:

Focus on performance, efficiency, and narrow accountability: Neo-liberalism has disseminated managerial thinking in the public and third sectors, shifting the focus from "what" services are provided to "how" they are delivered.

The dominance of market logic: Both sectors have been encouraged to conduct their activities based on a competitive market rationale, aiming to operate in a "better, faster, and cheaper" manner.

Organizational transformation: Non-profit organizations have evolved towards a market-oriented culture, characterized by the need to accomplish more with fewer personnel and lower wages.

Weakening of civil society attributes: The horizontal, informal, and solidarity-based structures and cultures of non-profit organizations have increasingly resembled market competition and bureaucratic forms.

These four trends have led to significant transformations in the traditional characteristics of public and third-sector organizations, rendering them more "business-like" in nature.

In this part of the study, we will focus on the transformation of NGOs in Türkiye in terms of increased professionalization, bureaucratization, and corporatization on the one hand and decreased legitimacy and social responsibility on the other hand.

Increased Professionalization

In recent decades, the rise of neo-liberalism and the New Public Management (NPM) approach have significantly reshaped the dynamics within both the public sector and non-governmental organizations (Günel, 2010). This transformation has been driven by the widespread dissemination of managerial thinking and market-oriented practices, which have fundamentally altered the nature and operations of these organizations (Anheier 2009; Gray et al. 2006; Çamur–Aydın 2022).

One of the key features of this transformation is the increasing emphasis on performance, efficiency, and a narrow conception of accountability. The neo-liberal and NPM frameworks have sought to redefine the role and functioning of public sector institutions, as well as the organizations within the non-governmental sector, by subjecting them to a market-based logic (Baysal 2017; Anheier 2009; Gray et al. 2006). This shift has been driven by the notion that the public and non-governmental sectors can be managed more effectively by adopting the same principles and practices that are typically associated with the private sector, such as a focus on cost-cutting, productivity enhancement, and the pursuit of measurable outcomes.



Consequently, both public sector organizations and NGOs have been increasingly expected to operate within a "lean and mean" philosophy, where the emphasis is on doing more with less, and where the "bang-for-the-buck" mentality becomes the dominant framework for evaluating their activities and achievements (Bulut–Akin–Kahraman 2017; Detomasi 2007: 325). This has led to a significant transformation in the organizational structures, practices, and cultures of these entities, as they strive to align themselves with the demands of the market-oriented approach.

In the case of NGOs, this shift has had particularly profound implications. These organizations, which were traditionally viewed as embodying the values of civil society, such as horizontal, informal, and solidarity-based relationships, have been subject to a similar process of "managerialism" (Lang 2012). The drive for increased efficiency, measurable outcomes, and competitive advantage has led many NGOs to adopt organizational structures and practices that resemble those found in the private sector, often at the expense of their original mission and values (Özsağlam 2019).

One of the most significant manifestations of this transformation is the increasing emphasis on project-based funding and the corresponding rise of a "projectification" mentality within the non-governmental sector (Jacobsen 2022; Aslan 2016). As NGOs have become increasingly reliant on external funding sources, often provided by government agencies or private donors, they have been compelled to align their activities and priorities with the requirements of these funding mechanisms. This has resulted in a shift away from a more holistic, values-driven approach to service delivery, towards a more fragmented, output-oriented model that prioritizes the successful completion of individual projects (Taşğın–Özel 2011).

The impact of these transformations on the public and non-governmental sectors has been far-reaching (Lewis–Kanji–Themudo 2020). The shift towards a more market-oriented, performance-driven approach has not only altered the internal dynamics of these organizations but has also raised questions about their ability to maintain their traditional roles and responsibilities within the broader societal landscape (Hanay–Uzun–Özder 2020).

Table 2. Fields of specialization of NGOs between 1980–2020 Period

Period	Economy	Education	Health	Environment	Social Services	Justice	Other
1980–1990	%15	%20	%12	%10	%18	%8	%17
1990–2000	%18	%22	%15	%12	%20	%7	%6
2000–2010	%22	%25	%18	%15	%15	%5	%0
2010–2020	%25	%28	%20	%17	%8	%2	%0

Source: Erdoğan 2020; Özdemir-Başel-Şenocak 2010).

Table 2. presenting the sectoral specialization of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Türkiye during the post-1980 period reveals a clear reflection of the transformative impact of neoliberal influences on these civil society actors.

A closer examination of the data suggests several key points. Firstly, the increasing share of NGOs in the economic sector, rising from 15% to 25%, indicates that neoliberal policies have steered these organizations towards a more economy-centric orientation. This shift aligns with the broader trend of NGOs becoming more aligned with market-driven priorities. Alongside this economic focus, the table also highlights the growing presence of NGOs in the education and health sectors, with their share increasing from 20% to 28% and 12% to 20%, respectively. This suggests that NGOs have attempted to fill the gaps left by the state's diminishing role in public service provision, as the neoliberal agenda has led to a reconfiguration of the welfare state. Interestingly, the data also reveals a rise in the proportion of NGOs engaged in the environmental domain, climbing from 10% to 17%. This indicates a heightened sensitivity to environmental issues within the civil society sphere, as NGOs have become more attuned to the pressing ecological concerns of the time.

In contrast to these expansions, the table also points to a decline in the share of NGOs operating in the social services and legal sectors, dropping from 18% to 8% and 8% to 2% respectively. This suggests a weakening of NGOs' traditional roles as champions of social justice and rights-based advocacy, potentially signaling a shift away from their historical mission of promoting civic empowerment and democratization. Furthermore, the complete elimination of the "other" category in the later periods suggests a more focused and specialized approach adopted by NGOs, as they have streamlined their activities within more defined domains.

Overall, the table depicts a transformation in the orientation of Turkish NGOs in the post-1980 period, where they have become increasingly centered on economic, educational, health, and environmental concerns, while their engagement in social welfare and rights-based activities appears to have diminished. This shift in the priorities and mission of NGOs may have profound implications for the broader democratization process, as their traditional role as champions of social justice and civic empowerment may have been eroded.



Increased Bureaucratization

The implementation of neoliberal policies and the increasing availability of project-based grants in Türkiye during the post-1980 period have significantly contributed to the growing bureaucratization of Turkish non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Borsuk–Dinç–Kavak–Sayan 2021).

To elaborate on this, it is important to note that the economic liberalization and privatization policies adopted in Türkiye after 1980 led to a limitation in the transfer of public resources to NGOs (Eder 2010). This circumstance prompted these organizations to seek more professional and bureaucratic structures to secure their funding needs (Ketola 2013).

Alongside this neoliberal transformation, the constraints on public resources also directed NGOs towards the project-based funding provided by international institutions, such as the European Union and the World Bank. The acquisition and management of these funds heightened the institutional capacity and professionalization of NGOs, but it also contributed to the strengthening of their bureaucratic structures (Zihnioğlu 2019). Furthermore, the detailed reporting and accountability requirements imposed by project-based funding increased the development of more accurate and bureaucratic processes within the internal operations of NGOs. This, in turn, led to a gradual hardening of the flexible and participatory structures that had previously characterized these civil society actors. Notably, project-based financing also steered NGOs towards specialization in specific domains and the establishment of more institutionalized frameworks. However, this shift resulted in these organizations increasingly aligning their agendas with the demands of the funding sources, rather than pursuing their priorities (Becerikli–Köroğlu 2017).

The growing dependence on external funding sources inevitably weakened the autonomy of NGOs. Their institutional priorities and activities began to be increasingly shaped by the demands of their stakeholders, rather than being driven by their internal motivations.

Increased Corporatization

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have historically played important roles in producing solutions to social problems, carrying out advocacy activities for the public good, and encouraging citizen participation (Yavaşca 2021; Salamon–Anheier 1992). However, in recent years, with the widespread adoption of project-based financing models and an entrepreneurial management approach globally, NGOs have been exhibiting an increasing tendency toward commercialization (Aktaş–Giderler–Akdeve 2023). This transformation process is also clearly being experienced in Türkiye. Particularly since the 2000s, issues such as strengthening the institutional capacities in the civil society field (Demirkaya–Çelik 2021), increasing service delivery capacities (Ayhan–Önder 2021), and developing sustainable financing models (Saka 2024) have come to the forefront.



As a result, NGOs have started to engage in more intensive collaborations with public and private sector actors, orient towards profit-generating activities, and position themselves with a more entrepreneurial approach.

When examining the underlying dynamics of this transformation, two main factors stand out. The first is the strengthening of the role of NGOs in public service delivery as a result of fiscal constraints in the public sector and the adoption of a new public management approach (Çam 2023). In particular, local administrations have started to deliver various public services and social assistance through NGOs, thus directing NGOs towards undertaking more commercial functions (Gürel-Özdemir 2009).

The second important factor is the change in the funding models of international donors towards NGOs. Project-based, performance-oriented, and sustainability-focused funding approaches have been encouraging NGOs to increase their revenues and develop entrepreneurial and innovative solutions (Çiftçi 2015). This has led NGOs to shift their activities towards more commercial areas and develop new revenue models such as service sales and social entrepreneurship. According to Buğra (2016), this commercialization trend observed in Türkiye carries certain risks in terms of the fundamental values and functions of NGOs. First, the delicate balance between the public-interest mission of NGOs and the profit motive can be disrupted, which can lead to a weakening of their advocacy and oversight roles (Göz 2022). Moreover, the autonomy and democratic participation mechanisms of NGOs can also be threatened (Van Tuijl 1999). On the other hand, the strengthening of the entrepreneurship and innovation capacities of NGOs, the diversification of the services provided, and the improvement of their quality have also been observed as positive outcomes (Ateş 2017).

In conclusion, the commercialization process experienced by non-governmental organizations in Türkiye in recent years is shaped by both the internal dynamics of NGOs and external environmental factors. How this transformation is managed, by preserving the fundamental values and functions of NGOs and directing it in a way that will enhance the quality and social impact of the services provided, is of critical importance for the strengthening of Türkiye's democratization and social welfare.

Table 3. Commercialization Tendency of NGOs in the Post-1980 Period

Period	Commercial Income	Donation/Aid/Membership Income	Project Based Income	Other Income
1980–1990	%10	%50	%30	%10
1990–2000	%15	%45	%35	%5
2000–2010	%25	%35	%35	%5
2010–2020	%35	%25	%35	%5

Source: Erdoğan 2020; Özdemir-Başel-Şenocak 2010; Özer-Sokolowski-Haddock-Salamon 2016.



The data presented in *Table 3* reveals a distinct trend of increasing commercialization among non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the post-1980 period. Over four decades, from 1980–1990 to 2010–2020, there has been a marked shift in the revenue composition of these civil society organizations.

In the early period of 1980–1990, NGOs derived a majority of their income, around 50%, from donations, aid, and membership fees. This traditional philanthropic model was complemented by project-based revenues, which accounted for 30% of total income. Commercial activities made up only 10% of NGOs' financial resources during this time.

However, the following decades witnessed a gradual but steady increase in the importance of commercial revenue streams for NGOs. By the 2000–2010 period, the share of commercial income had risen to 25%, nearly matching the 35% contribution from project-based funding and surpassing the 35% share of donation, aid, and membership fees. This trend of commercialization accelerated further in the 2010–2020 period, with commercial revenues reaching 35% of NGOs' total income. Conversely, the proportion of donation, aid, and membership fees declined to just 25%, while project-based funding maintained its 35% share.

Decreased Legitimacy and Social Responsibility

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Türkiye have come to the fore as actors in the governance model, especially since the 1990s. However, this model has led NGOs to become instruments that undertake the regulatory functions of the state rather than being autonomous institutions that voice social demands (Aygül 1997). Within the framework of the governance model, the promises made to NGOs, such as "devolution of authority to civil society" and "increasing the initiative of citizens", are nothing more than efforts to reproduce the hegemony of capital. This model restricts citizenship rights in the political sphere, allowing private interests to present themselves as the common interests of society (Ataay, 2006).

Consequently, NGOs in Türkiye are increasingly representing the interests of the state and the market rather than the demands of the people (Gündüz–Kaya 2014; Ünlü 2019). This situation has led NGOs to face legitimacy challenges. The public is increasingly aware that NGOs represent the interests of the state and the market, rather than their interests (Yeşildal 2020).

Due to neoliberal policies, changes have also been observed in the context of the social responsibility of NGOs in Türkiye (Biter–Şener 2021). Some NGOs have made profit-making their primary objective, focusing on meeting the needs of the state and the market rather than working for social transformation and change. This situation also weakens the social legitimacy of NGOs (Şen 2008). It can be said that NGOs in Türkiye are increasingly aligned with the interests of the state and the market under the influence of neoliberal policies. This transformation has led to changes in the context of both the legitimacy and social responsibility of NGOs (İnsel 2005).



Therefore, to strengthen civil society (Reianu 2024) and deepen the democratization process in Türkiye, the autonomy and social responsibilities of NGOs need to be reinforced (Şahin–Akboğa 2019; Yeşiltaş 2006; Sönmez 2019).

Acknowledgment

The present study draws on Jürgen Habermas' concept of "legitimation crisis" to explore the transformation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Türkiye under the influence of neoliberal policies. While Habermas' theoretical framework presents certain limitations in fully explaining the Turkish context, it also offers some universally applicable insights into the development of civil society in Türkiye.

Habermas' emphasis on the critical importance of state-civil society relations for democratic legitimacy resonates with the Turkish case, where the nature of state-NGO interactions significantly shapes the empowerment and democratization of civil society. Similarly, Habermas' recognition of the significance of public participation, deliberation, and consensus-building processes provides a valuable reference point for understanding the evolution of civil society in Türkiye.

However, Habermas' theoretical framework is primarily rooted in Western contexts and may not fully capture the unique historical, cultural, and political dynamics of Türkiye. For instance, the relationships between the state and NGOs in Türkiye may differ from Habermas' assumptions about Western democracies. Moreover, the impact of neoliberal transformations on Turkish NGOs may diverge from the experiences of their Western counterparts.

In this regard, even though Habermas' "legitimation crisis" concept may have limited explanatory power regarding the transformation of Turkish NGOs under neoliberal policies, his theoretical insights can still contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of civil society development in the Turkish context. By adapting Habermas' concepts to the specific conditions of Türkiye and considering local dynamics, this study aims to offer a nuanced analysis of the evolving role and challenges faced by civil society in Türkiye.

Discussion and Conclusion

The rise of neoliberal policies has led to significant transformations in the structure and functions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Türkiye, as well as other developing countries, through the governance model implemented by global financial institutions (Baysal 2017; Çam 2023). The widespread adoption of project-based financing has caused NGOs to evolve into more professional, bureaucratic, and corporatized forms.

This change can be evaluated within the framework of Habermas's (1975) concept of legitimacy crisis.



The governance model's weakening of democratic participation and the independent voice of civil society has led to a loss of legitimacy for NGOs. Indeed, NGOs have increasingly become organizations that represent the interests of state and market powers (Ünlü 2019; Gündüz–Kaya 2014).

Project-based financing has limited the autonomy of NGOs and their ability to set their agendas. Intensive reporting, auditing, and control mechanisms have alienated NGOs from their missions and goals, directing them toward the priorities of donors (Roberts–Jones–Fröhling 2005; Drązkiewicz-Grodzicka 2016). This has resulted in the weakening of traditional NGO characteristics such as flexibility, participation, and horizontal structures.

On the other hand, the project-based financing model has also contributed to the professionalization, specialization, and strengthening of the institutional capacities of NGOs. Thus, some NGOs have become capable of delivering more effective services, developing innovative solutions, and establishing sustainable financing models (Ateş 2017; Saka 2024). This has allowed NGOs to participate more in the provision of public services and respond more quickly to societal needs.

However, the prominence of the profit-making objective has weakened the social transformation and change-oriented functions of NGOs, creating problems in terms of legitimacy and social responsibility (Göz 2022; Buğra 2016). In this process, NGOs have begun to become organizations that serve the interests of state and market actors.

In the case of Türkiye, the increasing role of NGOs in the governance model since the 1990s can be interpreted as a concrete manifestation of the legitimacy crisis described by Habermas (1975). The narrowing of the channels for political representation of social demands has created the expectation that NGOs will fill this gap. However, within the governance model, NGOs have become organizations that represent the interests of the state and the market (Ataay 2006; Aygül 1998).

This transformation has led to a loss of legitimacy for NGOs and a narrowing of their social responsibility domains. The public has increasingly become aware that NGOs are extensions of state and market powers (Yeşildal 2020; Şen 2008). On the other hand, the fact that some NGOs have made profit-making their primary objective has weakened their role in the civil society's struggle for change and transformation.

All these developments have a limiting effect on the progress of the democratization and social justice agenda in Türkiye. Strengthening civil society as an independent actor, deepening democratic participation, and expanding citizenship rights are integral parts of this agenda. In this context, various policy recommendations can be developed to strengthen the autonomy and social responsibilities of NGOs:

First, it is important to revive the core funding model alongside the project-based financing provided to NGOs. This will increase the capacity of NGOs to determine their strategic priorities and create a more independent agenda in response to social demands.

Second, the reporting, auditing, and accountability mechanisms of NGOs should be reorganized in a more transparent and participatory manner. This will strengthen the responsibilities of these organizations towards both the state and society.

Third, the role and capacity of NGOs in the provision of public services should be increased, but in a manner that is consistent with the principles of democratic participation and social responsibility. This can help NGOs to gain both effectiveness and legitimacy.

Finally, supporting the capacity of NGOs to develop social entrepreneurship, innovation, and sustainable financing models can contribute to their becoming organizations that respond not only to state and market interests but also to societal demands.

These policy recommendations will contribute to the strengthening of civil society in Türkiye, the expansion of democratic participation, and the advancement of the social justice agenda. Therefore, the restructuring of NGOs should be considered as a key component of the democratization process.

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