
Agrarian Change and Rural Poverty in Contemporary Turkey

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Résumé

This study investigates the manifestations of rural poverty in contemporary Turkey in the context of agrarian change, impacts of public policies and spatial differentiation of poverty. It discusses both the role of unequal power and property relations in agrarian structures, deagrarianization and non-agricultural employment and the impacts of social policy issues of housing, access to education and health services on the current conditions of rural poverty. TURKSTAT data and policy documents of related institutions are used in the study. In addition to the desktop research, this study depends on the semi-structured interviews conducted with ministerial experts, NGO representatives and poor households and village headmen from ten villages in two different regions. This study first analyzes agricultural employment, which is the main characteristic of rural area, and agrarian change in recent decades through their impacts on poverty. Mass de-agrarianization and de-ruralization have not occurred in Turkish case despite extensive liberalization policies of the last decades. Yet, rural people have faced with the insufficient incomes from agriculture, and non-agricultural works and social assistance have become prevalent forms of alternative income. Public policies have also promoted the non-agricultural works in rural areas as an income differentiation method. Although tourism and hand-crafts are come up with in discussions, this study shows that there are two prevalent forms of non-agricultural income available in rural areas, casual agricultural work and construction. Both are mostly precarious work done under bad working conditions without having insurance or job security, and thus cause higher risk of poverty. Moreover, such kind of works is despised within the social structure of the village as an indicator of being poor and needy. As a result, our findings present the shortcomings of the approaches that dismiss agriculture and encourage non-agricultural incomes without taking into account the nature of non-agricultural employment patterns, which fail to generate secure and socially-acceptable options for getting out of poverty. In addition to the results about agrarian structure, this study reveals two other distinctive features of rural poverty in Turkish case; limited access to public services and better housing options, and recent legal and institutional changes about rural areas. The conditions of rural poor have been worsened through houses with serious infrastructural problems, difficulties to reach education and health services, and weakened administrative capacity of village headmen.

Mots-Clés: Agrarian change, rural poverty, Turkey

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