

Original article

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THE WORK OF THE DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES AND ITS EFFECT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF SERHAT DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

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Abstract. The Development Agencies were established in 2006 in Türkiye to support regional development, with the budget transferred from the central government. The Development Agencies collaborate with public administrators, local governments, provincial administrations, universities, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector to adopt an effective governance model. The work of agencies in exceptional situations is also distinctive compared to other actors. It is crucial to evaluate the efforts of the Development Agencies in mitigating the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and draw conclusions about their effectiveness in the region.

The impact of a pandemic outbreak on the Development Agencies has not yet been researched. This study aims to evaluate the work of the Serhat Development Agency and the effect of this new process on the local development of the region during the pandemic period, which continues its activities in the provinces of Ağrı, Ardahan, Kars and Iğdır covering the TRA2 region of Türkiye. The study was conducted using the qualitative method. In-depth interviews were utilized during the field research in the agency between 19–29 October 2021 and 18–22 January 2023. The results obtained show that the pandemic process has reduced the interaction of the agency with its stakeholders and new projects have not been supported, which had a negative impact on the development of the region. Agriculture continued without any interruption during the pandemic. Negative effects were seen in the tourism, food, and service sectors, but no additional efforts were made to remedy them.

Keywords: regional development, local development, the development agencies, Serhat Development Agency.

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1. Introduction

Regional development aims to reduce social and economic disparities between regions by utilizing local resources and making investment decisions. Türkiye has been working to reduce inequality between regions for years and established the Development Agencies in 2006 to conduct research and implement plans. The central government in Türkiye establishes the Development Agencies that play an effective role in the development of the regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the whole world since the beginning of 2020, has caused regional inequalities to increase even more and has negatively affected the development of regions in Türkiye as well as the rest of the world. In Ağrı, Ardahan, Kars, and Iğdır provinces of the TRA2 region, the research was focused on the Serhat Development Agency’s studies in their scope. When evaluating the findings obtained from the study, it is seen that the Serhat Development Agency followed an already determined agenda during the COVID-19 pandemic process but could not conduct studies that would reduce the negative effects of the pandemic, make the development process sustainable and support the region.

The study is divided into four parts. The first part focuses on the methodology used, while the second part discusses the establishment of the Development Agencies in Türkiye. The third part provides an overview of the general situation of the TRA2 Region during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the fourth part presents an analysis of the work done by the Serhat Development Agency during the COVID-19 pandemic. Local development has been assessed in relation to the work of the Serhat Development Agency during the COVID-19 pandemic in the latter part.

2. Relevant studies and possible approaches

Several articles have examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Development Agencies from different geographical locations. Byron et al. (2021) studied the social and political effects of COVID-19 in the Commonwealth Caribbean region and found that the pandemic has increased economic hardships and highlighted the risks to global economic integration. The study aimed to develop solutions that are crises resilient.

The study found that receiving the assistance of the Development Agencies, restructuring, and rebuilding processes were crucial. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other International Financial Institutions (IFIs) mobilized resources for the giants in the C.C. area (Byron et al., 2021). The conclusions of the article support the need for a concrete approach to multidimensional development and for making human well-being the primary objective of development. Regular monitoring of economic growth is necessary. The crisis has caught the Caribbean nations unprepared (Byron et al., 2021).

A study by Shibuya et al. (2022) reviews East Asia's development capacities, best practices, and experiences with significant outbreaks, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research highlights four key East Asian characteristics that could contribute to resistance to future outbreaks, emphasizing the need for coordinated public health emergency management systems, sustainable investments in public health infrastructure, and open data sharing. The study suggests that national interests in global health are vital for development.

The study indicates that East Asia receives development assistance from development organisations such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), and the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). Regional multilateral the Development Agencies such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific have also contributed significantly to regional development (Shibuya et al., 2022).

Omar et al. (2020) examined how the COVID-19 outbreak affected Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), development organizations, and entrepreneurs in Malaysia. The epidemic has negatively impacted small and medium-sized enterprises, industries, and the global economy. The goal is to identify the strategies used by SME owners to survive. The study involved conducting semi-structured telephone interviews with the owners of specific small and medium-sized enterprises.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) need cash reserves and emergency funds to cover overheads and fixed costs for at least six months and to prepare for operational and financial challenges such as supply chain disruption, cash flow issues, and access to stimulus packages. These challenges are magnified during global crises, and SMEs must remain adaptable and have precise strategic resources to weather them (Omar et al., 2020). A study of India's digital sectors during the COVID-19 era found that the virus has significantly impacted Indian enterprises, with sales decreasing in 70% of the analyzed enterprises and employment rates remaining vulnerable despite employers' efforts to educe the workforce (Fabeil et al., 2020).

Fabeil et al. (2020) examined the options micro-entrepreneurs make to maintain their businesses in Malaysia when faced with crises. The epidemic has a greater impact on microbusinesses. Regarding the effects of a pandemic on micro businesses, specifically their continuity and recovery strategies, there is a shortage of labor in developing countries. Telephone interviews with micro-entrepreneurs in Malaysia were conducted to explore the crisis management strategy from the perspective of micro-entrepreneurs affected by the COVID-19

epidemic. The interview's findings demonstrated how the pandemic crisis disrupted micro businesses on several levels, having an impact on them. In Malaysia the food and beverage industry, agriculture, retail, building and transportation industries, and tourism were affected. In order to ensure ongoing profits, entrepreneurs are encouraged to be more adaptable and make big changes in their businesses (Fabeil et al., 2020).

The search conducted in the Web of Science database encompassed a comprehensive review of papers on the effect of COVID-19 on sustainability using both bibliometric methods and a meta-analysis method. The analysis indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has harmed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but it also identifies potential new opportunities for the SDGs. Throughout the post-pandemic period, the article's conclusion provides relevant suggestions for achieving sustainable development objectives. Accordingly, the fields with the greatest number of publications are environmental sciences, green sustainable science technology, environmental studies, and public health. This has been proven to bring significant scholarly attention to environmental sustainability during the COVID-19 epidemic. The world economy has become unstable due to the COVID-19 epidemic (Wang and Huang, 2021).

Amis and Janz (2020) analyzed rural enterprises under the guidance of Scottish Enterprise, the country's national development organization, and the Scottish Government's Economic Recovery and Advisory Group. The participants were chosen to use the services of agribusiness and rural providers. The study's initial investigation focused on the components of a human-centered approach and its importance in the fight against the pandemic. Second, the institutions' social and economic contexts, particularly in the public and private sectors, were investigated.

Additionally, the study is expected to provide guidance on a variety of topics, including global development and how to create the best business analytics. Institutionalizing technology whose online applications have evolved into normal operating procedures during the epidemic will hasten resilience in the pandemic-fighting effort (Amis and Janz, 2020).

The effectiveness of COVID-19 pandemic management policies is investigated in the Research and Policy Brief conducted by Stuti (2020). The pandemic-related crisis presents a chance to increase trust in state institutions for corporate leaders and international development partners driven to enhance governance for economic development.

The study suggests that international organizations have an advantage in this position due to their absence from the local political system. International organizations may attempt to provide humanitarian relief through non-governmental organizations instead of governments due to concerns about the elite's capture of foreign aid. Due to issues about elite capture of foreign aid, international organizations may attempt to bypass governments and deliver humanitarian relief through non-governmental organizations (Stuti, 2020).

There are numerous studies on the COVID-19 pandemic phase and its aftermath focus on development studies in various parts of the globe concerning institutional crisis resistance, crisis management, governance, and social and po-

litical repercussions. Financial difficulties have been observed among the Development Agencies, governmental, and non-governmental organizations involved in development during the pandemic process. Some of these organizations have received support from central government institutions and international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The Development Agencies were not prepared for the pandemic, and it exposed institutional weaknesses. To better handle future crises, development organizations must adhere to governance principles, coordinate with other institutions, and share data transparently.

The pandemic disproportionately impacted on small and micro-businesses and several industries, including agriculture, retail, transportation, building, and tourism in developing countries. However, the pandemic also resulted in benefits such as improving crisis management skills and increasing public trust in regional development organizations.

3. Methodology

The current study investigates the extent to which the work of the Serhat Development Agency has been affected by the pandemic period. The primary objective is to determine the challenges it faced before and during the pandemic, develop solutions/measures for them, and identify possible vulnerabilities of the institution and its resilience, if any.

The basic assumption of the study is that the interaction of the Serhat Development Agency with its stakeholders and project support has decreased in the pandemic process, and this has a negative impact on the development of the region it serves. In this study, the qualitative method was applied. General meanings, concepts, themes, and generalisations were extracted from the data found. The Analyzed data were obtained from documents, observations, and decoded conversations. Consequently, an induction was made with the applied method. The resulting analysis was created by making generalisations and organising the data in a consistent and understandable way (Neuman, 2014.).

A qualitative research method was used in this study, specifically in-depth face-to-face interviews, to provide a realistic analysis of the topic. The researcher's impressions and perspectives gained during the interviews have been incorporated into the data.

The study was conducted in the institutional building of Serhat Development Agency from 19–29 October, 2021 and 18–22 January, 2023, with the target population being the agency's managers. Eight executive managers were interviewed in-depth for the study.

In the interviews, short biographies, areas of responsibility, and service periods of the participants were shared when necessary. Questionnaires were used, and the semi-structured questions were prepared in advance to obtain flexible and open-ended responses. Managers were asked about their experience, age, education, and hometown. The findings were analyzed and interpreted based on the relevant headings after conducting in-depth interviews.

4. Fundamentals of RDAs and establishment policies in Türkiye

The Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) established around the world have distinct legal statuses, obligations, powers, and activities based on the unique regional systems. Numerous institutions and organizations collaborate with RDAs due to their coordination responsibilities. Because of this, it is critical to establish the legal status of RDAs before beginning this research in order to prevent institutional conflicts (Eroğlu and Kum, 2010). The importance of RDAs globally has been boosted by the new public management strategy. Despite the fact that nations have created annual development plans and general development plans to ensure development, regional economic, social, and cultural diversity within a nation pose serious political and administrative challenges.

Changes in regional policies and an understanding of the importance of implementing local dynamics led to the widespread adoption of the regional Development Agencies in Europe after World War II. Since the 1950s and 1960s, certain countries in Western Europe have included the Development Agencies in their regional policies. The potential of these institutions to help people deal with the difficulties of corporate restructuring has sparked a lot of attention (Damborg et al., 2017). The traditional management approach has given way to the new public management approach as a result of the economic crisis that began to develop after 1970, the disruptions experienced in the supply of public services, and globalization. Public administration has undergone a transition and transformation due to this approach known as governance. The notion of global cooperation is the driving force behind the new public management approach. Governance is applied at every level, whether it is local, governmental, or international. The idea has been implemented in numerous other areas, including health, education, the environment, and international relations, and has significantly aided the advancement in these areas. Local and regional enterprises, non-governmental organizations, and the Development Agencies will benefit from this new approach (Tunç et al., 2019). Legal Status of RDAs in Various Countries is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Legal Status of the Regional Development Agencies in Various Countries

Country	Legal Status
United Kingdom	Limited Company with Guarantee of Local Authorities
ABD	Nonprofit Association
Belgium	Inter-municipal agency or original legal personality Owner Public Organization
France	Nonprofit Association or Mixed Economy Company
Germany	Limited Liability Company or Public Entity
Spain	Private Public Institution
Italy	Limited Liability Public Company

Source: Eroğlu ve Kum, 2010, p.179.

Within the administrative structure of the countries, RDAs in England by limited companies with the guarantee of local authorities, by non-profit associations and unions in the USA and France. It is seen that it was established by private public institutions in Spain and by limited liability public companies in Italy. The central government is the sole owner of the Regional Development Agencies in terms of their structure, organization, and function at the regional level, but most of them were founded by the state. In the 1950s and 1960s, RDAs promoted economic growth by attracting foreign capital into the nation. Later, they offered services to regional and local businesses either on their own or in collaboration with other organizations.

Since the 1990s, it has been aimed to bring vitality to the intra-regional economy, to ensure sustainable development, and to reduce interregional development disparities, especially in Western Europe (Atay, 2011). In 2001, the EU introduced governance principles in its White Paper. This included accountability, equity, participation, transparency, efficiency, and localization service. By following the principles of Governance (EUROPEAN UNION, 2001) and (Celikyay and Turgut, 2011), the Development Agencies transparently work on fundamental issues. In Europe, the Regional Development Agencies, or RDAs, are typically characterized as publicly supported organizations that are independent of the national and local governments and work to advance economic development in areas that have been identified as priority or problematic areas (Damborg et al., 2017).

Concerns about changes in administrative structure in public administration started in the 2000s. Türkiye adopted several laws to harmonize with the EU *acquis* during the EU candidacy process, and occasionally amended some of its existing laws. The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) has been taken into consideration based on the idea of addressing local needs at the local level in order to make better use of the resources already available, lessen development disparities between regions, and strengthen local governments. Additionally, other difficulties are also noted, such as the need to restructure local institutions to meet the European Charter of Local Self-Government criterion (Hamza and Çelikyay, 2018).

In this context, Türkiye passed a law in 2006 promoting economic growth through RDAs.¹ With the new law, the European development model was adopted, and the regions were accepted as the source of economic growth. Development strategies have been moved closer to the local level, away from traditional sector-based, centrally directed national policies. By creating a national system of semi-private RDAs, the aim is to shift towards regional economic growth. Turkey's centralized state tradition and regional economic disparities came to the fore in the face of this reform plan. The Turkish regional Development Agencies are analyzed in a context based on the literature on New Regionalism and the European Union Regional Policy, and they are identified as a useful example of effective regional economic development (Young-Hyman et al., 2008).

¹ The previous name of the law was "Law on Establishment, Coordination and Duties of the Development Agencies," which was changed to "Law on Services of the Development Agencies" with Article 75 of Decree-Law No. 703 dated 2/7/2018.

The Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) are a new governance model at the sub-national level in which political, administrative, economic, non-governmental organizations and other actors take part (DeasandWard, 2000, p. 277). They are institutions that are financed by the public administration, which directs and implements activities to support local economic development at the regional level, apart from the central and local government (Halkier, 2006,). RDAs help to ensure that the development efforts provided in the region and carried out at the national level along with the development of the regions lead to more reasonable and precise results (Keleş and Mengi, 2013).

The structure and purpose of the establishment and legal status of RDAs differ from country to country; some were used to ensure decentralization, while others were used to distribute national government policies effectively and efficiently (Harding, 2006). Although RDAs are independent from the central government in terms of structure and organizational structure, most of them were established by the central government. The European Union's Regional Development Agencies often have a certain degree of autonomy (Eryılmaz and Tuncer, 2013).

In 2001, the European Commission prepared the Accession Partnership Document that included the Development Agencies. In the context of Türkiye's harmonization with the "European Community Regional Policy," the expectations of the EU are stated in the short term. These expectations are the preparation of NUTS in accordance with the Union rules, adopting a strategy for the development of regional policy, starting the use of regional policy criteria in the selection of projects in the planning process, and establishing a strategy for strengthening regional statistics (Akpınar and Özasan, 2005).

Since the Helsinki Summit in 1999, Türkiye has been working to align its regional policies with those of the European Union (EU), including the creation of creating NUTS-II-level regions with RDAs. This new regional structure was initiated to align with the European agenda, resulting in 26 statistical areas at the NUTS-II level, encompassing all 81 provinces of Türkiye. RDAs are expected to provide support and financing for regional development projects (Lagendijk et al., 2009).

With the adoption of Law No. 5449 in 2006, RDAs were founded in Türkiye as institutions that place a strong emphasis on the recognition of regionalization, localization, and entrepreneurship. In order to lessen regional inequalities, take advantage of the funds provided by the EU to member states, and adapt to the EU in terms of regional politics, Türkiye, which has implemented numerous reforms in the EU membership process, has established the Development Agencies (Savaş Yavuzçehre, 2016, pp. 370–371).

In Türkiye, the Development Agencies are defined as "an institution established to develop and revitalize the entrepreneurial potential of a bordered region, and which has an administrative structure independent of the central government in order to contribute to development in this way" (DPT, 2000, p. 54). Prior to its accession, Türkiye used the European Commission to implement its regional policy plan (Young-Hyman, 2008,). However, it is thought that RDAs do not meet the expectations for the strengthening of local governance, instead, they mostly function as a different centralization tool, and serve only popular

economic goals rather than enriching local democracy and political participation (Sadioğlu et al., 2000). The comparison of RDAs in Türkiye and Europe is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

The comparison of RDAs in Türkiye and Europe

Criteria	RDAs in Europe	RDAs in Türkiye
Aim	Providing interregional competition	Eliminating interregional inequality
Constituent	Centralized and local governments, local authority, foundations	Established with the confirmation of the Presidency
General Characteristics	A semi-autonomous position, easy politics for the firms, wide ranging devices, flexibility, directing the developments	Compulsory participation of the regional actors, flexibility within the regional development policies
Organizational Structure	General Assembly Executive Board, Chairman Board of Control Secretary-general	Executive Board, Development Council, Secretary-general, Investment Support Offices
Legal Status	Public Corporation Stock Company, Limited Company, Non-profit Foundation, Public-Private Legislation Institutions, Inter-municipalities Agencies, Non-departmental Public Body Autonomous Organization	Institutions which are subjected to the private law provisions in terms of agencies, being provided with legal entity, decentralization institutions
Fields of Activity	Internal development, Attracting the foreigner investors, The services provided for entrepreneurs, local and regional authorities, Education services, International activities, Financial intermediation, Providing technical aid, Supporting the research institutions	Regional development plans, Supporting local government plans, Providing regional cooperation, Supporting the researches about regional development financially
Financial Resources	Funds provided by participants, Centralized government funds, Revenue from services Donations EU funds	Transfers from the general budget EU and other international funds, The share of one to one hundred that will be transferred from the budget revenue of the Chamber of Industry
Staff Structure	The employment of staff by the Development Agency is subject to its own establishment laws concerning financial rights, wages, and social security, as well as the laws governing public officials	Determined by the executive board on condition that the wages and daily pages of secretary-general and other staff and their other financial and social rights do not exceed the sub and upper limits subjected to Law of Social Insurance in terms of retirement and social security
Supervision	They are mostly responsible for local or regional directors and some of them are responsible the related minister and parliament, co-founders and executive board	Responsible to Ministry of Industry and Technology, Executive board, Secretary general, Internal auditor, Executive board and Development Council
Project Centers	One-stop shops	Investment Support Offices

Source: (Savaş Yavuzçehre, 2016, pp.377–379) and (Presidential Decree No. 4, 2018).

Türkiye administrative tradition has a centralized structure, which influences the design and operation of Regional Development Agencies. The Ministry of Industry and Technology is responsible for overseeing RDAs in Türkiye, and the national government provides the majority of their funding. The close relationship between Turkish RDAs and the central governments of the country has a significant impact on the success of the agencies. Positive relations between RDAs and the central government will help the agencies to achieve their goals (Dura, 2007).

The administrative organization of RDAs in Türkiye includes the Development Board, the Executive Board, the General Secretariat, and the Investment Support Offices. The Board of Directors makes the decisions for RDAs and is in charge for creating and carrying out the agencies' policies. The Board of Directors is made up of individuals nominated by the central administration who are representatives of the groups that helped form the agency. In addition to the other members, there are private sector representatives on the Board of Directors. This board elects the Director General, who has the crucial responsibility of instructing the technical team (Demirci, 2003).

The Secretary General is the executive body of the RDA and carries out the duties assigned by the Board of Directors and is responsible to the Board while performing these duties.

The foundation of the Development Agencies by the Turkish government, the fact that they receive a sizable portion of public funds, and the fact that the central government oversees them all demonstrate that these organizations are public legal entities. However, the development organizations have their own employees and are not regarded as public property, demonstrating that they are governed by private law (Öztürk and Tatarolu, 2018).

5. The general situation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the TRA2 region

5.1. General Information about the Serhat Development Agency

The Serhat Development Agency was founded to promote development in the TRA2 Region, which includes Kars, Ardahan, Agri, and Iğdır. It aims to provide locally-focused solutions to local problems, serve sustainable development, and promote coordination and cooperation between the public and private sectors, civil society, and universities. Its goal is to bridge the development gap in the region.

The Serhat Development Agency is managed by Türkiye's Ministry of Industry and Technology and has a Board of Directors as the primary decision-making body. The General Secretariat serves as the executive body, and the Development Board is the advisory body.

The agency has several units, including the Legal Advisory and Results-Oriented Program Management Unit, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, and various Investment Support Offices. The functions of the departments are listed on their website (<https://www.serka.gov.tr>), and Table 3 shows their human resources data for 2019 and 2021.

Table 3

Data Provided by the HR Department of The Serhat Development Agency

Year	Head of Branch	Specialist	Support	Financial Aid	Total
2019	10	17	7	16	50
2021	10	9	7	16	42

The Serhat Development Agency experienced a decrease in the number of qualified personnel during and after the pandemic period, but the heads of units, support personnel, and auxiliary services remained the same. The pandemic may have an adverse impact on the agency's financial statements, and a comparison of income and expenses has been made. Table 4 includes the income statement data for 2021.

Table 4

The Serhat Development Agency Income Statement

Income items	Estimated Revenue 2021 (TL)	Actual Revenue 2021 (TL)
Transfers from Central Government	34.000.000,00	15.589.147,51
Transfers from Special Provincial Administrations	2.833.891,60	2.833.890,88
Transfers from Municipalities	2.706.333,70	932.479,90
Transfers from CCIIs	74.453,22	70.047,68
Resources from EU and Other Funds	0,00	0,00
Operating income	1.100,00	11.821,08
Donations and Aid (Social Development and Gender Equality Policies Center (SOGEP))	0,00	5.700.000,00
Collections from Receivables	6.101.072,89	695.052,62
Refunds from Project and Activity Support Payments	0,00	0,00
Interest and Other Income	929.482,69	785.687,23
TOTAL	46.646.334,10	5.328.979,40

Source: (SERKA, 2021, p.43).

There is a substantial disparity between the income items of the agency and those not related to the “Shares Transferred from Special Provincial Administrations.” In 2021, the agency did not receive any funding from the EU or other agencies.

Additionally, the projects and activities did not generate any income or support payments. Overall, there was a significant decrease in general revenues, amounting to TL 41,317,354.7, which is approximately nine times the budget. Expenditure data for the first six months of 2021 is shown in Table 5.

Table 5

**The Serhat Development Agency Expenditure Table
for the First Six Months of 2021**

Income items	Estimated Expenses 2021(TL)	Actual Cost 2021(TL)
General Management Services	16.408.642,00	5.777.246,16
Monitoring, Evaluation and Coordination Services	1.973.122,99	570.325,00
Plan, Program and Project Services	1.545.000,00	19.761,00
Research and Development Services	3.464.340,00	11.510,66
Promotion and Education Services	3.180.000,00	205.625,67
Project Support Services	86.112.208,19	13.503.816,29
Activity Support Services	2.814.425,00	120.000,00
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>115.497.738,18</i>	<i>20.208.284,78</i>

Source: (SERKA, 2021, p.44).

Estimated expense items and revenues experienced a significant decrease. The pandemic has led to restrictions that impacted the operations of the organization and its stakeholders. The estimate recorded in the expense item was reduced by approximately six times.

5.2. The Serhat Development Agency Interview Findings

One-to-one interviews held between 19–29 October 2021 and 18–22 January 2023 show the demographic characteristics of the Serhat Development Agency executives.

The study discusses the Secretary General, Kars Investment Support Office, Ardahan Investment Support Office, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, Human Capital and Coordination Unit, Tourism and Environment Unit, which operated during the pandemic, fought against COVID-19 and its impact on local devel-

opment. Semi-structured interviews with experts from The Serhat Development Agency involved fewer people than other development organizations because it covers four small cities in the East of Türkiye.

The Agency experienced frequent negative shifts in the number of employees because of its location in the East.

In this context, semi-structured interviews were conducted with only 8 interviewees due to the low number of personnel at the executive level of the Agency. The results obtained are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Demographic Characteristics of Interviewed Managers

Number	Gender	Age	Place of Birth	Years lived in Kars
1	Man	47	Kars	11
2	Woman	28	Samsun	2
3	Man	39	Agri	2
4	Man	30	Kars	23
5	Woman	29	Kars	24
6	Man	46	Mersin	7
7	Woman	27	Manisa	1
8	Man	30	Elazığ	3

Source: Compiled by the authors based on interviews.

The managers at the administrative building in Kars Province were asked about their familiarity with the region's social and cultural characteristics, demographic structure, and economic conditions. Four of the eight interviewed managers had been working in the office for less than seven years and were not from the area.

The educational attainment of managers, their length of service at the institution, and their professional background were also surveyed.

Table 7 illustrates the categorization of administrators based on their educational qualifications, area of responsibility, length of service, and professional expertise.

All the managers have university degrees; two of them have postgraduate degrees, and one of them has a doctorate degree. One of the directors is also pursuing further postgraduate study. Two managers previously held the posts in public institutions before joining the agency, while the others had previously worked in the private sector. Before starting at the agency, three of them had never held the post in an institution, therefore they lacked prior work experience. On-the-job training exercises are regularly conducted by all the managers of the agency.

Table 7

Educational Level , Term of Office, and Professional Experience of Managers²

N	The level of education	Position	Qualification	Previous Experience	Department	Experience in the current position (Years)	Total experience (Years)	Service training received
1	Under-graduate study	Expert	Expert	Private sector	Investment Support Office	11	11	Yes
2	Under-graduate study	Manager	Sociologist	Special Education Institution	Human Capital and Coordination Department	2	2	Yes
3	Phd	Senior Manager	Geomatics Engineer	Private Sector, Local Government, Public Institution	Senior Executive	1	18	Yes
4	Under-graduate study	Head of Tourism and Environment Department	Electrical Engineering	Private Sector	Tourism and environment	4	4	Yes
5	Under-graduate study	Coordinator of Investment Support Office	Political Science and Public Administration	-	Investment Support Office	5	5	Yes
6	Post-graduate study	Expert in Monitoring and Evaluation Department	Food Engineering	Ministry of Commerce	Investment Support Office	-	8	Yes
7	Undergraduate study	Expert in Monitoring and Evaluation Department	Economics	-	Investment Support Office	-	3	Yes
8	Undergraduate study	Expert in Monitoring and Evaluation Department	Management	-	Investment Support Office	-	5	Yes

Source: Compiled by the authors based on interviews.

² The boxes denoted by the (-) sign could not receive an answer.

5.3. Executives' Perceptions on Development Agency Studies and Local Development

Regional Development Agencies are the institutions responsible for the development of projects that support local development and ensure its sustainability in their area of responsibility. The definition of local development by institutional managers and their view of this concept is considered significant. The participants provided their definitions of local development in this context. Responses were received from people-centered research describing local development.

“Educating people, training human capital locally and integrating it with industry within the possibilities in the region...”

“Tourism, rural development, the manufacturing industry is not actually a potential, it should be developed in a socio-economic sense with the right policies and local decisions.”

According to some participants, local development is a concept that can be explained by the precondition of recognizing local (stakeholders).

“Development from the local starts with getting to know a local. It is about knowing the capacities and capabilities of each local stakeholder.”

Different responses have defined local development as a concept that encompasses multiple aspects and sectors.

“Multidimensional work, from its spatial dimension to its economic, social and environmental dimensions.”

“A mechanism where all sectors come together and act in coordination and local people benefit from it.”

Participants assessed the impact of Development Agencies on local development. Tourism, agriculture, and animal husbandry, human capital, social support, and entrepreneurial programs for women and youth are the areas that the agency considers to be effective. To succeed in local development, some participants suggest the development of agricultural high schools, empowerment of women, and skills training for local personnel.

The agency's structure can operate in any sector as required due to their institutional structure and ability to work in a variety of areas. It can also assist investments, engage in lobbying efforts, develop expertise, and work in a variety of industries. Given the region's highly successful and dynamic structures, it is believed that raising their budgets will enable them to reach local development.

“In Kars, the impact of promotion and cattle breeding activities on employment is indisputable in both the tourism and manufacturing industries.”

“The agency had a great impact on human capital and women's entrepreneurship.”

The participants emphasized the agency's coordinating role as an issue. Because of this role, the agency is in an effective position for the stakeholders.

*"We are in the position of a collaborating institution."
"Guiding both entrepreneurs, investors and institutions."*

Actors that are effective in the realization of local development are also important. Some participants listed these actors as governors, mayors, presidents of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) and agency general secretary. It is noteworthy that the managers of the institutions are listed as active actors rather than the institutions. The roles that the institutions play in local development are seen as directly linked to the office managers, as evidenced by the following opinions.

*"Provincial governors, mayor, president of the chamber of commerce and industry, secretary-general of the agency."
"In fact, we can call it the members of the board of directors."*

In some responses, institutions, especially the agency, were addressed directly. However, participants answered about the work done with local actors. The studies emphasized the importance of local actors as stakeholders. According to the project content, examples of the studies conducted with the provincial organizations of the central government, non-governmental organizations and universities were listed. In some responses, central government's the provincial organizations of the central government are also mentioned.

*"We always define local actors as stakeholders."
"We did a project under the name of social entrepreneurship."
"We have only just begun to focus on civil societies."*

The participants drew particular attention to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Together, producer organizations, NGOs, cooperatives, unions, and the public will achieve local development.

"Producer organizations and other organizations, cooperatives, unions, and the public a little more bluntly are the most significant local actors, in my opinion."

5.4. The Serhat Development Agency TRA2 Regional Studies

In this part of the study, questions were posed to managers about the TRA2 region (Ağrı, Ardahan, Iğdır and Kars Provinces), which is included in influence and responsibility of the SERHAT Development Agency: What work is needed for the development of the TRA2 region, what work has already been done and what effect the agency has on the work. The participants emphasized the importance of strengthening human resources and providing employment while expressing the region's shortcomings on a sectoral basis. The development of rural areas requires agricultural operations as it is one of the least privileged areas in Türkiye.

“The most important potential has firstly the tourism sector, secondly agriculture and animal husbandry, and thirdly the manufacturing industry.”

“There is a lack of intermediate staff and qualified personnel.”

Opinions were also expressed that the provincial organizations of the central government should operate in the region and that local administrations' city services should be strengthened.

“The provincial directorate of commerce and the provincial directorate of industry must somehow be opened and brought here.”

“We have a lot of infrastructure problems in local tourism.”

When considering the inquiry into whether the works adhere to a specific plan and are deemed successful, it is essential to note that the works are executed in accordance with predetermined strategies and objectives. The regional plan is carefully outlined, and a comprehensive analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) is conducted. Furthermore, an impact assessment is also conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the work.

“The plan of the region has been determined. The current situation has been revealed. Strategies and targets were determined.”

“We have provided support for every sector that may be related to urban, agriculture, tourism, industry or not.”

For the development of the TRA2 Region, it was asked whether the investors in the region carried out studies in coordination with the producers and the local population. The managers shared that there were meetings with stakeholders and that the agency was in charge of coordinating them.

“There is a sectoral unit meeting. Good Eastern Express etc. in Kars's tourism. They ask, what is your offer for this year, what is your opinion?”

“We are in constant consultation with the major industrialists, the representatives of the major tourism sector, the organized industrial zone, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.”

Agriculture, industry, and tourism are the three main areas covered by the agency's Result-Oriented Program (SOP). In addition, an annual work program was prepared, and a roadmap was developed with the relevant stakeholders. Other stakeholders included the Union of Beekeepers, Provincial Directorates of Agriculture and Forestry, Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and the universities as partners.

“We have a program called the result-oriented program (SOP) for the development of tourism destinations.”

“From the Beekeepers' Union to the Provincial Directorates of Agriculture and Forestry, the university, and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, we attempt to act with a multi-stakeholder structure.”

The managers were asked about the studies and the impact of the studies on the development of the TRA2 Region. Some prominent works in the region were mentioned. The inclusion of the Ani Ruins on the UNESCO list, the Caucasian War History Museum, the opening of the Cheese Museum, the Eastern Express, the vicinity of *Çıldır Lake* and the restoration of Kars Castle are among the prominent works.

The development of structured industrial zones in Iğdır, Kars, and other provinces, the inauguration of the Kars Cheese Museum, and the expansion of the tourism industry have been accomplished. Collaborative efforts with vocational high schools and women's cooperatives have been undertaken to empower women and increase the number of cooperatives. However, the recent economic crisis has led to a reduction in both state investments and ongoing projects. As a result, the Ministry has the authority to suspend and transfer the budget of projects supported by the Agency operating under its supervision.

"It is a very serious study for Ani Ruins to be included in UNESCO."

"The Caucasus Line History Museum received 120.000 visitors in the first two years it was opened."

"After the Eastern Express, a Kars train exploded, but if you didn't invest here, this bubble would collapse."

While there have been some successes, there are still some areas that need to be improved, for example, unsustainable projects, incomplete efforts, stakeholder reluctance and a lack of information, underutilized agency capacity, and a lack of employee motivation within the institution.

"Everything we do here actually benefits something, touches something, but I think there is more to do."

"Not everyone can do their job well enough. Everyone does their job, but apart from that, they don't want to do much."

The TRA2 area was designated as an immigration area. The question has been raised as to what kind of studies have been conducted to increase youth employment and prevent migration. This situation needs to be evaluated on a regional basis, as requested. The agency's work is predominantly aimed at preventing migration and includes projects geared towards vocational training and employment in secondary education institutions. It is anticipated that the outcomes of these projects will be available in the forthcoming years.

"Most of the agency's work is geared towards preventing migration."

"We have studies and meetings on youth employment."

"We provide internship programs for vocational high schools which ensure employment."

Considering the characteristics of the region, the participants were queried about the criteria employed to evaluate the project applications submitted to the agency and the priorities that guide such evaluations. The responses received indi-

cate that the application process entails certain stages, a transparent and straightforward application guide, and evaluations by independent auditors based on predetermined criteria. The preferred project selections should be development-oriented, responsive to the needs of the local populace, and prioritize regional benefits over individual gains. Moreover, projects that contribute to the branding process of the provinces are also accorded due consideration.

“When you say local dynamics, how does Kars become a brand? What comes to your mind when you think of Kars, Ağrı, Iğdır and Ardahan in Türkiye. We want to work on them.”

“Our priority is to see if it brings out the local dynamics. After that, there is nothing we can clearly say that this is our sine qua non.”

6. COVID-19 pandemic process

6.1. The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic Process on the Development Agency Studies

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly disrupted the routine functioning in many areas, causing the postponement or cancellation of planned projects, loss of labor and human capital, and financial problems. The cases that emerged in Türkiye in early 2020 and some legal restrictions have also affected the work of Development Agencies.

The questions posed were aimed at gauging the extent to which the ongoing pandemic has impacted the Serhat Development Agency and the associated studies. At the beginning of the pandemic, in-person meetings and promotional events were no longer possible. Personnel work schedules were arranged on a rotational basis, with those who could be physically present in the office doing their work remotely.

The pandemic has a greater impact on stakeholders, thereby affecting the institution as well.

Financial issues were not the cause of direct problems. However, due to the problems that arose, general economic problems and the rise in exchange rates, the projects were delayed, and the budget was exceeded.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not caused any significant impairment among the agency’s personnel. The psychological effects of the process have been highlighted. Factors such as employee discomfort and the inability to feel comfortable in the work environment have been cited. In addition, remote work is not as efficient as face-to-face.

“Several staff members were ill with COVID-19, which had a psychological effect.”

“There were no job cuts due to the pandemic.”

“There was no change in the scope of duties due to COVID-19.”

Many sectors and institutions have taken a number of measures due to the pandemic. The development agency was questioned about the specific measures. The guidelines of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labor and Social Se-

curity were implemented, disinfection procedures were carried out for the institution within the framework of the mask- distance- hygiene rule, staff was informed, the application of the Hayat Eve Siğar (HES) code started, precautions were taken to maintain physical distance in the work environment, working hours were reduced and reorganized.

“The Ministry of Labor sent 14 rules to institutions. The staff has been informed. HES Code application, masks, and disinfectants.”

“We reduced the 10-hour working hours to 8.”

The pandemic response is the focus of the new project calls. Support programs continued. The projects launched in this and the previous period offered several conveniences in terms of funding, duration and activity.

“The calls coincided with the period in which the restrictions were reduced. No restrictions were imposed on COVID -19 related projects.”

“We have taken the COVID -19 precautions. We have not taken any additional measures for the project.”

“Our technical support is usually face-to-face; they were conducted online.”

Despite receiving the demand for project calls, none of the projects were found to be successful due to deemed successful on the basis of the evaluation. There is no new project in this process. With the Development Agencies Combat and Resilience Program against COVID-19” of the development agencies announced on 31.03.2020, it is intended to support projects that will contribute to the fight against the risk of the epidemics and offer urgent solutions to reduce the effects of the epidemic. The program supports projects that provide solutions to the problems that already exist or that may arise in the performance of economic activities due to the epidemic (EU Council Presidency, 2020). The agency was asked about the number of projects it has supported under this program. A call was published in the region as part of the program. Many applications were submitted, but no project was deemed successful.

“Calls were made regarding the pandemic in four provinces.”

“There were delays in the projects. Additional time extensions were provided for the projects due to COVID.”

There are different opinions about whether the pandemic affected the development agency’s support. According to some managers, the development agency’s support was affected, according to others, support was not affected. Despite the consensus that investments and project processes have been affected, these views are not based on quantitative data. The impact of the pandemic cannot be measured, as the managers explained.

“The pandemic has affected development investment and support for services. We couldn’t measure it, so we can’t provide data.”

The pandemic did not cause the current problems and there were no problems with the flow of funds in general. According to one opinion, the amount of funding has decreased due to the pandemic. Project budgets have been affected by the current exchange rates, as there have been interruptions in the implementation of projects.

“There were no problems with the flow of funds. Due to COVID-19, fewer funds were sent from the central budget compared to normal figures.”

“We did not have any financial support due to the pandemic.”

A question was asked about the impact of the pandemic on planned studies. The pandemic prevented many organizations from planning. Domestic and international trade fairs, stakeholder meetings region-specific work on aromatic plants and snow rallies are among the events that cannot be held.

“Promotions and organizations could not be held; meetings with stakeholders could not be held.”

“We had a study on aromatic plants in Ardahan and Kars, but we could not carry it out.”

6.2. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic process on local development

The impact of COVID-19 on local development in the TRA2 region was examined by interviewing managers about the sectors affected and the measures taken by the development agency. The tourism and food sectors were the most affected, and the agency provided financial support to manufacturing industry, while the service sector, particularly tourism, was significantly impacted. Rural activities continued with minimal impact and distance learning became more common. Consulting activities had minimal impact on investment and support, and projects were revised, with either less equipment or a larger budget requested. The Doğu Express, a major tourist attraction, was completely closed, severely affecting the service sector.

“It has mainly affected the tourism industry. Studies are needed to measure how much it has been affected. The project of the city of Kars with its historical identity has been accepted. Work on the Ebul Menuçehr has been carried out. Work continues for the Bedesten in Kars Stream. A café in Bayraktepe in Sarikamis Ski Center was opened and brought into tourism. Susuz Waterfall was built (All these studies are independent of the COVID -19 period).”

Several projects, including the Ebul Menuçehr Mosque, the Sarikamish Ski Center Bayraktepe Cafeteria, the Kars Stream and Covered Bazaar Project and the Susuz Waterfall were carried out during the pandemic period. However, many tasks of the 2020 work program, including training, advertising, consulting and technical inspections, were postponed or not completed. There was no specific planning for the pandemic, and the primary goal was to continue the ongoing process and ensure the survival of the company receiving financial support.

Managers were asked to evaluate the impact of their work before and during the pandemic on the region's development. A development plan focused on agriculture was adopted by the TRA2 region. There were no difficulties as agricultural activities continued without interruption during the pandemic. On the other hand, as already mentioned, the tourism sector was emphasized. A program was introduced to support micro and medium-sized entrepreneurs. In addition, training was provided to strengthen the skills of women's cooperatives and beekeepers. Over 700 farmers were trained in animal care, nutrition, sanitation, and animal diseases as part of the "Exemplary Producer Training Program.

"Nothing was interrupted. If there is something that was interrupted, it was interrupted by the institutions of those involved."

"The activities before and after the pandemic continue. There is no change there."

"I do not think COVID -19 has affected the city like Istanbul."

The development agency's influence on the TRA2 region in the fight against the pandemic is limited.

6.3. What are your recommendations?

Finally, the managers were asked for their general suggestions. It was emphasized that the support programs of the Ministry of Health and other relevant ministries can be implemented and that it is necessary to get used to the new normalities that came with the pandemic. Proposals have been made for support programs specifically targeted at the health sector. Although the initial lockdown process was challenging for all sectors, they continued their activities in the following processes. The possibility of employees contracting the disease is a problem that can occur. The service industry, which includes hotels, cafes and restaurants, was hit hard by the COVID-19 outbreak. However, they said that businesses that produce certain goods, including milk and dairy products, can be protected from negative effects by increasing their capacity for e-commerce.

"A support program can be made to combat the pandemic."

"The sector most affected by COVID was the service sector. Businesses that are not good at e-commerce started to stumble during the COVID period."

7. General assessment and outcome

Executives at Serhat Development Agency discussed the agency's human resources, stakeholder interaction, project support and budget, as well as their approaches to local development, the challenges of the pandemic and the sectors that need support. The agency remained open during the pandemic with rotating staff and remote working. There were no significant changes in human resources, but some entrepreneurs suffered job losses. The study included opinions of three executive managers from the region, providing a comprehensive insight.

When compared to the initial estimates at the start of the epidemic, the agency's revenue and spending components have changed dramatically over time. The overall income in the predicted budget has decreased by almost nine times, while the spending items decreased by around six times. However, this has not negatively affected the agency's operations. The amount of funding allocated to the projects declined as a result of the overall status of the economy and the rise in exchange rates. The TRA2 region has adopted a development plan for agriculture. Agricultural activities continued uninterrupted during the pandemic. Negative effects were observed in the tourism, food and service sectors. Nevertheless, no further study has been done for the sectors that are determined to be impacted. The new project calls are only expected to be made within the ministry's project program in 2022. According to this study, the Serhat Development Agency, which was founded for regional development, required investments, support, incentives and research during the pandemic, but none of this was done. During this period, the Development Agencies started consistent project calls decided and programmed by the central government. From the interviews, it was discovered that SERKA recognized the needs of the region but did not respond to them during the pandemic.

The unsustainability of the projects and the incompleteness of some of them, the reluctance of the stakeholders and the lack of information, the inability to fully use the agency's capacities and the lack of motivation of the institution employees are the weaknesses identified during the pandemic period. An analysis of the region's strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) was carried out and an impact assessment was made. Quantitative data is not available to measure the effects of the pandemic.

It has been said that face-to-face training and remote work during the pandemic has developed into a useful habit for the post-pandemic period. Additionally, the field study carried out by SERKA found that people who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic were entrepreneurs and that entrepreneurship was on the rise.

Supporting local development requires human-oriented studies. Local development studies acknowledge the importance of the young population staying in the region, as it is a migratory area. It is necessary to increase youth employment, strengthen human resources and prevent out-migration in the region. Adapting new norms and highlighting support programs for the healthcare sector are necessary due to the pandemic. The Ministry of Health and other central government organizations at the provincial level that support the development of the region should be opened in the region and the municipal services of local governments should be supported.

It has been determined that the pandemic has a significant impact on various stakeholders. Both domestic and international fairs, stakeholder meetings, and events that were planned prior to the pandemic, were canceled. Under the "Development Agencies Combat and Resilience Program against COVID-19," the agency issued a call in the region, which resulted in numerous applications but ultimately no successful projects were identified. Throughout the pandemic, no new projects were initiated, indicating a lack of initiatives by Development Agencies in Türkiye to address the negative impacts of the pandemic in their

respective regions. Consequently, the project support provided by the Ministry is deemed adequate when faced with unforeseen circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Development Agencies play a crucial role in the economic and social advancement of their respective regions. Their guidance and support for various projects and activities have contributed to the development of the region. Public investments channeled through these agencies have aimed to enhance employment opportunities and overall life satisfaction in the area. This has also created opportunities for the private sector, which has its own social and economic priorities, as well as a need for fundamental infrastructure. The post-pandemic efforts of these agencies continue to contribute to the social and economic growth of the region.

The analysis of the data supports the hypothesis that the pandemic has led to a reduction in interaction between the Serhat Development Agency and its stakeholders. Additionally, it is evident that new project support has not been realized, and this situation has periodically hindered the development of the region

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