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# LOCAL SSE POLICIES ENABLING THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

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## WORKING PAPER

Consumer cooperatives faced with metropolitan politicization:  
the new agricultural and food public policy in Istanbul

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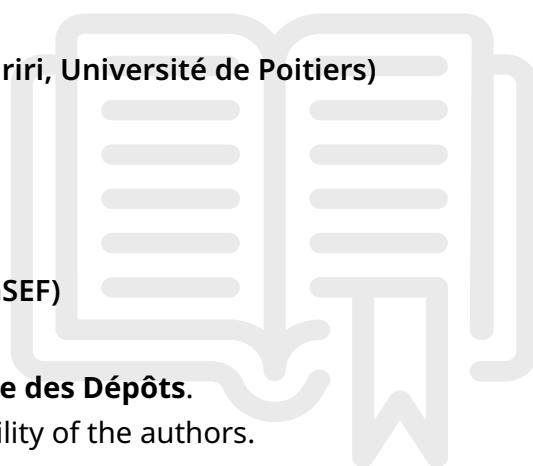
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# Consumer cooperatives faced with metropolitan politicization: the new agricultural and food public policy in Istanbul<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The arrest of Istanbul's mayor on March 19, 2025, sparked a protest movement against the AKP government<sup>2</sup>. Ekrem İmamoğlu, the undisputed leader in Istanbul since 2019, represents the opposition party, the CHP<sup>3</sup>, and inspires considerable public hope in the lead-up to the 2028 presidential elections. Barred from running in the 2023 presidential elections, he is mobilizing increasingly broad electoral support. However, the current conflict between modernists and conservatives since the late 19th century, a feature of the history of Turkish political life, is not entirely surprising, as the 2023 celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Turkey could have foreshadowed it, given the government's authoritarian drift<sup>4</sup>.

The electoral success of the CHP in 2019, amplified in 2024 by winning a large majority of Turkey's municipalities, is the first real sign of the erosion of the AKP's political hegemony

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from French: GAJAC, O., ÖZDOĞAN K., « Les coopératives de consommation face à la politisation métropolitaine : la nouvelle politique publique agricole et alimentaire à Istanbul », *Politiques locales d'ESS au service de la transition socio-écologique*, GSEF, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> The Justice and Development Party, founded in 2001.

<sup>3</sup> The Republican People's Party, founded in 1923.

<sup>4</sup> The unsuccessful submission of an ANR and IDEX project, three consecutive years in which the aim was to analyze the construction of public policies from the perspective of civil society in view of the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Republic, and a probable political conflict between the two historical and mass parties of Turkey.

since 2002. Since its second term, the AKP focused on dismantling the State to culturally reshape it with new values and norms that tended to curtail individual and collective freedoms and rights on the civil, press and justice levels. Thus, public policies in Turkey do not always aim for public interest; they must serve a societal cultural project in which most of the population is expected to be loyal by adhering to conservative, religious and nationalist values.

Faced with the AKP's governmental hegemony, opposition-led metropolises and municipalities, across all parties, emerge as political alternatives in the political competition. Within this context, we focus on the new agricultural public policy of the metropolis of Istanbul. Our objective is to examine the appearance of the social (and/or public)<sup>5</sup> problem of agriculture in a metropolitan setting. This concerns the agricultural and food issue in a major metropolis, Istanbul (IBB), where the agricultural land area, far from ensuring food sovereignty for 15.6 million inhabitants across 39 districts, has decreased by 27.5% between 1995 and 2019 (Büke *et al.*, 2021).

In this respect, consumer cooperatives, which in Europe fall under the concept of the social and solidarity economy, are a major player in placing social issues on the agenda. These cooperatives emerged in close connection with the Gezi Park movement of 2013<sup>6</sup>, which gave rise to an alternative way of life *here and now*. They raise questions about their influence on public policy as a grassroots movement, adopting a self-governing model and occupying public space to express a strong difference from the market.

The value of the metropolitan or municipal scale as a field of inquiry lies in the legitimacy of subnational actors and their growing influence (Mazeaud *et al.*, 2022: 5) in the implementation of local public policies (climate change, agriculture, social action, etc.). This study focuses on understanding the construction of public policy in the metropolis of Istanbul regarding agricultural and food issues between two specific events. The first is the Gezi Park movement of 2013, and the second is the victory of the CHP in the 2019 Istanbul municipal elections against the AKP party. In this context of political polarization, public policies become even more of a political and electoral battleground, given that public authorities possess powers, resources and redistributive capacities. Starting from the paradox of the

<sup>5</sup> In this analysis, the social problem is linked to consumer cooperatives and the public problem to the metropolis of Istanbul, even though some authors do not distinguish between the two terms.

<sup>6</sup> The Gezi Park movement originated with a group of environmentalists who mobilized in 2011 to defend Gezi Park, located in the heart of Istanbul, on which the Beyoğlu (Taksim) municipality had announced plans to build a shopping mall. At the time, Gezi Park was a protected green space (a park), and the Beyoğlu municipality claimed that the project would allow for the reconstruction of the Ottoman barracks that had been demolished in the 1940s to create the park. On May 29, 2013, after police intervened against the group of occupants defending the park, thousands of people joined them. As the mobilizations spread spontaneously and instantaneously across most of Turkey's provinces, the protesters' demands went beyond environmentalism or the right to the city, encompassing widespread discontent with the AKP's anti-democratic, authoritarian and discriminatory policies. After four days of confrontation with law enforcement, the protesters managed to enter the park and occupy it for 15 days. Some dubbed this occupation the Gezi Park "commune". In this regard, it is important to emphasize that the Gezi Park movement is not merely a protest; it carries within it a political aim: to create "another way of life here and now" while adopting a non-hierarchical and self-governing organizational model. It was only after the forceful police eviction of the Gezi Park occupants that the "seeds" of Gezi were sown, giving rise to a galaxy of solidarity initiatives (community gardens, food banks, squats, forums, etc.). In this process, initiatives inspired by horizontal and self-managed organizational models prioritized ecology and the reclaiming of shared spaces.

dynamics of consumer cooperatives in the Kadıköy district and the metropolis of Istanbul and their process of invisibility by local political powers (metropolis) that we wish to demonstrate that the new public agricultural policy is an object of politicization of the metropolis in connection with the Turkish political context, electoral timeframes and political competition.

Unlike the controversies among historians, and also political science studies where politicization is understood in terms of the "individual's relationship to the political sphere" as well as the involvement of "groups, institutions, and issues [...] within the framework of professional competition" (Déloye and Haegel, 2019: 68-69), intermediary groups such as consumer cooperatives are not truly critical actors in the political sphere because their social identity is constructed more in opposition to the market. Here, consumer cooperatives are not actors in the politicization of agricultural and food issues by directly challenging "the political system" or attributing responsibility to it (Zittoun, 2021: 89). They contribute indirectly as a continuation of historical movements (such as the Gezi Park movement) and considering the (authoritarian) political context (Déloye and Haegel, 2019: 62).

Furthermore, the concept of politicization must incorporate electoral timeframes, that is, the "impact of political alternation" at the metropolitan level and (municipal and national) "upcoming electoral deadlines" (de Maillard, 2006: 39) in the implementation of a new agricultural public policy. This aims to contribute to discussions seeking to bridge the gap between politics and policy (de Maillard, 2006: 40; Zittoun, 2021: 77). The "weight of an electoral shift" can facilitate the "entry of certain subjects" and lead to discontinuities (de Maillard, 2006: 43 and 44) reflecting both substantive and symbolic choices (2006: 47) in terms of public policy, but without excluding the "formatting" of the public problem (2006: 44) when politics fails to consider certain problems in the decision-making process (Zittoun, 2021: 87) or impose their own problematization. This electoral timescale reminds us that "political maneuvering" (de Maillard, 2006: 42) is associated with a political career, and that a public policy can lend credibility in the eyes of the electorate (2006: 47) and increase the popularity (2006: 48) of a party or candidate.

Finally, the creation of public policy can be an instrument of public action in the political competition between the ruling party (AKP) and the metropolitan opposition (CHP). Harold D. Lasswell already noted that public policies contribute to maintaining the power of elites or that they are an instrument of power or influence (Zittoun, 2021: 82). The new metropolitan team has all the "notoriety" of instituting a new agricultural public policy, but its content must reinforce the exercise of its power and avoid politicization by bringing new demands (or "emerging themes") (2021: 88) to the forefront in the conventional agricultural sector. This notoriety relies on communication from experts who participate in selecting choices while rejecting "analyses from outside" (2021: 92 and 93) (consumer cooperatives) in order to gain credibility with the beneficiaries and stabilize this new metropolitan agricultural public policy. The weight of the metropolis's (institution) domination, as well as its centrality in the politicization process, reflects a desire to establish stability in terms of public policy in a context of political polarization where the AKP government has been weakened by the last municipal elections of 2024.

We presume that the politicization of agricultural and food issues by the metropolis is a process of active choice and selection of instruments (Zittoun, 2021: 97) that reconciles the

solution to a salient problem (protecting agricultural land), the idea of change with the emergence of a new public problem (urban agriculture and food), and the suitability of the agricultural sector's challenges through the involvement of experts (conventional agriculture) and actors (farmers) likely to contribute to the popularity of the mayor (İmamoğlu) of the metropolis of Istanbul. In light of these parameters, we can highlight certain elements that contribute to the politicization of public policies within the Turkish context, where the drift toward authoritarianism no longer seems to have any limits in domestic political life.

Consequently, the making of public policies cannot be conceived solely in terms of change and reproduction, as the instrument of public action becomes both a means and an end in political competition. Among the various protagonists involved in defining the public problem—the metropolis and conventional farmers on the one hand, and consumer cooperatives and agroecological farmers on the other—their distinct arguments and collaborations limit their inter-organizational relationships within the framework of a new agricultural public policy. This is because the political work of the metropolis diverges as the consumer cooperatives frame the social problem.

From this perspective, the metropolis chooses to work on a discourse of legitimation (distinct from consumer cooperatives) of the public problem and of its new agricultural public policy and of persuasion of conventional farmers on the periphery of the metropolis of Istanbul by creating alliances with them to validate its instrument of public action. While the constructivist approach mentions that the political sphere is the product of social logics, that is, subject to diverse influences and interests, that "many actors [...] play the role of 'entrepreneurs' of politicization or depoliticization" (Déloye and Haegel, 2019: 77-78), the meaning of "political sociology insists on the transgression of the boundaries of the political" (Arnaud and Guionnet, 2005 cited by Déloye and Haegel, 2019:77) whereas the sociology of public action tends to hold that "public policy choices" would be more the result of "the interweaving or hybridization of spaces" (Déloye and Haegel, 2019: 77). From this, we conclude that it is indeed the metropolis that is self-constructing itself as a place where experts, conventional producers and communications are interweaved on its new public agricultural policy.

In this way, consumer cooperatives and the metropolis have been agents of politicization, albeit with distinct modes of action. Unlike the metropolis, consumer cooperatives have established reciprocal relationships with agroecological farmers, expressing a strong difference from the market, whereas the metropolis has more or less created top-down alliances with conventional farmers to impose its new agricultural public policy. Through these two perspectives, the transformation of a public problem into an instrument of public action takes on a politicizing meaning between distinct political positions. For consumer cooperatives, politicization does not aim to express "demands to political power" (Groc, 1998: 46) as intermediary groups (Déloye and Haegel, 2019: 69) and with a view to potential reforms, but rather they are directly engaged "using an economic status" to differentiate themselves from the market "through their modes of action" (Lanciano and Saleilles, 2011: 157). While consumer cooperatives are concerned about their self-management model, the politicization of the metropolis links the idea of not dissociating public action (policy) and politics (politics) (Zittoun, 2021: 78-79).

While consumer cooperatives show a politicization largely external to political power, the metropolis of Istanbul follows a logic of politicization internal to Turkish political arenas, in that public action, such as the new metropolitan agricultural public policy, must be understood not only within a context of political polarization (AKP and CHP) but also within electoral timeframes (de Maillard, 2006). Consequently, we can suggest that the 2019 political alternation is one of the "opportunities" for "public choices" or the implementation of a new metropolitan agricultural public policy (2006: 42 and 43) more geared towards consolidating the "popularity" (2006: 48) of the new metropolitan team and accumulating benefits (2006: 48) for the upcoming elections (Girault, 2011). Public action as an instrument of political competition (2006: 42) is politicization (Déloye and Haegel, 2019: 76) with a view to establishing the power of electoral alternation in Istanbul and the next presidential elections.

The data for our research are based on fieldwork conducted from August to September 2024 in the Kadıköy district of Istanbul. In total, we interviewed thirteen cooperatives, three institutions, and six civil society actors. Of the thirteen cooperatives, ten are consumer cooperatives, two of which are both consumer and producer cooperatives. While the other three cooperatives operate in different sectors, such as disability, women's issues and education, and are not included in our analysis, these interviews allow us to consolidate the findings of our fieldwork on consumer cooperatives (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of interviews conducted

Types of institution	Number of interviews
Consumer cooperatives	8
Consumer and producer cooperatives	2
Other cooperatives	3
Civil society actors (associations)	6
Public institutions	3

Source: Authors' own work

The interview guides were adapted to suit the actors interviewed. The main themes for the cooperatives were: your cooperative (its operations and your neighborhood); ecology, the local political context, and transformation (legislative, democratic, political, social and economic); new local social and solidarity economy (SSE) policies and relationships with local institutions (metropolitan, provincial and national); and recognition of the SSE and its role in the environmental transition. For local political authorities, the themes focused on: the choice of governance (patronage or public, citizen-led or market-based); the choice of cooperatives and producers; the decision-making process; and the functioning of the Halk Market<sup>7</sup>. The interviews were also adjusted for civil society actors involved in environmental issues recently or for a long time. For the development of the interview guides, we drew on two previous field studies: one on short food supply chains and the other on women's cooperatives in Turkey. We used only seven interviews conducted with cooperatives located in Kadıköy. Taken together, this research is based on a total of about thirty interviews<sup>8</sup>.

Our analysis is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the social problem of agriculture and food and its inclusion on the public agenda in Istanbul. In the first subsection (I), we will see that the emergence of the social problem of agriculture and food is closely linked to the 2013 Gezi Park movement, where citizen initiatives led to the creation of consumer cooperatives. However, this grassroots movement did not translate into politicization through mobilization targeting the political sphere (government or metropolis). This is an alternative supply of goods and services produced by cooperatives seeking to establish themselves outside of political representation. The idea of politicization here aligns with the literature on new socio-economic movements, where consumer cooperatives adopt the status of self-managed actors.

The second subsection (II) addresses the transformation of the social problem into the implementation of the new metropolitan agricultural public policy. In 2019, the new metropolitan team problematized the issue of agriculture and food inclusively, involving various metropolitan stakeholders (consumer cooperatives, unions, professional associations, experts and academics). While the influence of the State still limits municipalities in the exercise of their powers, the government's authoritarianism pushes opposition parties (leading both metropolises and municipalities) to centralize the issues and relegate civil society actors, including consumer cooperatives, to the background. Thus, the metropolis's definition of the

<sup>7</sup> People's market or popular market.

<sup>8</sup> In the text, interview excerpts are anonymized.

public problem gradually distances itself from consumer cooperatives, rendering them invisible.

The second part examines the politicization of agricultural and food issues by the metropolis and the emergence of a new, conventional agriculture public policy meant for political power. Initially (III), we will demonstrate that despite the Istanbul metropolis's proactive and inclusive rhetoric, participatory governance has been largely abandoned in favor of metropolitan bureaucratic centralism. Even though the autonomous nature of consumer cooperatives limits potential institutional compromises, the metropolis has established itself as the sole intermediary for the work undertaken between these autonomous consumer cooperatives and the Kadıköy municipality. Alongside this recentralization, the metropolis politicizes the public issue of agriculture and food by primarily engaging with conventional metropolitan farmers. While the new agricultural public policy makes the agricultural and food issue an instrument of public action in line with the conventional agricultural sector, the invisible consumer cooperatives are weakened by the absence of a level of political representation and political power and by a voluntary self-management model.

Secondly (IV), we will recall the commercial dimension of a city where the purposes of land use are the subject of various struggles (smart farming, construction, maintaining a ring of small farmers, etc.). The metropolis acts as the spokesperson for metropolitan farmers, becoming the guarantor of their well-being by assuming a role in the agricultural sector as an actor, redistributor of aid, and creator of new sales outlets. The ambition to include consumer cooperatives, like other target groups, remained dead letter in 2024. The new agricultural public policy demonstrates that it is embedded in the macroeconomic determinants of the liberal economy. This new policy represents the arrival of a new actor at the metropolitan level, but in no way does it constitute a new public policy favorable to the ecological transition proposed by consumer cooperatives. Through this new public agricultural policy, the metropolis seeks to consolidate its political power in a metropolis where political polarization is strong, because *"Whoever controls Istanbul controls Turkey"*.

## **A grassroots movement and the placing of the social problem of agriculture and food on the public agenda**

While the Gezi Park movement in 2013 began to protect a green space slated to be transformed into Ottoman barracks and a shopping center, it would become the heir to a consciousness at the intersection of ecology, agriculture and food, and give rise in the Kadıköy district of Istanbul to the creation of consumer cooperatives which would establish themselves in the public space before local political powers gradually appropriated their institutional legitimacy.

### **I. The rise of the environmental issue after Gezi**

The Gezi Park movement had two effects on the development of food and agricultural initiatives: one is the formulation of ideas that combine ecology, agriculture and cooperatives; and the other is the establishment of an alternative and more horizontal organizational model.

### *From the food and agricultural cause...*

The Gezi Park movement was a significant turning point in the spread of food and agricultural initiatives (consumer cooperatives and communities, and agricultural cooperatives) in Istanbul and other Turkish cities. While their numbers steadily increased throughout the 2010s, it was in the early 2000s that cooperative solidarity-based organizational models were discussed and implemented by leftist, Kurdish and anarchist movements.

In a context of privatization launched by the AKP in the second half of the 2000s, the number of protests continued to grow. In addition to the media and symbolic resistance of SEKA (Hürriyet Gazetesi, 2005), the resistance of TEKEL (Savran and Özan, 2010) and DEBA (Olay, 2012), the analysis by Yörük and Yüksel provides an even better understanding of the situation and scale of protests in Turkey before Gezi: estimated at less than sixty per month in July 2012, they were more than two hundred in March and two hundred and fifty in May 2013 (Yörük and Yüksel, 2016: 88).

Before the Gezi Park movement of 2013, the idea of organizing cooperatives, agriculture, and in particular organic farming by small producers and farmers, was already a topic of discussion within opposition groups, from left-wing movements to environmentalists, and among independent activists. The Gezi Park movement had multiple benefits. First, it allowed a segment of the population to engage with agricultural and food issues impacted by globalized agriculture<sup>9</sup>.

Discussions were held in various forums in Istanbul's parks. It was the first time the idea of creating a consumer cooperative was discussed at a Yoğurtçu forum meeting (interview with YK3). Health, food sovereignty, and access to healthy/organic food were among the many other topics discussed (patriarchy, injustice, etc.). This event popularized ideas and practices that combine ecology, agriculture and cooperation.

Furthermore, it brought to light producers committed to environmentally friendly farming practices. Urban concerns became a rural issue, as the role of small-scale producers focused on both self-sufficiency and direct sales through agroecology had been overlooked in agricultural public policy.

This shift from post-Gezi neighborhood solidarities and the emergence of the first cooperative solidarity initiatives can be illustrated by the resistance of the *Bostan* (historical gardens) which, from 2013 onwards, either organized new collective gardens such as *Moda Bostanı*, *Kuzguncuk Bostanı*, *Berkin Elvan Bostanı* (Fautras, 2016; Özdoğan, 2023), or protected agricultural areas in the center of the city, such as the *Yedikule Bostanlarını Koruma Girişimi*, the *Piyalepaşa Bostanı Dayanışması*, and others (Özdoğan, 2023).

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<sup>9</sup> Before this social movement, there were two consumer cooperatives.

In this latter dimension, "some families operating the gardens [...form] an association (*Yedikule Bostancılar Derneği*) to defend their way of life and their profession as farmers in an urban environment" (Gajac, 2024: 8).

### ***...to the adoption of structured organizational forms***

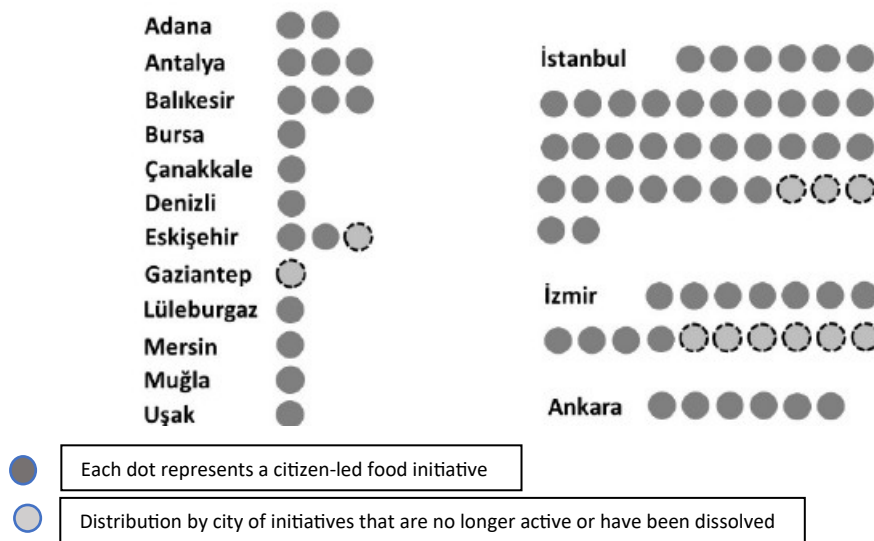
Whether we are talking about agriculture, food, education, higher education, construction, catering, women, textiles, culture, disability, etc., individuals are seeking at the local level to establish solidarities in several cities, without limiting themselves to the urban space, in order to establish new social relations in order to respond to market dissatisfactions, their ideals and political injustices.

This abundance of initiatives, according to our field data, shares common traits. They all rely on volunteer work and defend a strong autonomy from public authorities. They are formed through knowledge production mobilizing a plurality of actors, including teacher-researchers, students, but also many laypeople, specialists and civil society actors, thus combining practice and reflection in knowledge production, meaning that a large part of solidarity initiatives is based on multi-party reciprocity (Gajac, 2024:10).

In Istanbul, and more specifically in the Kadıköy district, among the diverse solidarity initiatives stemming from the Gezi Park movement, consumer cooperatives and/or food communities predominate (Figures 1 and 2). Consequently, the environmental issue (agriculture, food) itself is the most representative theme of the challenges addressed by solidarity initiatives in Turkey, alongside social, gender (women), humanitarian (refugees) and economic issues.

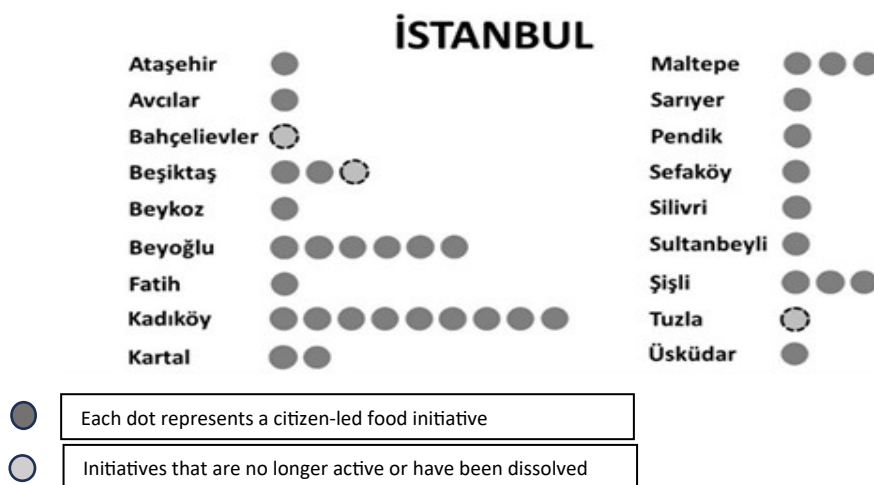
This is an environmental challenge whose distinctive feature is its local roots, as Cemil Yıldızcan points out: "Many examples of initiatives, such as the cooperatives in Kadıköy, Beşiktaş, Göztepe, and Koşuyolu, named after the neighborhoods where they were established, are organic continuations of neighborhood solidarities formed during or after the protests" (2024: 57-58). Thus, cooperatives emerge where people live, whether they stem from existing neighborhood solidarity networks, long-standing or not, bringing together individuals who share the same vision and seek to reach specific segments of the population.

Figure 1: Distribution of citizen food initiatives in Türkiye by city



Source: Karakaya Ayalp, 2021: 985.

Figure 2: Urban distribution of citizen food initiatives in Istanbul



Source: Karakaya Ayalp, 2021: 985.

Cooperatives inspired by the Gezi Park movement, during which mobilized individuals sought for a month to extricate themselves from the classic political opposition between moderns and conservatives (Akyıldız and Gajac, 2024: 130) by instituting a way of living together without the need for political representation, perpetuate this spirit by adopting repertoires of self-management with less hierarchical, more horizontal, consensual, solidarity-based, local, plural, informal, less patriarchal functioning, and by taking into account social, cultural and environmental dimensions.

From the abundant solidarity initiatives, organizations will opt for legal forms (mostly cooperatives such as consumer cooperatives and some associations) or not (*de facto* associations such as food communities<sup>10</sup>), and engage in certain areas of activity to offer goods and services whose market dimension takes into account the expectations of stakeholders (ecology, women, social protection) while maintaining a democratic organizational functioning open to local issues (neighborhood, district, city, region, etc.).

## **II. From cooperative activism in the public sphere to metropolitan problematization**

Consumer cooperatives will see themselves as self-managed alternatives or as a grassroots movement, and succeed in bringing their cause into the public sphere before being coveted by historical actors in civil society (professional chamber, union), but also by the two main political parties (CHP and AKP) which are not indifferent to these issues and are invested in them in turn.

### ***From the emergence of cooperative models based on solidarity between consumers and producers...***

In the 20th century, according to Akın Birdal (2000), cooperatives were either initiated by the State or by political movements. Since the 2000s, cooperative models were initially conceived as an activity of a (Kurdish) political movement, and in the 2010s, they were designed as a non-hierarchical, self-managed struggle, such as the experience of BUKOOP (a cooperative founded in 2010) or the Yeryüzü food community (interview with YKBK), which was primarily organized by independent activists.

Since the Gezi Park movement, solidarity-based cooperative initiatives have been conceived, according to those interviewed, as alternatives to the market. Making healthy food accessible to consumers without the use of chemicals, by promoting local varieties to better compensate small producers and farmers, confirms this trend toward short food supply chains that has emerged in recent decades.

Meetings with consumer cooperatives revealed that this desire to democratize the economy is reflected in the fact that many of them support women's cooperatives and cooperatives that guarantee minimum working conditions and social protections (Gajac, 2022: 16 and 21). Through their commitment and principles, they aim for a social change that includes an ethical, environmental and inclusive dimension in the production of goods and services.

The idea of a new generation of cooperatives is being promoted, and if we consider this in relation to the notion of alternatives, we presume that their distinctiveness today lies more in their socio-economic dimension compared to their predecessors, which were more inclined

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<sup>10</sup> Food communities were not included in the analysis of this study because they do not wish to interact with local authorities due to their illegal status.

towards a quest for power. The main certainty is that it involves solidarity in terms of action, solidarity-based organization (such as cooperatives), and internalized solidarity.

According to the people interviewed, in the fields of education, disability and women's issues, needs are internalized and stakeholders have no other alternatives. Initially, the issue of alternatives was indeed relevant to all sectors, including consumer cooperatives, and this can be even more vital for certain groups, such as women, because cooperatives, despite their imperfections, particularly in terms of guaranteeing regular wages and social protection, remain an alternative in the field of employment (Telseren, 2024: 81).

In the absence of a revolution, the idea of alternatives can be a way to perpetuate existing forms of solidarity (Gezi) and/or to address new challenges such as the question of food sovereignty. In any case, these solidarity-based alternatives seek, starting from societal issues, to broaden solidarity by building local networks at the neighborhood level, between different cities, between urban and rural areas, but also sectoral networks; some even attempt to organize themselves to create a movement at the national level.

These alternatives almost all begin with no knowledge of their field of intervention, working from their inexperience, discovering the cooperative model to establish a democracy of cooperation, traces of which can be found in the historical culture of the *imece*<sup>11</sup>. This holds true according to the people interviewed about the consumer cooperatives in Kadıköy, but also in Istanbul and Turkey.

### ***...to activism in the public sphere***

The Kadıköy district has become the new political center of the social and political movement in Istanbul. When the Gezi Park "commune" ended in Taksim, on the European side, the Kadıköy district, located on the Asian side, became Istanbul's new site of resistance (Figure 3).

The central neighborhoods of Kadıköy are the most successful examples of local organizing, with occupation houses (*Caferağa* and *Yeldeğirmeni*), neighborhood forums and solidarity networks (*Mahalle Dayanışması: Acıbadem, Caferağa and Yeldeğirmeni*) (Aşar, 2020: 106), and by hosting other organizations such as associations and vegan grocery stores. This new site of resistance is taking shape due to the proliferation of activities in public spaces. Alongside their self-learning process, consumer cooperatives occupy public space by increasing the organization of events and publications. Many collectively produce books recounting their experience, their autobiography, as well as creative works, including artistic events inherited from the Gezi Park movement (Gajac, 2024: 12).

Among the solidarity-based initiatives, consumer cooperatives and food communities are the most active. They organize meetings, workshops, conferences, day events and congresses. "Whether we're talking about producer cooperatives, consumer cooperatives or food communities, the events calendar is relatively full" (Gajac, 2024: 12).

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<sup>11</sup> A method of cooperation in which everyone's work is done collectively.

From 2016 to 2022, while food cooperatives and communities met annually to discuss food, agricultural and environmental issues, as well as producers' living conditions, the "*Gıda Topluluklari ve Kooperatifleri Çalıştayı*" (workshops on food communities and cooperatives) were more sector-specific in terms of knowledge production (Gajac, 2024: 12). The latest edition, on May 22, 2022, on the theme of business and the monopoly of multinationals, recalls the strong difference expressed by cooperatives and consumer communities with regard to the market (Gajac, 2024: 12-13).

Figure 3: Map of Istanbul's districts with a focus on Fatih, Taksim (Gezi) and Kadıköy



Source: IBB (map adapted by the authors)

### ***From a coveted solidarity...***

Faced with this agenda-setting in the public sphere, more traditional civil society organizations are not remaining indifferent. Whether we talk about the Social Research Foundation (SAV – *Sosyal Araştırmalar Vakfı*), the Istanbul Chamber of Agricultural Engineers (TMMOB – *Ziraat Mühendisleri Odası İstanbul Subesi*), or even the Agriculture and Food Working Group (*Gıda ve Tarım Çalışma Grubu*) of the Kadıköy Municipal Council (*Kent Konseyi*), which oversaw the food festival on October 19 and 20, 2024, we can see varying degrees of involvement from these organizations, including the Chamber of Agricultural Engineers having established an annual conference (Gajac, 2024: 13).

These organizations, whether in collaboration with universities or not, sometimes refer to the concept of solidarity (*Dayanışma*) as shown by the following titles: *Sosyal Dayanışması Ekonomisi için Güçlü Kooperatifçilik* of 2021 ("Strong Cooperatives for a Social and Solidarity Economy"); *Tarımsal Üretim ve Tüketimde Sosyal Dayanışması Pratiği Olarak Kooperatifçilik Sempozyumu* of 2021 ("2021 Symposium on Cooperatives as a Practice of Social Solidarity in Agricultural Production and Consumption") (2024: 13-14).

Local political authorities have not remained indifferent to this activism either. They acquired new powers with the enactment of a law in 2012, which came into effect in 2014 after the municipal elections, allowing them to operate in the agricultural sector. Metropolitan Law No. 6360 authorizes municipalities to "carry out all kinds of activities and services to support agriculture and livestock farming" This law, which also abolishes villages and towns within metropolitan areas and transforms them into districts, aims to strengthen the metropolitan dimension while seeking to protect land threatened by urban zoning and megaprojects.

In Istanbul, when Ekrem İmamoğlu became mayor in 2019, agriculture on the outskirts of Istanbul was threatened by rising property taxes, the inexorable expansion of industrial agriculture, and the negative effects of the environmental crisis. This risk to agricultural land is perceived by the new metropolitan team as a crisis, about which the IBB<sup>12</sup> has issued communications to warn of "the end of agriculture" or "the end of agriculture in Istanbul", while also linking it to the injustice of unequal access to healthy food.

By seeking to revive and develop agricultural and marketing models that would make healthy food accessible to all a priority for the municipality, it is clear that local political authorities began to address this issue politically in the late 2010s. The active role of the Istanbul Metropolis in the field of agriculture and cooperatives, alongside the Ministry of Agriculture, benefited, after the election of Ekrem İmamoğlu in 2019, from the image of a charismatic and strong mayor, while also aligning with the CHP's program in other municipalities.

### *...to the legitimate actors of social change*

While consumer cooperatives introduce alternatives stemming from a multi-stakeholder reciprocal production of knowledge, this new normality arising from a grassroots movement translates into limited social change.

In a context where the ruling party has been in power since the early 2000s, the AKP's legislative and presidential successes have weakened the role of civil society. "The idea of a counter-democracy of surveillance, control and judgment (Rosanvallon, 2006) was largely weakened by the AKP during the 2010s. The takeover of the media, the instrumentalization of the judiciary, the closure of civil society organizations after the 2016 coup, and the trials of civil society figures have rendered counter-democratic processes obsolete" (Akyıldız and Gajac, 2024: 135).

Already in the 1980s, Turkey had experienced a coup d'état, and citizens had been excluded from the local policy-making processes (Yaşar, 2014: 564), which were reserved for the legitimacy of local political powers. Municipalities, and especially metropolises, gained new powers and resources after the coup of December 12, 1980, and it was the 1982 constitution that gave them an image of a strong municipality and mayor due to "the special forms of administration [that] can be established for large cities" (Erder and İncioğlu, 2008: 44).

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<sup>12</sup> *İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi* (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality)

Nowadays, civil society actors continue to bear the brunt of the rivalry between the CHP and the AKP. Between privatization and the redeployment of the State (Massicard, 2014), the AKP sought, at the beginning of its term, to maintain control over local political powers and resources. Holding a majority in the assembly, the government introduced a series of legal measures to increase the powers of municipalities without ensuring the transfer of the budget, including in the agricultural sector (Massicard, 2014)<sup>13</sup>.

After Gezi, freedom of association has not improved considering the constitutional advances of the 2000s. In this respect, while the IBB's annual reports (2014-2018) echo the symbolic implementation of activities—training in 2017-2018 and planting trials (IBB, 2020)—by the Department of Agriculture, there is no sign of collaboration with consumer or producer cooperatives, nor with the collective gardens created and the historic orchards protected by resistance collectives.

On the contrary, the latter been developed or used as dumping grounds, and the former have been transformed into recreational gardens by the municipality in the Üsküdar district (Özdoğan, 2023). As for consumer cooperatives, they have been ignored. It was only after the 2019 municipal elections, in which the ruling party lost many municipalities, that hope reappeared among the opposition.

## **Politicization of the new agricultural public policy between political alternation and upcoming elections**

While consumer cooperatives have brought agroecological issues into the public sphere, the opposition's electoral victory in 2019 did not lead to a different approach to public policy implementation at the metropolitan level. At the same time, consumer cooperatives have been unable to move beyond their technical cooperation as a network to structure their political power. They thus find themselves marginalized as an alternative, and local political authorities remain entrenched in a productivist land culture without offering solutions to the farmers' crisis, access to healthy food, or environmental challenges. Instead, the metropolis is focused on consolidating the legitimacy of its local power in anticipation of the upcoming elections.

## **III. A new public agricultural policy that is counterproductive in terms of the agroecological transition**

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<sup>13</sup> Osman Savaşkan (2017: 152-153) emphasizes that local administrative control has reduced the power of municipalities, which have not been supported in the political and fiscal decentralization. In a sense, local policies fall under the purview of central government decisions, and this centralized control over local levels of financial resources has been reinforced by governors and various ministries. Savaşkan (2019: 89) also notes that the central government acts as a controller and facilitator for its own municipalities, mobilizing them around macro-political projects.

Despite its proactive approach and rhetoric, the metropolis of Istanbul has adopted a centralized, self-centered and bureaucratic way of functioning, making consumer cooperatives invisible, which have themselves formed a network for sharing information without organizing their political power and consolidating their economic model.

### ***Towards opposing political positions in the making of the new agricultural public policy***

The resurgence of cooperatives in the 2000s did not dispel the fear of being prohibited from engaging in politics. Much more involved in socio-economic than socio-political issues, they remain subject to suspicion and State control. Moreover, cooperatives claiming a high degree of autonomy are unable to co-create public action. This is all the truer given that none of the consumer cooperatives in the Kadıköy district have ever had their requests to the municipality and the metropolis granted.

As local political authorities have been given new powers and as reflection on cooperatives, ecology, food and agriculture has taken root in civil society, one might be tempted to think of the gradual emergence of participatory governance of public action.

However, the instability of political life, with the failed coup of 2016, serves as a reminder that civil society organizations, from the late 19th century to the present day, have been subjected to the hegemony of successive political regimes and their measures of prohibition and closure. Cooperatives were banned during the 1980 coup for their political activism, and their vocation has been lost in cases of corruption, resulting in a highly negative public image that persists to this day.

The lack of co-construction is not due to inaction on the part of the new metropolitan mayor. On the contrary, he has established a team of experts and activists within the Department of Agriculture, recognized for their support of small-scale producers and the cooperative movement. With the participation of academics and the Istanbul Planning Agency, this team began working on agriculture and cooperatives even before the publication of IBB's food strategy document (İBB and İPA, 2021). The speech delivered to 11 metropolises of the CHP in Izmir during the agricultural cooperation workshop hinted at the implementation of such a public policy (Izmir BŞB, 2019).

However, this proactive approach failed to consider the initiatives already undertaken by cooperatives in Kadıköy and deviated from their established framework. Following the 2019 elections, a local cooperative in the Kadıköy district proposed opening a market to the Kadıköy Municipal Council's Food Working Group (Yerdeniz, 2024: 72), which responded favorably. However, IBB's Department of Agriculture informed the Kadıköy municipality that it also had a similar project (interview with AA). The Kadıköy municipality then abandoned this project in favor of the IBB, which adopted a policy of "centralization at the local level" (Yaşar, 2014; Şahin, 2014), thereby neglecting consumer cooperatives.

The metropolis has engaged in a new local public policy, primarily targeting the metropolitan conventional farmers and agricultural cooperatives. Despite this proactive approach, the metropolis is struggling to achieve its objectives, and its management as a local administration is unable to initiate a genuine environmental transition of agricultural production models across its territory. Conceived from the perspective of participatory democracy, the creation of a market quickly became, in its decision-making and implementation processes, the metropolis's project (Gajac, 2024: 17).

Cooperatives that have put this agricultural and food issue on the public agenda have been relegated to invisibility without playing a democratic role in the resolution of public problems, both in relation to the AKP, which since the 2010s has reduced the agricultural (land) issue to an investment or speculative good to the detriment of small farmers and cooperatives, and to the CHP, which from 2019 has rather sought to establish its control at the local level in the agricultural and food sector.

### *The limits of the external politicization<sup>14</sup> of consumer cooperatives*

The process by which local political authorities render consumer cooperatives invisible is relatively paradoxical given the dynamics of the Kadıköy district and the Istanbul metropolis. This is even more paradoxical because consumer cooperatives, rooted in their neighborhoods, self-formed through a long process of acculturation, and nurtured by multi-party reciprocity, have continued their collaboration on both a technical and relational level.

In this regard, they have established an information-sharing network on a list of farmers and a monitoring system for potential anomalies related to agricultural techniques and the use of chemicals by certain producers (Gajac, 2022). Although some consumer cooperatives have decided to part ways with producers for breaches of the moral contract, "this self-monitoring [...] maintains trust at the heart of the relationships" with producers in the sense that it "allows for mutual understanding in the face of problems encountered by producers in managing their crops" (Gajac, 2022).

On a relational level, they acted as ambassadors in other neighborhoods of the city and in other regions of Turkey, as they were approached and invited by new cooperative project leaders to share their experience. Nevertheless, as a grassroots movement, they were unable to establish representative political power because they remained politically divided.

The question that the SSE has still not resolved is the organization of power (Frère and Jacquemain, 2013: 254). As Alain Caillé reminds us, "[collectives] are 'political', certainly. But where is the large-scale organizational form that would allow them to open a dialogue with national institutions [...] that would have other goals than making public policies concerning their specific objects [...] more functional and operational?" (Caillé, 2003 cited by Frère and Jacquemain, 2013: 254).

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<sup>14</sup> The idea of external politicization is a critique of the market. With reference to the work of Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier on the diversity of new socio-economic movements, the author highlights two main modes of consumer mobilization in the contestation of the market order, an "internal" critique and an "external" critique of the market (Lanciano and Saleilles, 2011).

Focusing their objectives on the economy leads consumer cooperatives to directly express political criticism of market players and indirectly to criticize the lack of State regulation among private actors—producers, processors and distributors—whose industrial, market-driven logic is favored at the expense of a plurality of production, processing and distribution systems more inclined to respect living organisms. The lack of political convergence among cooperatives prevents the coordination of their interests and weakens the broadening of the issues for which they were established.

In addition to the institutional invisibility that the cooperative power structure fails to address, a third explanatory factor weakens their development. The very idea of an alternative carries an inherent fragility that is reflected in their economic model. Most consumer cooperatives seeking recognition have experienced an initial phase of emergence without truly being able to reach and/or maintain a phase of development. Indeed, many use the term survival. They are operating within a survival logic for numerous reasons (rent, taxes, etc.) that they have had to overcome over the past decade.

Because almost all consumer cooperatives have opted for a volunteer model, the profit margins applied to products are primarily intended to cover operating costs. Often, volunteers are highly motivated, even driven at the beginning, and for some, from the very beginning to the present day, by strong convictions. This isn't always dependent on categories like women or parents in educational and mental disability cooperatives (since they have no alternative): ideological factors can also play a role. In any case, this type of consumer cooperative faces the challenge of organizing volunteer work to ensure its operation. This workload is often unevenly distributed and relies more heavily on some than others.

Finally, volunteers are often members of the cooperative, and even if other volunteers may join the daily or weekly activities, it is difficult to envision the continuity of an organization based solely on external volunteering. Having become volunteer members out of conviction, responsibility or a sense of leadership, cooperatives operate with small core groups of volunteers fully dedicated to the cooperative. Despite the personal enrichment individuals gain from this, volunteer turnover can be explained by the significant demands of the commitment on their personal lives, the desire to join other causes, and their dissatisfaction.

In a context of institutional lack of recognition, cooperatives have become weakened by an economic model based on volunteer work, forcing cooperatives to choose self-management and thereby restricting access to healthy food to a certain segment of the population, since even cooperative volunteers do not all have the income to purchase food from them. This is compounded by the fatigue, even exhaustion, of the volunteers, as they receive no compensation. They must give without receiving anything in return. Except for cooperatives that have opted for paid staff, many cooperatives have closed.

On the other hand, the metropolis has formed an alliance with conventional metropolitan farmers and farmers' cooperatives to deploy a public action instrument in line with their expectations and the conventional agricultural sector.

## IV. Politicization between political alternation and elections

### *The discourse of the new metropolitan team as a guarantor in favor of conventional agriculture*

The SSE used to remain in the shadows for decades before gaining legislative recognition and being integrated into public policy. This invisibility tends to align with societies' conception of the economy and its principles, as highlighted by Polanyi.

However, the globalized city, as an object of study, is perceived as both a means and an end for development. Indeed, a city's resources can be managed according to one or more economic principles. Istanbul, as a megalopolis of 15.6 million inhabitants, is as much a stake in political power as it is an economic one. Moreover, reforms promoting decentralization since the 1980s have been limited to technical objectives aimed at making the city functional. Sema Erder (2015: 360) draws attention to the fact that decentralization here was not undertaken for the purpose of democratization but rather was "accepted as a solution to ensure the functioning of cities."

Law No. 3030 on the Metropolitan Municipality of 1984 is considered one of the most important in the neoliberalization of Istanbul's economy and administration. Similarly, C. Gamze Yaşar also predicts that metropolitan municipalities will focus on growth and that, even though Law No. 6360 supports agriculture, urban planning of agricultural areas will expand (2014: 559-560). In fact, she emphasizes that the basic principle, as well as other laws and decrees promulgated after 2003, was consistent with the strategy of maximizing the city's growth (2014: 564)<sup>15</sup>.

Following the 2019 elections, the phrases "Encouraging agriculture" and "Encouraging urban agriculture" reappeared, and support for agriculture, livestock farming and cooperatives in and around Istanbul was also added to the IBB's 2020 annual report among the activities (such as "Producing Istanbul") that "will contribute to increasing the city's economic value" (IBB, 2020). The discourse surrounding the new Istanbul metropolis incorporates demands for healthy food and the maintenance of small-scale, ecological and local agriculture, but it gradually shifts its focus away from the social issues addressed by consumer cooperatives, favoring alternative approaches outside the organizational framework of self-management and the horizontal, consensual functioning of these cooperatives.

When democratic demands for healthy food and the preservation of small-scale agriculture lose their self-governance dimension, they become popular demands (Laclau, 2005). Those who decide and implement these demands are experts recruited by the IBB. Thus, we see that responses to demands for healthy food and the preservation of small-scale, ecological and

<sup>15</sup> While the 2004 law (No. 5216) allows metropolises to extend their responsibilities into rural areas and intensifies pressure on agricultural land, no provision authorizes them to provide "agricultural support" (Agah and Yılmaz, 2021), a gap that the 2005 Municipal Law (No. 5393) failed to address. Under the AKP's leadership, legislation has instead encouraged investment and speculation in land, and the 2014 law is being used by municipalities to promote water-smart agricultural practices, diversifying industrial farming methods (Özdoğan, 2023).

local agriculture are implemented within a hierarchical framework. At the same time, the IBB's Department of Agriculture assumes the role of guarantor of the interests of conventional farmers and agricultural cooperatives in Istanbul. IBB's Department of Agriculture claims to act in their best interests, but it effectively eliminates the democratic demands of consumer cooperatives.

### ***The metropolis, a centralized and attractive operator in terms of an instrument of public action***

During its first term (2019-2024), the growing importance of agriculture in the IBB's agricultural activities expanded to cover all stages from production to consumption, and its budget increased (interview with BBBT). The 2021 Istanbul Food Strategy document (İBB and İPA, 2021) also planned to ensure the "participation of vulnerable groups in political decision-making processes" and to "support fair, equitable and nature-friendly food communities, food cooperatives, agricultural initiatives, etc." This has remained unimplemented. The document also details concrete measures to protect rural areas and producers in Istanbul.

Within this framework, the metropolis will assume at least three functions in the agricultural sector (İBB and İPA, 2021). It becomes a "public farmer" in seeds and plantations by cultivating new land, testing local seeds, growing seedlings, and establishing test areas (vineyards) (interview with BBBT), and in land management by rehabilitating and purchasing land around Istanbul (Sarıyer Büyükdere Nursery).

Furthermore, it comes in support of agricultural activities by making land available through the Interventionist Flexible Support Model presented at the CHP Municipalities Agriculture Summit (September 30 - October 2, 2021). This model includes a range of technical assistance (soil, irrigation, etc.), the provision of equipment and supplies (seeds, etc.), and the purchase of produce from farmers for the community. Finally, it opened two types of markets: farmers' markets in rural areas on the outskirts of Istanbul (Çatalca İnceğiz Mah.) and markets for producers and producer cooperatives in the districts of Kadıköy and Beşiktaş, managed by the subsidiary İSYÖN on behalf of the IBB.

In addition to the fact that the IBB also opened an online marketplace<sup>16</sup>, the producers' and producer cooperative markets proved entirely counterproductive. On the contrary, the problems they were intended to address were exacerbated. Clearly, the initial proactive approach of the IBB's agricultural services department and its consideration of cooperatives and consumer communities shifted towards providing financial and technical support to villages, and conventional farmers and producer cooperatives. A joint meeting with these cooperatives and initiatives was held once in Kadıköy, but as negotiations made no progress, no further steps were taken to collaborate with all consumer cooperatives.

The strategic document Istanbul Vision 2050, announced by the IBB before the 2023 elections, still includes the statement that "alternative forms of interaction such as

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<sup>16</sup> *Halk Market*, <https://www.halkmarket.istanbul/>

cooperatives and solidarity networks should be supported" (IBB and IPA, 2022: 198), but our field observations and interviews in the summer of 2024 confirm that consumer cooperatives do not have a regular relationship with the metropolis. The only one involved in the farmers' market and producer cooperatives withdrew in October 2023 due to numerous unresolved issues and a lack of dialogue.

Despite the relatively large number of cooperatives and consumer communities in Istanbul, the top-down approach of this new agricultural policy has rendered their place and role in supporting an agricultural transition, distribution and consumption invisible. The two markets do not differentiate themselves qualitatively from the products of other markets and do not address the farmers' urgent need for improved income. They (referring to the Salı Pazar and Beşiktaş markets) could have served as spaces for raising awareness and offering healthy food, but consumer cooperatives withdrew, and conventional farmers continued to use chemical products without any serious administrative oversight of the origin of the goods sold.

By deviating from the framework of consumer cooperatives, the metropolis, through the centralization of its new public agricultural policy, is framing the public issue of agriculture and food through experts to validate an attractive and instrumental public action tool for conventional metropolitan farmers and farmers' cooperatives. This is because the metropolis is becoming the primary operator of its public policy while simultaneously adhering to the standards of conventional agricultural production and redistributing subsidies.

### ***Politicization in the service of the metropolis's popularity versus autonomous consumer cooperatives***

At first glance, the relationship between local political authorities and cooperatives appears to be characterized by unequal treatment. Consumer cooperatives have not received as much attention and support as women's cooperatives and those providing aid to refugees. This difference in political treatment is certainly not due to the organization of a political power representing the latter or to a viable economic model.

Are we not facing politicized<sup>17</sup> or partisan public policies, a kind of local political "populism"? (Erder, 2015: 360) argues that the localization project promulgated in the post-coup context of 1980 never aimed at democratization; it oscillated between populism and authoritarianism. Tuna Kuyucu and Özlem Ünsal also emphasize that infrastructure investments during this same period were made according to a populist approach (2010, cited by Ekinçi and Görgülü, 2015: 75).

Nowadays, populism can be a way of constructing politics (Laclau, 2005: 11) by both moderns and conservatives in a centralized State where local political powers have been given responsibilities. Ernest Laclau argues that one dimension of populism is "the unification of a plurality of demands in a chain of equivalences" (2005: 96)<sup>18</sup>. The community gardens (*mahalle bostanı*) set up by the IBB are presented as equivalent to all gardens in Istanbul, but

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<sup>17</sup> We could also talk about depoliticization in the process of making consumer cooperatives invisible.

in fact, the IBB excludes both the historical community garden and market gardening movements of Istanbul from its public action by remaining deaf to their demands and interests<sup>19</sup>.

With consumer cooperatives, it is difficult to envision this unification of pluralities considering their demand for autonomy, because the facts demonstrate that those originating from grassroots movements (alternative education, higher education, construction, disability, etc.) are ignored by local political authorities. Conversely, these same authorities create cooperatives in which the beneficiaries do not participate in their design over the medium and long term.

From a public policy perspective, while the metropolis sought to protect rural areas and include civil society, it appears to be reinforcing the dominant production standards of private actors in the agricultural, agri-food and distribution sectors by opening new market spaces where products are identical in quality to those sold in large retail chains. Their financial sustainability relies on the metropolis, failing nonetheless to satisfy producers, cooperatives or consumers. Moreover, most of those interviewed mentioned that the two markets are not functioning properly, that the number of cooperatives has fallen sharply, as has customer traffic. The metropolis itself recognizes this (interview with BBBT).

This situation is not unique to our case study; it is common to almost all cooperatives established by local political authorities. They persist as long as they can be sustained by national funding programs, which largely depend on international funds, international organizations, and/or various countries around the world. These public policies in favor of cooperatives are based on a functional and utilitarian logic, that is, serving the market first and foremost, rather than contributing to the empowerment of individuals.

Very few cooperatives established by local political authorities provide beneficiaries with the support they need to manage the cooperative autonomously in the medium and long term. Cooperatives are inevitably bound to a top-down management model, dictated by the State and/or local political authorities, with or without private company partners. Our observations reinforce this idea, as beneficiaries are neither introduced to the principles and values of the cooperative nor provided with training, and they see themselves more as employees than as cooperative members.

This cooperative populism, operating through a paternalistic structure, fails to prepare beneficiaries to sustain their livelihoods and achieve independence. Their dependence on political powers is very strong. The support mechanism of the "flexible interventionist support model" of the IBB's agricultural services department is not based on a collective and participatory democratic approach that values the formulation of shared demands. This approach, which tends to individualize by subjugating producers and cooperatives, has been

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<sup>18</sup> The other two: "the establishment of an internal border dividing society into two camps; the consolidation of the chain of equivalencies by the construction of a popular identity which, qualitatively, is not the simple addition of equivalent links" (Laclau, 2005: 96).

<sup>19</sup> This spirit can be found in the gardens where metropolises and municipalities also play a role in the management of ornamental gardens as a leisure activity, of a more populist nature, called neighborhood gardens (*Mahalle Bostanı*) (Özdoğan, 2023).

denounced because it prevents "farmers from making a living from their work" and is likely to "destroy their autonomy, capabilities and skills", as well as make them dependent on the municipality (interview with MK). Moreover, those interviewed mentioned that collaborations with local political authorities are based primarily on personal connections within their neighborhood, but also beyond, with other municipalities.

One of the interviewees asked: "What will happen if the municipality changes hands during the elections and stops providing support? This is one of the reasons why producers and cooperatives in Istanbul remain loyal to the current party's municipality [they give it their votes]" (interview with MK). With new elections and the arrival of a new mayor, it would not be uncommon for a change of municipality to trigger the closure of the cooperative established by the previous mayor. This is not only true for changes of municipality between local political opposition parties (between the CHP and the AKP); it is the same between two elected officials from the same party (CHP or AKP): the new elected official is compelled to close the cooperative established by their predecessor.

Lacking an understanding of cooperative principles and values, and misinterpreting the alternative model, municipal cooperative populism, on the one hand, erases the differences between cooperatives and businesses, and on the other hand, gives the impression that cooperatives are beneficial to their members, when in reality they are being used to bolster the reputation and legitimacy of local political powers. In the case of our study, the political stance of consumer cooperatives excludes them from the new metropolitan agricultural policy because it contradicts the very instrument of public action that it implements, and because the creation of cooperatives is primarily intended to serve a personalized local power structure between political alternations and the next elections.

We can therefore speak of a new public agricultural policy at the territorial level with the advent of the metropolitan scale and its powers, except that this public policy is in no way demanding in terms of environmental transition, unlike consumer cooperatives. Through this new public agricultural policy, the metropolis seeks to consolidate its political power in a metropolis where political polarization is strong in view of the upcoming presidential elections.

## Conclusion

Based on the points raised and our theoretical framework, we are led to defend the idea that "a public policy is a (...) political object" by understanding "the making of a public policy as political activities" (Zittoun, 2021: 79) and by erasing "the existence of a distinction between policy and politics". This understanding seems to reflect the stakes of public action in the Istanbul metropolis as the construction of a space for political opposition to the hegemonic and authoritarian power of the AKP, while simultaneously politicizing (and monopolizing) agricultural and food issues in a top-down manner.

Therefore, this politicization on the part of the metropolis is less significant considering its agricultural powers, as these stem from the admittedly recent decentralization reforms concerning the new powers acquired by these local authorities. It is present in the background,

taking a different direction compared to the previous team of the Istanbul metropolis, which was more inclined towards land speculation. The political alternation of 2019 appears to be an opportunity for the new metropolitan team to address agricultural and food issues and work towards implementing a new public agricultural policy.

This will gradually outline the restrictive choices of stakeholders (conventional farmers and farmers' cooperatives), distinguishing them from consumer cooperatives, heirs to the Gezi Park movement and pioneers in placing agricultural issues and access to healthy food on the public agenda. The new metropolitan team is creating its own space of interdependence, where it will become the main operator by relying on recognized experts and persuading conventional farmers and producers' cooperatives through interventionist methods.

The politicization of the metropolis's new agricultural policy is thus situated within an electoral timeframe, where the new team seeks to consolidate its political power by counting on stability in public policy, which contributes to enhancing the reputation and popularity of Istanbul's mayor. This perspective explains the choices and selection of public action instruments, which reflect more the arrival of a new actor in the agricultural sector—metropolises—than the consideration of the demands of an agroecological alternative championed by consumer cooperatives.

The issue of the agricultural land crisis, with a decline in its surface area in Istanbul, is proving more complex to overcome in terms of the environmental transition. The proactive approach displayed by the new metropolitan team, with its focus on participatory and inclusive democracy (vulnerable populations, consumer cooperatives, etc.), is under government oversight which forces the metropolis in the short and medium term to align with conventional agricultural standards in order to maintain at least a minimum number of farmers and farmers' cooperatives on the metropolis's periphery. Within this context of political polarization, this new agricultural policy contributes to strengthening the political efforts of the main opposition party, the CHP, as it seeks to seize the political power and turn the page on the AKP era.

Without addressing all the problems related to agricultural and food issues, such as improving the income of conventional farmers and farmers' cooperatives and the environmental transition through the development of agroecology, the new agricultural public policy reproduces the negative externalities of the agricultural sector as the metropolis's refusal to integrate the alternative offered by consumer cooperatives, to the detriment of conventional agriculture, does not eliminate the misuse of the new sales spaces. A large majority of conventional farmers prefer to buy and resell at the two markets established by the metropolis rather than produce and sell their own products at these markets.

The initiatives of consumer cooperatives have not been perceived as legitimate actors and of public interest for better access to food and income for farmers, despite the fact that they concretely promote the consolidation of agricultural practices that are more respectful of the environment and living things, that they buy the products of farmers and farmers' cooperatives at a better price, and that they maintain agricultural production on the outskirts of Istanbul.

The demands of consumer cooperatives regarding agroecological production and food, which resonate more strongly with committed farmers practicing more inclusive, socially responsible and ecological agriculture, are a deterrent for many conventional farmers to change their model. This new metropolitan agricultural public policy could prove to be a tool for mobilizing farmers, either to retain them or to bring them into the fold of the CHP political party. This conclusion would warrant further study to examine the political influence of this new agricultural public policy on farmers' votes.

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## ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

Founded in 2013 in Seoul, the GSEF – Global Forum for Social and Solidarity Economy – is a global organization of local governments and civil society actors committed to promoting and developing the social and solidarity economy. Its 90 members, present in 35 countries, represent the diversity of SSE stakeholders: local governments, networks of actors, associations, cooperatives, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, universities, etc. The GSEF supports the development of the SSE around the world by promoting dialogue between public authorities and SSE actors in order to jointly develop local public policies that contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the emergence of ecosystems conducive to the SSE.

The GSEF thematic working groups (WGs) were voted on at the General Assembly on May 5, 2023. The WG on “The Impact of SSE Public Policies on the Achievement of the SDGs” brings together some fifteen researchers from all continents. It is led by Marguerite Mendell (Karl Polanyi Institute) and Timothée Duverger (Chair Terr’ESS, Sciences Po Bordeaux) and supported by the GSEF General Secretariat employee working on his CIFRE thesis.

Following on from research already conducted by the GSEF in partnership with UNRISD, which led to the production of guidelines for local SSE policies, in January 2024 the Research WG launched a call for contributions to gather proposals for working papers focusing on three recurring processes in public action: development, implementation, and evaluation. Through the analysis of these processes of SSE public policy development, the authors of the papers (both researchers and SSE actors) were asked to examine two fundamental dimensions: the contribution of these local policies to the achievement of sustainable development goals, and the paradoxes associated with the institutionalization of the SSE.

A reading committee composed of GT members evaluated more than forty proposals, including the seventeen working papers now published under the title *Local SSE Policies enabling the Socio-Ecological Transition*. Each paper is available on the GSEF website, free of charge, in its original language (English, French, or Spanish) and in English. This publication and the English translations were made possible thanks to financial support from Caisse des Dépôts.

The concrete examples provided by these working papers will feed into programs to strengthen the capacities of local authorities and support the development of public policies favorable to the SSE.

