



Understanding Development from a Local Perspective: A Qualitative Study on the Filyos Valley Project

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Yerel Perspektiften Kalkınmayı Anlamak: Filyos Vadisi Projesi Üzerine Nitel Bir Çalışma	Understanding Development from a Local Perspective: A Qualitative Study on the Filyos Valley Project
Öz Batı Karadeniz Bölgesi'nde yer alan Filyos Vadisi Projesi (FVP), önemli ekonomik ve sosyal değişimlere yol açmaktadır. 20 yerel sakinle gerçekleştirilen yüz yüze görüşmelere dayanan bu çalışma, FVP'nin kadın istihdamını artırmasına karşın esnek ve güvencesiz çalışma koşullarının yaygınlaşmasına neden olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca hızla artan konut talebi nedeniyle barınma, bölgede önemli bir sorun haline gelmiştir. Bir diğer dikkat çekici bulgu, yerel toplulukların karar alma süreçlerinin dışında kalmasının yönetimde eşitliğe dair kaygıları artırmasıdır. Bu bulgular, bölgede sürdürülebilir kalkınmanın tesis edilebilmesi için bütüncül ve katılımcı bir yaklaşımın benimsenmesinin önemini vurgulamaktadır.	Abstract The Filyos Valley Project (FVP), located in the Western Black Sea region, has profoundly impacted the area, especially in economic and social areas. Based on interviews with 20 residents, the study finds that while the project has contributed to increased female employment, it has also led to widespread flexible and insecure working conditions. Moreover, housing shortages driven by rising demand have become a critical issue. Notably, the exclusion of local communities from decision-making processes has heightened concerns about governance and equity. These findings highlight the importance of adopting a holistic and participatory approach to ensure sustainable development.
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1. Introduction

The Filyos Valley Project (hereafter FVP) stands as one of Türkiye's most ambitious development initiatives, promising to reshape the economic landscape of Filyos town in Zonguldak Province. Initially envisioned as a strategic port project, the discovery of natural gas reserves in the Black Sea shifted the focus to include a significant natural gas facility, further intensifying its impact on the region. While the project is heralded for its potential economic benefits, it has also triggered profound social, cultural, and environmental changes. This article examines these transformations through the perspectives of local residents and administrators, shedding light on the complexities and challenges associated with such large-scale development efforts.

The need for this research arises from the significant socio-economic transformations occurring in Filyos town due to the ongoing FVP. Despite the rapid changes in the region, there is limited research on the local impacts of such large-scale development projects, particularly in terms of their social and economic consequences for the local community. Understanding these impacts is crucial for fostering sustainable development practices and improving project outcomes. Moreover, this study aims to address the gap in the literature regarding the local perception of development projects and their long-term effects on residents, as well as the role of local communities in decision-making processes.

This research adopts a qualitative approach, with a direct focus on capturing the perspectives of the Filyos residents. One of its unique strengths lies in its ability to reflect the voices of those most affected by the project, offering firsthand insights into their experiences and opinions. By investigating these dimensions, this study will contribute to the broader discourse on governance and participation in development initiatives, offering insights that could inform future projects in similar contexts.

2. Theoretical Background

Regional development can be conceptualized as a series of endeavors directed at unlocking the economic and social potential of a given region to bolster welfare (Bærenholdt, 2009; Işık & Kılıç, 2012). It encompasses various dimensions aimed at harnessing a region's resources, fostering entrepreneurship, increasing employment opportunities and average income, and improving the overall quality of life (Baptista et al., 2008).

Implementing regional development initiatives stands out as one of the most efficacious strategies for mitigating disparities in regional development levels (Bachtler et al., 2014; Günaydın, 2013). Emphasizing the multifaceted nature of regional development, scholars highlight its role in fostering economic growth (Phillips & Pittman, 2009) and social stability (Almusaed & Almssad, 2023). Moreover, they underscore that development transcends mere economic advancement, encompassing broader notions of social progress. However, it is also pointed out that economic capital alone cannot suffice for development; the imperative of nurturing qualified human resources or enhancing human capital effectively and efficiently is highlighted (Berber et al., 2014). Hence, local stakeholders can capitalize on their skills, knowledge, and qualifications to seize emerging employment opportunities by adapting to new requirements.

Regional development is characterized as a field that encompasses multiple disciplines, requiring coordinated planning and execution (Dutt et al., 2020). For regional development projects to succeed, it is crucial to establish a structure where the process is guided by strategic plans (Pruteanu & Nita, 2020), public and private institutions work in collaboration (Roberts, 2007), and the participation of national and local stakeholders is encouraged (Draeger et al., 2010; Ignaccolo et al., 2018; Bell & Reed, 2021; Piscitelli, 2016). Additionally, it is of great importance that higher education institutions play a role in this process both as educational entities and as institutional entrepreneurs leading development and contributing to policymaking (Raagmaa & Keerberg, 2016; Harrison & Turok, 2017), while also supporting the cultivation of qualified human capital (Diebolt & Hippe, 2017; Faggian et al., 2019).

While regional development projects can yield economic benefits, it is crucial also to ensure the protection of human, natural, and environmental resources (Haughton & Counsell, 2004) and to implement necessary measures promptly (Lopez & Toman, 2006; Blackburn, 2007) to maximize social benefits and support. On the other hand, it is equally important to preserve cultural values and assets associated with regional development projects without causing harm (Lawer, 2019), while ensuring that appropriate measures are taken (Pineschi, 2023) to transmit these resources to the future effectively (Rotondo, 2016).

Maritime shipping accounts for more than 80% of global trade in goods, underscoring its pivotal role in unlocking countries' commercial potential. This statistic highlights the significance of maritime transportation as a critical element in global trade dynamics. In this regard, it can be asserted that ports play an indispensable role in regional development (Bottaso et al., 2014). The nexus between ports and development has been a focal point in scholarly discourse (Bryan et al., 2006; Sakalayan et al., 2017; Eroğlu Pektaş et al., 2018; Liu, 2012). Studies have delved into the ramifications of hinterland transportation facilities adjacent to ports on various economic indicators. (Toygar & İpekçi, 2020). However, it is apparent that research pertaining to ports predominantly gravitates toward their economic dimensions. Within this context, numerous studies have examined the economic impacts and performance of ports on their surrounding regions (Bryan et al., 2006; Ferrari et al., 2012; Gripaios & Gripaios, 1995; Prozzi et al., 2002; Wiegmans et al., 2015). On the other hand, it can also be noted that the potential social impacts of ports on their surrounding regions are often neglected (Pereira et al., 2019; Dağ & Büyükpınar, 2023).

In this context, ports in Türkiye, surrounded by seas on three sides, can also be considered as one of the fundamental elements of regional development. Filyos, situated within the Çaycuma district of Zonguldak province, is a coastal town with an approximate population of 5,000. The FVP, strategically positioned at the delta of the Filyos River, emerges as a pivotal investment encompassing Filyos Port, Filyos Industrial Zone, and Filyos Free Zone (BAKKA, 2019). With a projected annual capacity of 25 million tons, Filyos Port is poised to claim the title of the largest port in the Black Sea region and one of the top three ports in Türkiye (BAKKA, 2018).

Figure 1: Location of the Filyos Valley Project (FVP)



Source: <https://bakkakutuphane.org/dokuman/filyos-vadisi-projesi/147>

According to forecasts, the project is poised to yield employment opportunities for approximately 12,000 individuals (BAKKA, 2018). Another investigation suggests that the FVP, projected to entail an investment of around 8.5 billion US dollars, will directly engender job prospects for 8,000 individuals and indirectly foster employment for a total workforce of 30,000 individuals (Atış & Çelikoğlu, 2019). Moreover, the recent discovery and extraction of natural gas reserves beneath the Black Sea floor near the project area in 2023 have introduced a new facet to the project, positioning it as a pivotal natural gas and energy hub. The decision was made by the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) to process the natural gas reserves discovered in the Sakarya Gas Field at the onshore facility located in the Filyos Industrial Zone. Consequently, alongside the port project, construction began on the gas processing facility, which was planned to be completed in two phases. The first phase was finalized in 2023. Moreover, plans to establish an integrated fertilizer plant alongside the gas facility have emerged, notably broadening the FVP (TPAO, 2022; TMMOB, 2024). Considering these developments, the primary focus of the study revolves around scrutinizing the repercussions of the FVP on the Filyos region.

The Filyos Industrial Zone, designated as Türkiye's premier mega-industrial zone and an integral component of the FVP, is anticipated to wield significant influence not only within the town of Filyos itself but also across the broader Western Black Sea Region, characterized by prevalent rural population patterns. Clustering, the aggregation of businesses engaged in similar economic activities and complementary industries, assumes prominence in this context. Clusters are underscored for their functional role in ameliorating regional disparities and catalyzing development within their operational spheres (Jun & Kim, 2012; Günaydın, 2013). Reports indicate that the Filyos Industrial Zone enjoys favorable positioning for sectoral clustering owing to its robust infrastructure and transportation amenities (BAKKA,

2018). On the other hand, industrial clustering may trigger economic transformations and social and cultural shifts.

Moving beyond these considerations, to presume that a colossal endeavor such as the FVP would solely impact economic dynamics would oversimplify the nature of social reality. The burgeoning Filyos town, poised for significant transformation in the medium term, will undergo profound shifts across demographic, social, cultural, and economic realms. This study, anchored in an interpretive framework, aimed to understand how individuals living in the region, with firsthand insights, experience the project and perceive the ongoing social changes.

3. Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to scrutinize and comprehend the ongoing process of social change started within a small coastal town undergoing a significant investment influx. Furthermore, it endeavors to portray and elucidate local inhabitants' experiences, perceptions, and anticipations concerning this transformative social change. A qualitative-oriented methodology has been favored, aligning with the research's subject matter and objectives. Through a qualitative research design, it becomes eligible to grasp individuals' subjective experiences and distinct viewpoints, explore nascent or evolving phenomena, present intricate and comprehensive data, challenge prevailing theories or assumptions, and offer insights to policymakers and practitioners (Creswell, 2007; Marvasti, 2004).

In qualitative research, where emphasis is placed on exploring meanings and experiences, purposive sampling is considered appropriate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The selected sources or participants must possess rich knowledge and the ability to provide accurate insights into the relevant case (Patton, 2002). This sampling approach allows researchers to intentionally target individuals who can offer the most pertinent and insightful contributions to the study. Accordingly, in this research, face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants selected through purposive sampling, chosen for their ability to provide comprehensive information about the FVP and the region. Furthermore, data collection continued until a saturation point was reached, resulting in 20 in-depth interviews. Among the participants interviewed face-to-face were officials from the Filyos municipality, neighborhood headmen from the central district of Filyos, village headmen from the project's vicinity, local NGO members, local traders, and residents. While the sample selection prioritized participants with substantial local experience and knowledge of the Filyos Valley Project, this focus resulted in certain limitations, such as a higher average age and a predominance of male participants. These limitations are acknowledged and transparently detailed in "Table 1" to provide clarity on the sampling.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Interviewed Participants (n = 20)

Participant	Age	Profession	Education Level	Participant	Age	Profession	Education Level
1	58	Retired / Liquor store employee	High school	11	53	Head of the fishing cooperative	Associate degree
2	45	Teacher	University	12	30	Civil engineer	University
3	50	Tradesman/headman of a neighborhood	High school	13	46	Building contractor	High school
4	54	Retired / headman of a neighborhood	Associate degree	14	39	Restaurant owner	University
5	65	Retired / headman of a village	High school	15	37	Headman of a village	High school
6	50	Retired military personnel	University	16	51	Tradesman	Associate degree
7	58	Mayor of Town	University	17	65	Housewife	Primary school
8	62	Retired / amateur fisherman	High school	18	68	Retired nurse	High school
9	56	Retired / train conductor	Primary school	19	45	Hotel owner	High school
10	47	Professional fisherman	High school	20	70	Retired banker	Associate degree

Before data collection, ethics committee approval was obtained from Bartın University under the reference number 2022-SBB-0496. The field research was conducted between March and August 2024, and the researchers frequently visited Filyos during this period. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes on average. During the face-to-face interviews, participants who provided consent had their discussions recorded. In addition to audio recordings, researchers took interview notes manually and simultaneously using a laptop computer.

In qualitative research, data analysis is a continuous process throughout the study. Codes were developed to organize this process by identifying commonalities and distinctions within the findings. With the thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006), these codes were subsequently grouped to form categories, and ultimately, salient connections were established among these categories to delineate themes. The five main themes resulting from this thematic analysis process are outlined in the following section.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings derived from the analysis of data collected during the field research and discusses these findings within the context of the relevant literature. A thematic analysis technique was employed to evaluate the research findings. Initially, the data obtained through this technique were meticulously coded. A detailed examination of 20 individual interviews was conducted during the coding process, resulting in the identification of 117 unique codes. These codes were systematically classified into 28 distinct categories. As shown in the table below, these categories were further consolidated into five main themes within a comprehensive social analysis framework.

Table 2: Main Themes and Categories Identified in the Analysis

1. Development as a Demand	2. Demand for a Fair and Sustainable Development	3. Demand for a Democratic Development	4. Demand for a Safe Development	5. Demand for a Planned and Progressive Development
1.1 Contentment with the project	2.1 Economic criticisms and concerns	3.1 Desire for the involvement of the local community in the project management	4.1 Fear of Social Change	5.1 Unpredictable increase in the cost of living
1.2 Awareness regarding the project	2.2 Ecological concerns	3.2 Complaint of not being informed	4.2 Concerns regarding physical safety	5.2 Inadequacy of local authorities
1.3 The local community's desire for development	2.3 Gender inequality	3.3 Continuation of legal proceedings	4.3 Criticisms regarding the future	5.3 Housing issue
1.4 The historical character of the project	2.4 Weakening of local sectors	3.4 Claim of manipulative information	4.4 Concerns about migration	5.4 Failure to predict excessive population growth
1.5 Economic satisfaction	2.5 Concerns regarding human health	3.5 Loss of confidence in the project	4.5 Cultural tensions and integration issues	5.5 Criticisms of the development model
1.6 Pride in the project	2.6 Destruction of ancient ruins		4.6 Fear of alienation	

These themes have been designated as follows: Development as a Demand, Demand for Fair and Sustainable Development, Demand for Democratic Development, Demand for Safe Development, and Demand for Planned and Progressive Development. Alongside the presentation and analysis of the findings, reports, articles, field research, and theoretical analyses from the relevant literature that support the obtained findings are utilized to underpin the discussion conducted in this section.

4.1. Development as a Demand

The local population supports the FVP as a response to the development demands of the region's residents. The data collected during the field research reveals a broad awareness and sensitivity towards the project. The region's inhabitants appreciate the project's contributions to economic and social development and anticipate its positive future impacts. It can be argued that the economic benefits of the related projects are particularly salient in gaining the support of the public for local development models (Phillips & Pittman, 2009; Tapdık, 2022). In this context, satisfaction with the project is one of the most prominent findings encountered by researchers during the field research process. The local community believes that the project will strengthen the economic and social infrastructure of the region and constitute a significant opportunity for its future.

I think the industry is going to develop a lot here. A factory will be established, serving as a flagship facility, and around it, for instance, five more factories are likely to emerge. All transportation options are available, including roads, sea routes, railways, and airways. (P3)

Phase 2 of the port construction will also be completed. At that time, I believe there will again be an increase in employment opportunities. Once the free zone is established next to the gas facility, where factories and other industries will be set up, that's when the real transformation will happen here. (P12)

Economic satisfaction is another significant category related to the project. The local population believes that the project will have a positive impact on the regional economy and contribute to the increase in employment opportunities. Indicators of economic satisfaction include the occupancy rates of local boutique hotels, the rise in the number of construction companies, and the development of the ready-made food sector in the area.

For example, before the port, there were three construction companies here, including ours, but now there are 19 construction companies operating. It is a blessing for this area in commercial terms. Compared to 4-5 years ago, I can say that business here has increased by more than 100%. For instance, we are struggling to find workers for our construction projects here. (P13)

There are world-famous companies working here. For instance, we have 22 rooms, and all of them have been rented out in advance for a year to employees of a Canadian company. After the construction of the port, rents and housing prices here have soared. On the other hand, there is a housing shortage in this area. For example, it is almost impossible to find a room in a hotel here. I own a hotel myself, and recently, when a guest of mine arrived, my hotel was fully booked, and we couldn't find a vacancy in other hotels either. (P19)

We recently opened this restaurant; before, there was an older and rundown place. During the port construction in Filyos, there were ten thousand people working, and naturally, they came here to eat, which really boosted our business. I can say our business has peaked now, and about half of our current customers come from the port. (P14)

Expressions that document this content include the view that the influx of labor to the region due to the project is vital for local tradespeople, that Filyos has become a more vibrant center than before, and the increase in pharmacies, dental clinics, chain supermarkets, and beauty centers in the town.

Everyone's business has increased significantly in the last 4-5 years. For example, there was only one pharmacy here before, and now there are three; a dentist has come, and there was one women's hairdresser, but now there are three beauty centers—these changes all happened after the port. This place has become a lively town throughout the year. I have been coming here for 10 years; I normally live in Devrek (a district of Zonguldak province). Before the port, there would be no cars on the road when I came here, but now I come here with heavy traffic, so to speak. Until yesterday, even people from Zonguldak didn't know Filyos, but now it has become a place known throughout Türkiye and the world. (P13)

This is a town; it's the only place in Türkiye that has a Migros supermarket in a town. For instance, the population here is 5,000, and there's a Migros, while in Devrek, with a population of 30 thousand, there's no Migros. Additionally, corporate chain supermarkets have opened here because consumption has increased so much. For example, there are 3-5 thousand people at the construction site, and on weekends, those who finish work come here to shop, which has really boosted the local economy. (P1)

With the commencement of the project, there has been significant employment of residents in the town and its surrounding areas. As a result of this process, individuals who were previously unemployed or engaged in uninsured or temporary work have been integrated into formal employment. Nevertheless, despite the availability of insured positions, the prevalence of contractual and temporary employment has been a source of concern and criticism among local residents.

Everyone who wants to work is getting a job. There are a lot of companies. They provide insurance and pay slightly above the minimum wage. They also offer transportation, meals, and insurance as additional benefits. (P3)

On the other hand, the employees here are working for minimum wage and on contract, meaning they can be laid off at any moment. When you consider the minimum wage, most people are working for just a little more than that, and it's actually not enough to make ends meet. For example, most of the workers here can't afford to rent a separate house because of the cost, so many of them stay with their families. Also, most of the people working here are not doing this job for life; they are working temporarily while preparing for entrance exams or until they find a better job. (P2)

The local residents have mostly worked in temporary positions with insurance up to now. What we're actually looking for is for workers to find secure, long-term jobs where they can work for a lifetime with stability and benefits. (P7)

Additionally, it has also been noted that some employees who initially started in unskilled positions have, over time, transitioned into semi-skilled workers.

Initially, there were unskilled workers who started out in basic jobs but later obtained certifications and specialized as forklift operators, drivers, and other technical roles, earning better salaries. In other words, many people who would have left the village for the port project have become semi-skilled workers. That is to say, for many people who would have stayed in the village without the port, the port project has provided them with a profession and turned them into qualified workers. (P16)

The project's effects on gender equality are another notable issue raised by the local population. It can be stated that significant changes have occurred in the social and economic status of women with the FVP. Women who were previously excluded from the labor force

have now been integrated into formal employment, thereby enhancing their visibility and empowerment in both public and private spheres.

Women are also working in cleaning, tea-serving, and laundry jobs. There are no women left sitting at home in Filyos; they're all working now. Many of these women are working outside for the first time in their lives. (P1)

When I go out in the morning, I see all the housewives outside, going to work. This is a very good thing for the women of our town. They earn their own money, meaning they are not dependent on their husbands, which is wonderful. To this day, it's impossible to live on just one salary. Until now, some of these women were working as daily cleaners without insurance, but now they are working in proper jobs. (P20)

In recent years, women have found many job opportunities and have been able to provide better education for their children. Their children are now studying comfortably at universities in different cities. (P16)

On the other hand, it has been observed that some women with higher economic capital have adopted a critical stance toward various aspects of the issue.

With women working at the port, we've started having problems finding cleaners for homes. For example, I now offer 1,000 TL for daily cleaning, but no woman is willing to come to my house to clean for that amount. (P18)

Local economies have consistently expressed satisfaction with the prospect of development projects being passed on to future generations (Hamer & Farr, 2009). The realization of the FVP, which has been in planning since the Ottoman era, is regarded as a significant source of pride. This project is seen as a means to revitalize the region's historical legacy and as a value to be transmitted to future generations.

This is a project that has been talked about since Ottoman times and is being done for the first time. We are proud of this project. Whether I catch fish or not, whether my earnings decrease, it doesn't matter to me; I am very proud of this project. (P10)

Filyos was such a beautiful place until the 1990s when the brick factory (operated by the government) closed—I can't even describe how nice it was. The surrounding nature was beautiful, people were civilized, and there were balls and events. Civil servants would be assigned here and would come; those were good days. After the factory closed, the town went back 20 years. Now, I believe the port project presents a very important opportunity to bring Filyos back to its old lively and developed appearance. (P20)

Nevertheless, the project has also faced criticism to the extent that the local population has embraced it. However, it would not be entirely accurate to interpret these criticisms as an opposition to development projects per se. On the contrary, the criticisms articulated by the local residents can be seen as an expression of the search for an alternative development model, highlighting the shortcomings of the project and its implementation.

4.2. Demand for a Fair and Sustainable Development

Concerns such as resource depletion, pollution, species extinction, ecosystem degradation, poverty, inequality, traffic congestion, inadequate housing, and the loss of social capital are common challenges encountered in development projects, and sustainability emerges as a critical concept in addressing these issues (Wheeler, 2014; Galan, 2018). The primary concerns and criticisms that emerge when evaluating the effects of the FVP on the local population reveal the presence of a demand for fair and sustainable development. The fundamental issues examined within this theme include ecological concerns, economic criticisms and anxieties, worries about human health, the potential displacement of local industries, housing and accommodation challenges, as well as fears related to the destruction of ancient relics in the region.

Sustainability should be understood as protecting economic and natural resources (Haughton & Counsell, 2004). Concerns regarding the environmental impacts of the FVP represent a significant source of skepticism among the local population. Official reports indicate that the planned fertilizer factory, associated with the natural gas facility, could pose severe threats to natural habitats and water resources (TMMOB, 2024). During the field research, it was frequently expressed that the proposed fertilizer factory could pollute the air and water of Filyos town.

The fertilizer factory that's planned to be built is expected to produce 1.5 million tons of solid waste annually. This will contaminate our soil and water. It also consumes a lot of water—its daily water usage is equivalent to the water consumption of the entire town. So, it will obviously negatively impact our groundwater. The water in the existing wells will be drained, and we will need to drill deeper. And these are technical details I'm providing; I follow the issue closely, and these are expert opinions. (P5)

Our sea is crystal clear, and our beach is long and beautiful. However, I think that once the port project is completed and the fertilizer factory and free zone are up and running, our region will become much more environmentally at risk. (P2)

If economic development is not integrated with environmental sustainability, the costs imposed by environmental degradation can diminish the benefits of development and social welfare (Lopez & Toman, 2006; Stanković et al., 2021). Participants have expressed that the valley project has significantly harmed the natural environment, particularly the Filyos Bird Paradise. Uncertainties regarding how increased industrial activities associated with the project will impact environmental balances and damage local ecosystems are heightening the ecological sensitivities of the local population, forming the central dynamic of opposition to the project.

From an environmental perspective, the project was located in Bird Paradise. We're observing the negative impacts of the port on this area; it has been quite damaged. Bird watchers are noting that the number and diversity of birds there have notably decreased. (P14)

We may not have had much legal knowledge, or perhaps we weren't well organized, which is why we couldn't resist effectively or defend our rights at the time. People have been demoralized and frightened; you can hardly get them to go outside. Our women have shown more courage than us men in this regard; the women in our village have gone outside several times and protested the project. (P5)

Filyos town has experienced rapid population growth due to the construction of the port and the operation of the natural gas facility. However, the housing supply has not increased at the same level, resulting in a swift and substantial rise in housing and rental prices, far exceeding the national average. All participants have emphasized the astronomically high increase in rental prices within the town.

When the port construction began, the prices of houses, rents, and the value of fields have soared. Monthly rents shot up from 1,000 TL to as high as 15,000 TL. Rents have skyrocketed, and construction has rapidly increased. (P17)

For example, when teachers or other public employees come here, they end up spending half of their salary just on rent, making it really hard for them to live here. But companies can easily cover these rent costs for their employees. Now, for instance, a person rents out apartments in a building. If the employees were to stay in a hotel, it would cost them a thousand lira per day, but since it's cheaper for the company, they rent apartments for the employees. The company pays 15,000 lira for an apartment they rent for three people. This, of course, has driven up the rent prices here significantly. (P1)

The concept of sustainability in development projects encompasses various dimensions. Sustainable development requires, on the one hand, respect for both humans and other living beings and, on the other, the wise use and management of existing natural and economic resources (Blackburn, 2007). From this perspective, the sustainability of local development projects is feasible when considering the established local economies. Some local residents interviewed during the research expressed various concerns about the economic aspects of the FVP. Specifically, there are fears that the project may lead to the displacement of small businesses and traditional economic activities in the region. Economic concerns frequently mentioned include the damage to livestock and agriculture, the loss of fishing areas, and a remarkable reduction in tourism opportunities.

Thousands of acres of green space disappeared, gone. I think this place could have been Türkiye's largest agricultural basin after Bafra (a district famous for its rich agricultural legacy). The soil here is very fertile, and we have plenty of water. With modern techniques, advanced agriculture could have been done here. But the fertile land is gone; it's all turned into a pile of stones. (P5)

About 80% of the cultivated land is gone, and around 90% of livestock farming has ended. This area used to be a big producer of hazelnuts, wheat, and corn, but agriculture has significantly declined since the port. (P15)

In Filyos town, it has been observed that the fishing communities have faced disruptions in their activities due to prohibitions on accessing certain sea areas following the construction of the port and the gas facility, as well as occasional arbitrary practices. Interviewees have highlighted that, as compensation for the disruption of their livelihoods, the management of the port and the gas facility has provided specific partial support to fishermen, which is considered inadequate.

During the port construction, because our business was affected, they gave us a one-time payment. They paid based on the engine power of our fishing boats, and since my engine is 90 horsepower, I received 91,000 Turkish Lira. In total, they distributed 3.2 million TL to the registered fishermen here. When they gave it to us, they said it was for Phase 1. Is it a lot of money? No, it's not, especially considering they gave it to us for 4-5 years. With that money,

they basically gave us “a taste of honey.” Honestly, we’re staying afloat by taking out loans; without loans, there’s no way I could continue fishing. (P10)

Ensuring a livable environment for future generations, safeguarding local biodiversity, and being sensitive to air pollution should be considered environmental dimensions of sustainable development (Blackburn, 2007). The potential health impacts of the FVP are a significant source of concern among the local population. Specifically, the possible adverse effects of increased industrial activities on air and water quality heighten health-related anxieties. Local residents are troubled by the potential risks the project may pose to human health. Some interviewees have expressed concerns that the region might become a center for cancer-related illnesses.

Our sea is very clean, and our beach is long and beautiful. We have a high potential for summer tourism. We just want to be able to swim in the sea. To be honest, factories scare us. Cancer cases and illnesses have increased a lot here. People are especially scared of the fertilizer factory. We don’t want to become like “Dilovasi” (A district in the province of Izmit, notoriously famous for its immensely polluted air). If the factories are built, our town will be stuck between the thermal power plant in Zonguldak and these factories, so serious measures need to be taken in this regard. (P2)

A welfare state exists for the health and well-being of its citizens. Let’s say it will make me money, but what’s the point when I lose my health? If you’re going to make me money while causing me pain, what’s the value in that? (P5)

Insufficient attention to the preservation of cultural assets in areas where port projects are undertaken often results in damage to tangible and intangible cultural resources (Lawer, 2019). The ancient city of Tios, located within the boundaries of Filyos town, was established in the 7th century BCE and holds significant archaeological importance (Yıldırım, 2017). The ancient city’s settlement area is very close to the region where the port and gas facility constructions are taking place. In this context, the impact of the Filyos Project on the region’s ancient relics and historical heritage represents another significant dimension of concern.

They ruined our history and cultural heritage. They destroyed all the ancient ruins. For example, there used to be a lot of historical graves in the area that was once a military zone, but TPAO (Turkish Petroleum Corporation) demolished all of them. The forest clearing and the work around the graves were done secretly at night. Along with the forest, our history was wiped out, too. Then, to cover up the destruction in the forested area, they laid artificial grass over a large portion of it. (P6)

The Çatalağzı Thermal Power Plant is already nearby, and considering the port and other developments here, I believe this process will seriously damage our historical structures, our castle, and our natural beauties. It would be good if serious planning were done in these areas. (P2)

Fair and sustainable development emerges as a fundamental demand when the findings are categorized as highlighted above. The local population does not offer unconditional support for the project. A primary demand is that both the sustainability of the project and the mitigation of its negative impacts on the city and its residents be managed within the framework of justice principles. The goal of sustainable and equitable development minimizes social tensions and prevents the deepening of inequalities in regional development projects (Almusaed & Almssad, 2023). In this context, it is emphasized that a more comprehensive

development model should be established by balancing the impacts of the FVP and strengthening local participation. Strengthening local participation covers conducting the process with a democratic model.

4.3. Demand for a Democratic Development

The consideration of the FVP in relation to democratic processes and local participation is another key theme emerging from the research findings. This theme encompasses issues such as lack of information, disregard for local opinions, insufficient participation, exclusion from decision-making processes, neglect of local expectations, and lack of transparency. In this context, it is emphasized that for development projects to be sustainable, it is crucial for all stakeholders (both primary and secondary) who represent common values and interests to be actively involved throughout the process (Ignaccolo et al., 2018; Jansen et al., 2018; Dooms, 2019).

Since the inception of the FVP, serious criticisms have occurred regarding the insufficient dissemination of information to the local population. During the interviews, residents expressed their grievances about the lack of adequate information regarding the project's impacts, objectives, and process.

Honestly, we hear about it on television. There's no specific information being given to the people of Filyos town. In the very beginning, an informational meeting was held, but at that time, it didn't catch much attention from the public. I think the people are not very aware of this issue. (P8)

They don't run a participatory process at all. Usually, they just make decisions and inform us afterward. We head out to sea to cast our nets and fish, and then we see them coming and telling us fishing is banned for 15 days. (P11)

This deficiency has formed a general atmosphere of distrust towards the project and has heightened local opposition. However, the involvement of local stakeholders and communities in local development planning is critical to achieving balanced and sustainable local development (Hrivnák et al., 2021; Bell & Reed, 2021; Piscitelli, 2016). The insufficient inclusion of the local population in decision-making processes and the disregard for their opinions are among the major obstacles to democratic participation. The residents of the area desire to be actively involved in the decision-making processes.

In the initial meetings, we were told that a "clean industry" without chimney emissions would be established, like spare parts or dental implants. But later, the plans changed, and now we're told a fertilizer factory will be built. Unfortunately, as the headman of the village, I wasn't truly involved in any of these decision-making processes; that's the bad part—we always find out afterward. (P5)

The process was not conducted in a participatory manner; no. A lady from TPAO Public Relations comes. They act as if they are informing us, but in reality, they are making decisions there and just come to announce them to us. It's entirely a symbolic participation process. (P4)

The lack of transparency in the decision-making processes of the FVP has led to a deficiency of trust among the local population. The insufficient transparency regarding how and on what criteria decisions about the project are made reinforces the perception that the project is not being managed in a democratic manner.

The public has no idea about anything. A lot of politicians have come here, and ministers have visited several times, yet none of them have ever set foot in Filyos. For example, the Minister of Energy comes here almost every week these days, but he hasn't even once set foot inside Filyos town. (P9)

The provision of adequate information to the local population and their effective inclusion in decision-making processes must be seriously considered for the success and societal acceptance of the project. Globally, local projects that encourage democratic participation have been shown to achieve their objectives more effectively (Draeger et al., 2010). In this context, adopting a more participatory, transparent, and democratic approach in the management and implementation of the FVP emerges as a necessity.

4.4. Demand for a Safe Development

Sustainable development is a holistic approach that seeks to promote not only economic growth and environmental protection but also the preservation of cultural richness and the social structures of communities for future generations. As human identity is often closely intertwined with cultural heritage, safeguarding local cultures in the development process can be regarded as a fundamental human right (de Lange & Adua, 2022; Pineschi, 2023). The impact of the FVP on the region's social and cultural dynamics has generated concerns about security and stability, leading to a demand for secure development among local residents. The categories examined under this theme include future concerns, migration issues, security concerns, adaptation problems, cultural tensions, fears of social change, and the fear of marginalization of the local community.

Uncertainties regarding the project's impact on the region have led to increased future concerns among the local population. Despite the rise in job opportunities, doubts about how the project will alter the social and cultural fabric of the region and affect the lives of local residents have fostered a pronounced atmosphere of distrust and concern towards the project.

Until now, this place was a tourist town, but from now on, it will become more focused on industry, and its natural beauty will be ruined. I think in the future, this area will be economically developed but culturally deteriorated and regressed. For example, I don't think as many people will come here for the sea as they used to. (P14)

The increase in job opportunities resulting from the FVP has also led to a rise in migration to the region. This influx has raised concerns among the local population regarding the demographic balance. Workers and local residents have had discord and security problems during the project's implementation. Specifically, the presence of migrated workers has heightened security concerns and led to tensions between the local community and the newcomers. Additionally, tensions arising from cultural differences and fears of social change have negatively impacted the perception of security in the region.

There was once an issue with some people from the East who were staying at the construction site. They were singing Kurdish songs on the beach, and a few people came over asking why they were singing in Kurdish, which led to tension. We called the police, and the situation was resolved. (P1)

In the early days, there were some minor social integration issues and problems; for example, there were tensions and fights in restaurants at times. At one point, the local youth (about 35-40 people) communicated through a WhatsApp group and acted like an intelligence

network. Whenever there was an incident, they would immediately gather and go to the scene to intervene. (P3)

Alongside the economic transformations brought about by the FVP, significant social and cultural changes have also been observed in the region. A sense of alienation and detachment has replaced the previously existing solidarity and social relationships among the local population.

Now, most of the people we see in the town center are strangers to us. We don't even recognize our friends' children. So, this place has lost its small-town character, and we've become strangers to each other; people have grown distant. (P9)

Alienation has increased and will continue to increase, I think. Those coming from outside have disrupted the harmony of the area, but we'll have to get used to it. The project has contributed greatly to the town economically, but we have lost our former peace and happiness. (P8)

Additionally, some members of the Filyos community believe that the local cultural heritage and identity are also under threat. Local development projects necessitate regional approaches. Local cultural heritage should be treated as a living entity in need of preservation. A long-term development strategy should focus on strengthening regional cultural assets and social networks (Rotondo, 2016). Findings under this theme indicate that the FVP should be assessed not only from an economic perspective but also from social and cultural viewpoints. The project's impacts on the region encompass physical, social, and cultural security. Within this framework, the demand for secure development is crucial for the project's success and social acceptance.

4.5. Demand for a Planned and Progressive Development

Issues related to housing problems, increased cost of living, critiques of the development model, and dissatisfaction with local governance have emerged as prominent concerns among the local population regarding the project. In this regard, there is an apparent demand from the local community for the development process to be carried out in a planned and phased manner. The population increase resulting from the project has caused a certain degree of concern among local residents. Rapid population growth may lead to the inadequacy of existing infrastructure and the disruption of social services, emphasizing the need for a carefully planned approach. This situation underscores the necessity of addressing the needs of the local population and highlights the importance of more comprehensive planning to tackle housing issues. The government's transfer of the expropriation process to companies and increased employment in secondary roles for Filyos residents have led to criticisms of the development model. Inconsistencies in zoning changes and the lack of environmental regulations have prompted criticisms of the local administration's inadequacy in managing the project. These criticisms indicate that the interests of the local population have not been adequately considered in the project and that the development process needs to be more equitable and inclusive.

The mayor is facing much backlash from the public. Recently, for example, he changed the zoning plans and allowed much construction. He permitted the building of high-rise buildings, which I think has negatively affected the appearance of our town. (P3)

Recently, the government has handed over the expropriation process to companies. The government tells the companies to handle the expropriation process, and sometimes, even with some pressure, the companies are able to manage it. (P8)

The increase in rental prices and the consequent rise in living costs have led to notable economic hardships for the local population.

For example, some people returned to their villages in Filyos because the rents in the town center increased so much. They couldn't afford to stay there and had no choice but to go back to their village and live with their parents. (P4)

For example, the rent for a 1+1 apartment was 500 TL before the port construction started. But now, the same apartments are being rented for 10-12 thousand Turkish Lira. There is certainly an impact from the economic crisis in Türkiye, but I can confidently say that the rise here has been mainly driven by the port. (P13)

This situation underscores the necessity of managing the development process in a balanced manner from both social and economic perspectives. The increase in living costs may weaken local support for the project and potentially lead to social unrest. Dissatisfaction with the local administration further undermines the community's trust in the development process.

Strategic planning is crucial for local development projects to produce broader economic benefits, analyze the project's strengths and weaknesses, and quickly adapt to external changes (Pruteanu & Nita, 2020). In the context of the FVP, implementing a strategic and phased approach is crucial for boosting local confidence in the project and ensuring the sustainability of the development process. Insights from previously conducted local development projects from different examples, including those addressing transportation, environment, housing, and education, can serve as models. With expert support, these projects, managed through the joint efforts of local governments, regional administrations, central governments, other public institutions, and the private sector, provide valuable guidance (Roberts, 2007).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Filyos Valley Project (FVP) represents a transformative development initiative that has brought profound socio-economic changes to the region. This research was driven by the need to explore these transformations, particularly in the context of their social and economic consequences for the local community. Despite the rapid and visible changes associated with large-scale development projects, existing literature has paid limited attention to their localized impacts, leaving a salient gap in understanding how such projects affect residents' lives. Addressing this gap, the study offers a detailed examination of local perceptions, highlighting the critical role of community voices in fostering sustainable development practices and shaping better project outcomes. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of integrating local communities into decision-making processes, contributing to the broader discourse on participatory governance and development.

Adopting a qualitative approach, the research gathered the lived experiences and perspectives of Filyos residents, highlighting the value of presenting the voices of those directly impacted by the project. Through this lens, the study provides valuable insights into the socio-economic, environmental, and governance dimensions of the FVP, offering lessons that can inform future development projects in similar contexts.

The findings reveal a complex interplay between economic growth, sustainability, and governance. On the one hand, the project has garnered significant support from the local population due to its contributions to regional economic revitalization. Increased employment opportunities and the establishment of new businesses have positively impacted the area, providing a much-needed boost to the local economy. However, these benefits are accompanied by notable challenges. Environmental sustainability emerges as a key concern, with issues such as pollution and resource depletion—exacerbated by industrial developments like the planned fertilizer factory—posing risks to the region's ecological balance. Similarly, the rapid increase in housing prices and the decline of traditional industries, including fishing and agriculture, underline the socio-economic pressures faced by the community.

Beyond these concerns, the study highlights the broader aspirations of the local population for equitable and sustainable development. Residents express a clear preference for a development model that integrates economic progress with environmental protection and social inclusivity. Calls for secure and long-term employment, especially given the prevalence of precarious and insecure jobs, reflect the community's desire for stability and fairness. Additionally, the demand for greater democratic participation in the project's implementation underscores a widespread yearning for governance frameworks that respect local needs and cultural heritage.

While the Filyos Valley Project (FVP) has been lauded for its contributions to economic growth, particularly through job creation and infrastructure development, it has also sparked concerns regarding environmental sustainability, housing affordability, and precarious employment conditions. These findings align with broader discussions in the literature that highlight the inherent challenges of reconciling economic growth with sustainable development, a dilemma observed in projects both in Türkiye (Dağ & Büyükpınar, 2023; Tapdık, 2022) and internationally (Phillips & Pittman, 2009).

Additionally, this study underscores the critical importance of engaging local communities in the decision-making process—an issue emphasized by participatory development scholars (Ignaccolo et al., 2018; Jansen et al., 2018; Doms, 2019) who argue that meaningful stakeholder involvement is essential for ensuring equitable outcomes in development projects. A key insight from this research is the strong desire among local residents for a more equitable and inclusive development model—one that not only prioritizes economic benefits but also integrates environmental protection, social equity, and cultural preservation. These concerns align with findings from international studies (Pereira et al., 2019; Lopez & Toman, 2006; Stanković et al., 2021) on the social impacts of large-scale development projects, which emphasize the risks of exclusion and environmental degradation when local voices are marginalized.

This research, therefore, contributes to the literature by offering a local perspective on these broader debates, highlighting the need for a development framework that balances economic growth with social and environmental responsibility. Furthermore, the FVP exemplifies the complexities of governance in local development projects, particularly concerning the involvement of stakeholders beyond local residents, such as local governments and external investors. The study underscores the importance of participatory

governance models, which have been increasingly acknowledged in the literature (Draeger et al., 2010; Dağ & Büyükpınar, 2023) as essential for ensuring the sustainability and success of development projects. The local demand for democratic decision-making, secure and sustainable employment, and the protection of cultural heritage further aligns with the growing body of work (de Lange & Adua, 2022) advocating for participatory and inclusive development practices.

The FVP serves as a notable case study of the complexities inherent in regional development. While its economic achievements are undeniable, ensuring its long-term success necessitates a balanced approach that prioritizes sustainability, inclusivity, and fairness. Addressing ecological concerns, promoting gender equality, supporting local industries, and preserving cultural heritage are essential components of this approach. Moreover, the establishment of participatory frameworks that actively involve local communities in decision-making processes is indispensable for achieving these goals.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the literature on local development projects by highlighting the critical role of participatory engagement in ensuring sustainable and equitable outcomes. The findings highlight the importance of integrating economic growth with environmental and social justice, ensuring that local communities are actively involved in shaping the direction of projects like the FVP. To achieve long-term success, the FVP should adopt a participatory, planned, and inclusive development model that addresses the concerns and aspirations of the local population.

As the FVP continues to evolve with the construction of major industrial facilities, further research is essential to monitor and analyze its ongoing impacts. This study serves as a foundation for future inquiries, offering both theoretical and practical insights that can guide the design and implementation of more sustainable and inclusive development projects. Given that the construction of the FVP, which includes a natural gas processing plant, fertilizer factory, and other investments, is expected to continue for many years, it is crucial for researchers from various disciplines to examine the region's ongoing economic, sociocultural, and ecological-environmental transformations in future studies.

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Extended Abstract

Understanding Development from a Local Perspective: A Qualitative Study on the Filyos Valley Project

The Filyos Valley Project (FVP), located in the Western Black Sea region of Türkiye, represents a significant development initiative aimed at reshaping the economic landscape of Filyos town. Originally conceived as a strategic port project, the FVP's scope expanded dramatically following the discovery of substantial natural gas reserves in the Black Sea. The addition of a natural gas processing facility has further intensified its influence on the region. The project is celebrated for its potential to foster economic growth and industrial development, particularly in terms of creating jobs and enhancing infrastructure. However, the FVP has also introduced profound social, cultural, and environmental changes, sparking concerns among local communities about the long-term impacts of such large-scale development. This study aims to examine local residents' perceptions of these changes, offering a nuanced understanding of the project's benefits and challenges. By focusing on the experiences and viewpoints of the people directly affected, the research contributes to ongoing debates on sustainable and participatory development practices in the context of regional development projects. This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the social and environmental impacts of the FVP through the lens of local residents. A purposive sampling method was used to select 20 participants who could provide in-depth insights into the ongoing transformation. These participants include local officials, business owners, NGO members, neighborhood leaders, and long-time residents who have lived through the changes brought by the FVP. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews conducted over several months, with each interview lasting approximately 40 minutes. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes in the participants' responses. This method enabled the researchers to categorize findings into distinct themes, such as employment opportunities, housing challenges, environmental degradation, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

The analysis revealed a diverse range of perceptions regarding the FVP's economic, social, and environmental impacts. On the economic front, the project is widely viewed as a catalyst for regional growth. Residents noted significant improvements in local infrastructure, including roads and utilities, which they believe will contribute to long-term economic prosperity. Many participants expressed optimism about the future, particularly with the rise of employment opportunities tied to the port and natural gas processing facility. Female employment, in particular, has seen a marked increase, with many women entering the workforce for the first time. This shift is seen as a positive step toward gender equality and economic empowerment in the region. However, alongside these optimistic views, the findings also highlight critical concerns. One of the most frequently mentioned issues is the nature of the new jobs being created. While there are more employment opportunities, many of these positions are characterized by insecurity and lack of long-term stability. Participants noted that most jobs offered by the FVP are temporary or contractual, leaving workers with little job security. Additionally, housing has become a significant challenge. The influx of workers has driven up housing demand, leading to skyrocketing rental prices. Long-time residents have struggled to afford their homes, and some have been forced to move to nearby villages or smaller towns to find affordable housing. Another prominent theme is the exclusion of local residents from the decision-making processes surrounding the FVP. Many participants expressed frustration over the lack of transparency and community involvement. They reported feeling sidelined in discussions about the project's implementation, despite being the ones most affected by its consequences. This exclusion has fostered a sense of alienation and mistrust toward the authorities overseeing the project.

The FVP is a prime example of the complexities that arise when large-scale development projects intersect with local communities. While the economic benefits are evident, the findings suggest that these are not distributed evenly across the population. The rise in women's employment and infrastructure improvements are positive outcomes, but the prevalence of insecure jobs and the lack of affordable housing undermine these gains. The situation reflects broader issues in regional development, where economic growth does not always translate into equitable social outcomes. The precarious nature of employment in the region echoes concerns raised in the literature on labor markets in developing areas, where short-term gains often come at the expense of long-term stability. The environmental impact of the FVP is another critical concern raised by participants. The natural gas processing facility, along with the planned fertilizer factory, poses salient risks to the region's ecosystems. Residents expressed fears that the construction and operation of these industrial facilities would lead to pollution of local water sources and degradation of air quality. These environmental concerns highlight the need for stricter environmental regulations and monitoring to ensure that the economic benefits of the project do not come at an unsustainable ecological cost. Another key finding is the demand for greater community participation in the project's governance. The exclusion of local voices from decision-making processes is a major source of discontent. Residents expressed a strong desire to be involved in decisions that affect their livelihoods and environment. This demand for participatory development aligns with best practices in sustainable development, which emphasize the importance of including local stakeholders in planning and implementation to ensure that development projects are responsive to community needs.

The FVP offers a valuable case study for understanding the interplay between economic development, social change, and environmental sustainability in regional development projects. While the project has the potential to transform the region economically, its long-term success depends on addressing the social and environmental challenges it has introduced. Key recommendations emerging from this study include the need for more secure and stable employment opportunities, affordable housing policies, and greater transparency in decision-making processes. Additionally, efforts to mitigate the environmental impact of the project should be prioritized to preserve the region's ecological balance. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of adopting a participatory approach to development. Involving local communities in the governance of the FVP would not only improve public trust but also ensure that the project's benefits are shared more equitably. As the FVP continues to evolve, it will be essential for policymakers and stakeholders to address these issues proactively to achieve a more just and sustainable outcome for the region.