Strengthening Local Capacity through International Collaboration in Şanlıurfa

Ellie Han - *Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)*
sieunhan@mit.edu

UCCRN Case Study Docking Station (2026)
DOI: 10.7916/359f-wz54

Keywords	post-disaster recovery, population influx, refugees, co-design, governance
City Population	596,637
City Area	41 km^2
City GDP	6.22 billion USD
Climate Zone	Csa (hot summer Mediterranean)
ARC3.3 Linkage	Governance, Enabling Policy Environments, and Just Transitions

Introduction. Urfa, officially called Şanlıurfa, is in the South Eastern Anatolian region of Turkey and the capital of Şanlıurfa Province. Its strategic location near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers has positioned the capital as a vital center for agriculture in Turkey. However, excessive irrigation has led to severe environmental stressors such as increased soil salinity, drought, and pesticide contamination of soil, and as of the mid-2000s, only 17% of Sanliurfa's agricultural land had the capacity for irrigation (Barbaros & Pirili, 2008).

As of 2016, only 53% of local farmers have a risk perception about climate change and its impacts (Aydogdu & Yenigün, 2016). From its complex trend in spatial, seasonal, and inter-annual variability, Şanlıurfa is subject to extreme climatic variations, including frequent drought and flooding, putting severe strains on its main economic sector. Dwindling job opportunities in agriculture have been the main driver of high out migration rates in recent years. The unemployment rate in the city of Şanlıurfa is 18%, rising to 35% among the young population (Ergu, 2018).

Furthermore, Şanlıurfa faces a number of hazards and climate risks due to climate change. These include but are not limited to increasing intensity of heat waves, rising temperatures, and drought. These climate change risks are exacerbated by the aforementioned excessive irrigation within the region, requiring special attention be paid to water use and preservation (Sanliurfa Metropolitan Municipality, 2022).

Today, the city is mainly composed of Arabs and Kurds; however, the Syrian civil war has significantly impacted its demographics and character. As of August 2018, Şanlıurfa province is home to 470,296 Syrians and three refugee camps – accommodating the third largest number of refugees and constituting 23.6% of its total population (International Crisis Group, 2019). Its proximity to the Syrian border, in addition to a substantial number of Arabic and Kurdish-speaking locals, has made Şanlıurfa an appealing destination for Syrians seeking a permanent settlement, despite the lack of employment opportunities and the predominantly agricultural-based economy.

Şanlıurfa, once a relatively competitive province between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the True Way Party (DYP), is now one of the AKP's most secure strongholds. With the decline in popularity for smaller parties like DYP, Şanlıurfa turned substantially in favor of the AKP, which won the 2015 election with 64.55% of the vote. Although the prevalence of informal political practices in Şanlıurfa has frequently resulted in inequitable relationships, the election results indicate the acceptance of these practices by the broader society. Electoral behavior in Şanlıurfa appears to stem from a combination of oppression, deeply ingrained ideals of respect and tribal loyalty, and strong ties with the central government (Guida, 2013). Hence, tribal identities have not dissolved due to changes in demographic, social, and economic sectors; rather, they developed into a patronage network.

Turkey's transition to a hyper-centralized presidential system in 2017 led to concentrated presidential decision-making with limited scope for other local institutions to influence planning (Coşkun & Ülgen, 2022). The local government can no longer counterweight or rectify the decision-making process but rather prepare for mostly short-term, reactionary plans. The central government has been an ardent supporter of European Union (EU) membership and urged intensive domestic reforms to improve Turkey's democratic credentials that would develop favorable conditions for enhancing Turkey-EU relations. Hence, self-funding for climate action projects in Urfa is nearly unattainable, and most ongoing projects are sub-projects of the Sustainable Development Programme in the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), primarily implemented and funded by the EU, the World Bank, and the UN (Bilgen, 2018).

Strengthening Local Capacity through International Collaboration. Although Şanlıurfa is yet to develop a comprehensive, official action plan to address climate change, the local municipality's vigorous involvement in international collaborations has led to many completed, ongoing, and planned projects with long-standing interdisciplinary partnerships with over 200 experts and 45 stakeholders. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been playing a crucial role in supporting the city's efforts to adapt to the impacts of climate change and to

Figure 1. *Inauguration of the Ceylanpinar Waste Transfer Station with the EU and the UNDP.*

build institutional capacities around refugee integration.

The Ceylanpinar Waste Transfer Station project, inaugurated in 2017, represents a recent close collaboration with international humanitarian actors to mitigate the excessive burden of migration influx and was the first infrastructural assistance of such scale in the region. The station and its enhanced capacity are estimated to facilitate the efficient transport of 42,705 tonnes of solid waste and savings of 477,197 euros per year (UNDP, 2017).

Şanlıurfa also launched a waste separation and recycling program to reduce waste in landfills, along with biogas plants to generate energy from organic waste. In 2020, local authorities, under the UNDP's guidelines, initiated energy efficiency measures through renovation and repair work at six schools, followed by public buildings and hospitals, and ultimately provided energy-saving lights to over 12,000 homes (UNDP, 2020).

Moreover, through UNDP's Agriculture Cluster Project, Şanlıurfa has been actively engaged in various renewable energy buildouts, including geothermal, hydropower, and solar plants. The project has installed over 3,000 solar panels, providing renewable energy to 125 farms and reducing carbon emissions by over 2,000 tonnes per year (UNDP, 2018). As of 2021, Şanlıurfa is the leading hydropower generator in Turkey, with 3,128 MW and the third largest in solar energy. This allowed Şanlıurfa to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels and ensure local businesses have access to affordable and reliable energy sources (Erkul Kaya, 2021).

In addition to such infrastructure assistance, UNDP has also been working to increase public awareness and education on climate change and social cohesion in Şanlıurfa. UNDP has worked with local schools to develop curricula and provide training on climate change and sustainable practices. It also has hosted 51 sessions of zero waste training, reaching over 7,000 refugees, to promote domestic waste management (UNDP, 2020).

Role of the Local Government as Intermediaries. Weak governance poses a major impediment to significant strides initiated through international cooperation, especially when the city receives abundant funds from the central government and various international aid organizations. It enables corporate interests to capture politicians, thereby shaping policy away from climate action. Varying cases in Şanlıurfa demonstrate the importance of the role of the local government as an intermediary in fully facilitating and leveraging multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Figure 2. *UNDP supports Syrian and local women with special skills training.*

The city of Şanlıurfa introduced the new bus rapid transit (BRT) system in early 2015 as an attempt to increase bus ridership and reduce traffic congestion in the growing downtown. However, within its first month of operation, the BRT system resulted in 4 crashes that heavily injured pedestrians. (İmamoğlu et al., 2015). Despite raising doubts about its design and implementation, the Şanlıurfa government's active push towards sustainable transportation led to collaboration with transit specialists and the hosting of the UCLG-MEWA (United Cities and Local Governments Middle East and West Asia Section) Urban Mobility Summit in 2018. Shortly after, the city offered the first smart bike-sharing program and pedestrian-friendly streets to engage the public and proposed substituting diesel buses with electric buses.

Contrastingly, Sanliurfa's lax policing has been cited for the destruction of countless buildings during the 7.8 magnitude earthquake in early 2023, despite strict seismic building codes (Bilginsoy & Fraser, 2023). Leading up to the 2018 presidential election, the Turkish government introduced an amnesty plan for companies and individuals who had violated certain building seismic codes to avoid having to reconstruct their buildings up to the codes by paying a fine. Moreover, the local officials and the agency that is responsible for qualification inspections and tests were directly appointed by the central government. The agency later acknowledged that more than half of the buildings were not in compliance with existing safety standards. Such violations led to the existence of squatter homes inhabited by low-income families, who are already more susceptible to environmental disasters.

Lessons Learned from Şanlıurfa's Reliance on International Collaboration. Cities with institutional barriers and limited technical expertise and funding can achieve climate action goals collaboratively with intergovernmental actors. The objective of the climate action plan, however, is not to implement individual projects, but rather to stimulate all local agencies to adhere to and incorporate them into future decision-making processes. Hence, it is crucial to establish a transparent system for developing and monitoring adaptation plans, which should include clear policies and procedures for all levels of government.

Given Şanlıurfa's complex socio-political state, having such a framework becomes even more important to ensure that climate initiatives are implemented effectively and that progress is accurately tracked. It will foster public trust and also demonstrate the city's dedication to combating climate change in a transparent and responsible manner to potential funders and partners.

To identify and minimize potential risks of corruption, the assessment of key actors should be conducted in partnership with local stakeholders to understand the current system and specify possible leverage points for change. Ensuring public participation from the beginning of the planning process is also recommended, particularly the voices of marginalized communities like the indigenous Kurds and Syrian refugees. Here, community workshops and roundtables can be organized in order to hear and implement the concerns raised by citizens who are directly affected. Regulatory impact assessment should also be conducted by local research institutions to corroborate that disadvantaged communities are aware of the consequences and receive other incentives.

Lastly, multi-stakeholder processes should be implemented as tools to improve transparency and accountability, such as the formation of review committees with relevant experts and civil society. The United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC)'s (UNODC, 2015) guideline to devise a comprehensive privilege-resistance framework for adaptation can shepherd the development of and monitor the implementation of the climate action plan.

References

Aydogdu, M. H., & Yenigün, K. (2016). Farmers' risk perception towards climate change: A case of the GAP–Sanliurfa region, Turkey. *Sustainability, 8*(8), 806. https://doi.org/10.3390/su8080806

Bilgen, A. (2018). The Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) revisited: The evolution of GAP over forty years. *New Perspectives on Turkey, 58*, 125–154. https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2018.8

Bilginsoy, Z., & Fraser, F. (2023, February 10). Turkey's lax policing of building codes known before quake. *AP News.* https://apnews.com/article/politics-2023-turkey-syria-earthquake-government-istanbul-fbd6af578a6056569879b5ef6c55d322

Coşkun, A., & Ülgen, S. (2022). Political change and Turkey's foreign policy. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.* https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/11/14/political-change-and-turkeys-foreign-policy-pub-88387

Demographia. (2016). *Demographia world urban areas (built-up urban areas or world agglomerations)*. https://demographia.com/db-worldua-intro.pdf

Ergu, E. (2018, October 21). *Urfa ayakkabı üssü oluyor.* Hürriyet. https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/urfa-ayakkabi-ussu-oluyor-40994065

Erkul Kaya, N. (2021, June 21). *Turkey's energy map becomes greener as renewables expand countrywide*. Anadolu Agency. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/regulation-renewable/turkeys-energy-map-becomes-greener-as-renewables-expand-countrywide/33016

Guida, M. (2013). Friendship, kingship and interest: Informal politics in Turkey and the example of vote mobilization in Istanbul and Sanliurfa. *Turkish Journal of International Relations, 12*(4), 65–76. https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/alternatives/issue/1692/20890

İmamoğlu, C. T., Aki, M., & Başaran, Ş. (2015). Sanliurfa BRT road safety and accessibility project. *Embarq Türkiye.* https://wrisehirler.org/sites/default/files/%C5%9EANLIURFA%20BRT%20ROAD%20SAFETY%20AND%20ACCESSIBILITY%20PROJECT_Web.pdf

International Crisis Group. (2019). *Mitigating risks from Syrian refugee youth in Turkey's Sanliurfa.* https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europe-mediterranean/turkey/253-mitigating-risks-syrian-refugee-youth-turkeys-sanliurfa

Peel, M. C., Finlayson, B. L., & McMahon, T. A. (2007). Updated world map of the Köppen–Geiger climate classification. *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences, 11*(5), 1633–1644. https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-11-1633-2007

Sanliurfa Metropolitan Municipality. (2017). *Ceylanpinar solid waste transfer station opened.* https://www.sanliurfa.bel.tr/icerik/3843/21/ceylanpinar-kati-atik-aktarma-istasyonu-acildi

Sanliurfa Metropolitan Municipality. (2022). *Climate change risk and vulnerability assessment report.* https://www.sanliurfa.bel.tr/uploads/2024/20240927081902-96479-90568.pdf

Southeastern Anatolia Project Regional Development Administration. (n.d.). *Projects and activities.* http://www.gap.gov.tr/en/index.php

UNDP. (2018). *GAP organic agriculture cluster project scalability and replicability toolkit.* https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/tr/GAP-Organik-Projesi-Kumelenme_ENG_tek.pdf

UNDP. (2021, March 23). *UNDP Turkey supports women's cooperatives, waste recycling, and women's participation in labor force in Kilis and Sanliurfa!* https://www.undp.org/turkiye/news/undp-turkey-supports-womens-cooperatives-waste-recycling-and-womens-participation-labour-force-kilis-and-sanliurfa

UNDP. (2020, September 29). *"Zero waste" moves into Şanlıurfa and Kilis, strengthening urban waste management and social cohesion.* UNDP Türkiye. https://www.undp.org/turkiye/news/zero-waste-moves-sanliurfa-and-kilis-strengthening-urban-waste-management-and-social-cohesion

UNDC. (2015). *The United Nations Convention against Corruption: Implementation guide and evaluative framework for Article 11*. https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/2014/Implementation_Guide_and_Evaluative_Framework_for_Article_11_-_English.pdf

---

Acknowledgments

We thank Zafer Kurtar for reviewing this case study.

Additional Data

- **Population Density:** 118 people/km^2 [2023]
- **Per Capita Gross National Income (GNI):** 44,600 USD (Upper-Middle Income) [2024]
- **Gini Coefficient:** 44.5 [2022]
- **Human Development Index (HDI):** 0.853 (Very High) [2025]
- **Type of Climate Intervention:** Hybrid (Adaptation and Mitigation)
