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Democratic Economy Conference:  
An Introductory Note

In early November 2014, in the midst of a state of war in Kobanê just south of the Turkey-Syria border, the Democratic Society Congress, a Kurdistan umbrella organization active to the north of the border, held a two-day conference devoted exclusively to establishing the basic principles of a democratic economy in the region. The conference was the culmination of eight different workshops conducted during the summer of 2014 in different cities of Northern Kurdistan, located within the borders of (the Republic of) Turkey. The workshops and the conference in Wan were made up of activists, academics, municipal officers, representatives of local business associations and labor unions, experts, journalists, and a variety of other local actors. Decisions made at the conference were intended to function at multiple levels in the coming years. First, in its declarative tone, this manifesto is intended by the Kurdish movement as an announcement of its ethico-political commitment to the democratization of the economy. Second, it provides a broad orientation for the democratically organized self-governed bodies (communes, councils, etc.) to conduct economic politics both against the onslaught of “capitalist modernity” and toward building a “new life.” Finally, it is intended as a practical policy guideline for the municipalities controlled by the Democratic Regions Party (a sister party of the Peoples’ Democratic Party exclusively focused on local politics in Northern Kurdistan).

The Kurdish movement’s interest in concretizing its now more than decade-old turn toward ecological, gender egalitarian, and communal socio-economic vision needs to be situated within the context of the fragile peace

and settlement process with the Turkish state as well as the harsh economic conditions of the war-torn region. Indeed, with unemployment rates significantly above the national averages, with an overpopulated urban poverty in stark contrast to the depleted countryside (due to both economic hardship and forced evictions executed by the Turkish armed forces), and with a rather limited industrial production and discontinuous cross-border trade with south (Iraqi) and west (Syrian) Kurdistan, the need for an economic renewal in the region is more urgent than ever.

On the one hand, the settlement process provided a respite from the tense state of war (at least until the war in Rojava broke out) and an opportunity for the movement to put into practice its socioeconomic program— informed by Abdullah Öcalan’s vision of “democratic modernity.” On the other hand, since for the government (then led by Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party) “peace” essentially means lucrative investments and intensified extractionist practices in the region, the task of rapid construction of a democratic and autonomous economic alternative entails more than the realization of an economic utopia. It is a matter of utmost urgency for the survival of the movement in the post-conflict period. The government-funded development agencies and the Turkish investors ushered in by the Kurdish members of parliament for the Justice and Development Party proudly announce that, once the armed conflict comes to an end, capitalist development will eliminate poverty, provide employment opportunities, flourish cross-border trade, and so on. Within this context, the movement needs to simultaneously defend the social ecology of Kurdistan against the incursions and seductions of “capitalist modernity” and solve the many entrenched socioeconomic problems of the region in its own fashion, that is, by putting into practice the vision of democratic economy articulated in the principles, strategies, and guidelines listed below.

A fairly valuable asset for putting the movement’s economic vision into practice is the large number of municipalities that it won in the March 2014 local elections. Nevertheless, the experience of municipalities governed by the movement has been mixed. While certain social policy innovations have been successfully implemented, many of those efforts have been curtailed both by the financial limitations imposed by the central government and by the direct “political genocide” implemented during the 2009–13 period, when more than ten thousand elected officials and activists were imprisoned under terror charges. Yet, the hope is that the newly elected municipal governments, bolstered by the dramatic electoral success of the Peoples’ Democratic Party in the most recent general elections of June 2015, will be able to

gain some traction in building a “new life” through the democratization of the economy.

Another important yet usually unacknowledged asset of the movement in democratizing the economy is its strong organizational capacity, which manifests itself in consistently effective political and humanitarian relief campaigns. On the political front, the movement has conducted successful electoral campaigns (increasing its voting base in each successive election) without any official financial aid, against organized obstructions, and based solely on voluntary labor. On the humanitarian aid front, the movement has provided shelter for Kurdish, Yezidi, Arabic, and Turkmen refugees escaping from the war in Rojava, once again based on voluntary labor and contributions. Both types of activities entail highly complex logistical capabilities, require the mobilization of care-labor (in the form of organizing labor) at a regional scale, and can only be maintained through the financial support of a large number of small donors. And precisely for these reasons, they demonstrate the availability of a tacit muscle memory in the body politic of the movement for organizing solidarity economies.

Yet, there are a number of important challenges. First and foremost, what may appear to be an innocent grassroots practice of economic politics in the context of Western liberal democracies can suddenly be coded and persecuted in Turkey as a national security threat to the unity of the nation-state. For instance, consider implementing a local exchange trading system, a local currency that would protect the regional economy from the turbulent dynamics of capitalism and prevent the syphoning off of social surplus from the region. It is not hard to imagine how this may be construed in the public as a challenge to the sovereignty of nation-state and its currency. What is even more ironic is the fact that if such a local currency were to be introduced in the predominantly Turkish regions of the country, it would probably be celebrated as an innovative economic device for local development. Similar concerns apply even more forcefully when local governments explicitly demand budgetary autonomy (including the right to raise local taxes), when activists protest against large-scale hydropower projects or dangerous mining activities, or when locals undertake small-scale cross-border trading activity. In short, in Kurdistan there are many ways in which enacting local economies can be considered a security threat by the Turkish state.

A second set of challenges pertains to the antagonistic relations among the three major blocs making up the economic field in Northern Kurdistan. First, there is the growing yet still fairly shallow capitalist developmentalist bloc with its ties to Turkish and international capital, partially supported by

the regional development agencies. On the other end of the spectrum, there is the democratic economy bloc, equally limited in its scope, consisting of a disarticulated smattering of cooperatives and other forms of solidarity economies (associations, NGOs, etc.). In between these two poles, there exists a vast heterogeneous area consisting not only of small-scale capitalists, traditional artisanal producers, and petty-commodity producing peasantry but also of the municipalities and a sizable public service sector organized around them.

The struggle for the democratic economy bloc is two pronged. First, it needs to impart a certain density to the solidarity economy by proliferating the number of cooperative institutions and articulating these entities into a wide coordinated meshwork that connects producers with other producers and with consumers. Such coordinating activity (potentially undertaken by the regional “research centers”) among producer and consumer cooperatives will facilitate the discovery of knowledge (regarding product mix) in the absence of a fully fledged competitive market or a central planning board. (While the former is deemed undesirable, the latter will be construed as a step toward state building and criminalized.)

Second, the emergent democratic economy bloc needs to provide, using the municipalities as an important leverage, a framework that can convince those who inhabit the diverse economy of the gray area to desire to be a part of the effort toward building a democratic economy. While the movement is indeed in power in almost all of the Kurdistan municipalities, its conduct will be colored by the social and economic forces that it relies on in the coming years. In the absence of a robust cooperative economy, the municipalities will inevitably be pulled toward the gravitation of the capitalist development bloc. Again, without the protective shield of a solidarity economy, capitalist tendencies toward concentration will probably exert their forces over the small-scale artisanal producers, urban petty commodity producers, and small-scale peasantry, potentially leading to their gradual liquidation.

While this agenda of uniting noncapitalist class formations with small-scale capitalist formations against the monopolistic and rentier forms of capital has some strong affinities with the political economic vision of left populism (such as those found in them the United States during the 1890s and 1930s and in the United Kingdom during the postwar period), what distinguishes this notion of “democratic economy” is its postnationalist, radical ecologist, gender egalitarian, and council communalist characteristics. No wonder then that the final declaration and the proposals of the Democratic Economy Conference were received with a certain disdain by not only the

orthodox Marxists of Turkey (for being not revolutionary enough) but also Kurdish nationalists (for failing to define a national developmental strategy) and the representatives of the Kurdish business associations (for being too pastoral).

Below, we reproduce, for reasons of space, only the concrete set of proposals that follow the final declaration of the Democratic Economy Conference.<sup>1</sup> Organized thematically around the topics of the preparatory workshops, the various proposals range from establishing research centers for gathering information and coordinating economic activities to replacing labor subcontracting in municipal services with cooperatives. In their brutal mundaneness, they display a certain sober sense of antiheroics that contrast starkly with the diverse struggles of the movement, which have ranged from guerrilla warfare to the defense of Kobanê under siege by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and from electoral campaigning to protecting the historic Hevsel gardens from demolition. In contrast to the passionate affective intensities associated with these forms of action and activism, this set of concrete proposals is a testament to the fact that the difficult and inevitably repetitive labor (to the extent that it involves reproduction of life) of building a democratic economy requires a different kind of work, a kind of methodical, though no less subversive, conduct of the “ordinary business of life” in an ecological, egalitarian, and participatory mode.

### **Decisions of the Democratic Economy Conference November 8–9, 2014, Wan**

#### Women

1. The male-dominant (masculinist) capitalist modernity conceptualizes the economic sphere in a manner that renders women invisible. This conceptual frame needs to be replaced with alternative concepts along with a struggle for a rapid change in language.
2. A campaign needs to be organized to counter the governmental social policies that put women into the position of having to take care of the disabled, the elderly, and children under conditions of underpaid and undocumented work without any social security. This struggle must be undertaken on the grounds of international agreements.
3. Women must be able to participate in all decision-making processes regarding local resources. Urban spaces must be planned with an aim to ease the lives of women, the disabled, and children. Not just

parks but all common life spaces must be transformed in accordance with women's perspectives, and women-focused cities need to be swiftly brought into existence.

4. Institutional research centers need to be established for undertaking inventory work as well as for gathering and systematically analyzing knowledge on women's participation in the economy.
5. No economic formation (of production, distribution, or consumption) or organization has a chance of succeeding without women's participation. Therefore, affirmative action toward women in all spheres of democratic economy must be implemented.
6. Women-only communes should be established in diverse areas to ensure the direct economic participation of women.
7. Women's invisible domestic labor in the kitchen, in the home, and as caregivers must be socialized through the establishment of appropriate institutions (day care centers, communal kitchens, etc.).
8. An exclusive conference on women and economy must be organized to evaluate women's participation in the economy in a more specific manner.

### Agriculture

1. Social economy is created collectively, and its basis is land. Agricultural production must be developed on the basis of needs and the protection of local seeds. Agriculture (crop cultivation and stock-breeding) structured on the criteria of efficiency and profit leads to the degradation of soil and therefore must be rejected.
2. Agricultural production in forcibly evicted villages should be developed anew in accordance with a communal awareness. In order to democratize already existing agricultural production units and cooperatives and develop those production areas where women have tacit and natural knowledge, model village communes and cooperatives must be established. Women-only cooperatives and communes must be set up.
3. Since agriculture is a leading productive sector in Northern Kurdistan, municipalities must establish units for the development of agriculture.
4. In urban areas, prototypes of agricultural production units based on communal production and distribution must be established that prioritize the support of the participation of women and disadvantaged groups.

5. Struggles must be undertaken against the state and male-dominated forms of land ownership from a perspective that considers land use to be communal. Struggles for land reform must assume a gender-based perspective.
6. The system of seasonal work exploits women based not only on their ethnic identity and socioeconomic standing but also on their gender. In order to eliminate seasonal work, local economies must be developed in Kurdistan and measures must be taken to support family farming and encourage indigenous agricultural production in suitable lands.
7. Land mines and war waste must be cleared and legal action and struggle must be undertaken to protect the flora of the affected areas.
8. The pastoral nomadic lifestyle (*koçerlik*) in Kurdistan must be given its due attention since it is a form of life embedded in nature and the environment and entails commoning in production (*üretim ortaklığı*). Therefore, nomadic culture must be protected and supported (i.e., safety on migration routes needs to be secured, and education, health care, and similar basic needs must be catered to in locations of migration).
9. Fauna, flora, swamps, and forests destroyed during the forced eviction of the villages and by forest arsons must be taken into protection and the cultivation of new forest formations must be encouraged.
10. Pastures, highlands, and forests must be cultivated and defended from commodification, development, and changes in zoning regulations.
11. For the landless peasantry, currently excluded from both the traditional and modern legal systems, new mechanisms of justice must be developed and struggle should be waged to distribute (state-owned) treasury land among landless peasants.

#### Energy/Water/Mining

1. Hydroelectric power plants already built and currently under construction and dams set up for security purposes are harmful to nature, human health, and the landscape of Kurdistan. Social movements against their construction must be supported. Fossil fuel consumption must be minimized, and ecological, alternative sources of energy production must be considered (e.g., solar, wind, geothermal, and waste energy). Alternative sources of energy must be freed

from the control of monopoly capitalism. In order to develop self-management in the energy sector, platforms and cooperatives that voice the people's concerns must be established.

2. As a means to develop better and more conscious usage of energy sources, especially in regions where production takes place, awareness-raising measures should be taken (e.g., the organization of public meetings and training workshops).
3. As values [*değer*], water, land, and energy belong to all animate and inanimate beings and to society as a whole, they must not be commodified. Therefore, these values must be identified as and considered sacred. To bring the sacred status of water to social attention, water festivals must be organized.
4. The development of a socially based water management system is a task of utmost urgency. Water distribution for drinking, agricultural use, industrial use, and other daily uses must be determined on the grounds of social needs and ecology. Water must be redistributed equitably among those living within varying degrees of proximity to the water sources. An organizational infrastructure must be built for the democratic management of water through water councils where communities are able to exercise their right to water and make decisions concerning water.
5. In Northern Kurdistan, due to improper mining and water extraction practices, water reservoirs have been contaminated. As a means to avoid further contamination, necessary precautions must be taken and further zoning and development must be ceased.
6. Political and social struggles must be undertaken for the delegation of authority to extract and operate natural resources under and above the ground from the central administration to the local authorities.
7. Local governments must lead the organization and use of alternative types of energy. In urban planning, effective energy use must be designed in accordance with climate conditions.
8. Environmental impact reports must be prepared and evaluated for all economic activities.

#### Industrial Production

1. All existing and future investments supported in Kurdistan must be based on the basic principles of a democratic economy.
2. Local raw materials and resources are exported out of the Kurdistan region without being processed and imported back to the region in

processed forms at higher prices. Therefore, to bypass intermediaries, production cooperatives must be established that generate raw materials on the basis of need, without harming the ecosystem, and with priority for local markets. Production and consumption cooperatives must be organized as a coordinated network.

3. Economic forms such as shopping malls that have adverse effects on local production dynamics and consumer culture must certainly not be encouraged. Small local producers, craftspeople, and tradespeople must be organized into unions and distribution cooperatives in order to sustain and develop their operation.
4. Within the emerging new economic structure, public health, workers' health and safety, etc., must be supervised. To this end, social control mechanisms involving the participation of producers, users, and consumers must be developed and institutionalized.
5. Waste products and used resources must be recycled, and a public awareness about recycling must be cultivated.
6. Diversification of production and environmentally friendly technologies and services must be developed and implemented throughout industrial production processes in Kurdistan.

#### Trade, Finance

1. A funding mechanism for supporting the social and economic needs of the people (women in particular) must be established, and alternative use values must be prioritized [over exchange value].
2. Barter markets should be given priority. A needs-based social market must be established to weave together the divided markets of Kurdistan. The development of natural agricultural production in its natural course should be encouraged and marketplaces for natural agricultural products should be organized.

#### Social and Cultural Policy, Health Care, Education

1. Social policies that aim to dissolve the social network and develop a relation of dependence between the state and the individual must end, and the mentality and language of "aid" in the field of social services that reproduce the representation of poor as indigent must be changed. To this end, an inventory of social needs must be catalogued and social services must be delivered based on a collective social solidarity economy approach.

2. The current tourism policy (implemented by the central administration) ignores the multilingual, multireligious, and multicultural structure of cultural memory and heritage of the region. Against this policy of cultural genocide, material and nonmaterial cultural values must be protected. To prevent further destruction, social movements must be cultivated, and material and immaterial cultural heritage must be catalogued while protective policies are developed.
3. In Kurdistan, the impending intensification of the intervention of capitalist modernity into the social field will affect, in particular, the condition of women working in the textile and service sectors. Therefore, along with the establishment of cooperatives in these sectors as alternatives to the capitalist sector, in the short term, a struggle to improve working conditions and democratize the workplace must be undertaken in the domain of capitalist employment relationship.
4. Subcontracting is a system of exploitation, and, as such, it must be rejected. Starting with the municipalities, subcontractors must be replaced with production and service cooperatives organized by workers with participative democratic values.
5. Sports, art, health care, and education are basic civil rights. As such, they should ultimately be available free of charge as public services.
6. Social policies of the state expose the dispossessed, especially women, to undocumented work and exploitation. The social security system must be reorganized in favor of the workers. Social actions against labor exploitation must be cultivated and social control mechanisms must be developed.
7. Union movement must organize in such a way so as to include both the unemployed and the undocumented workers.
8. Workers' councils with workers' participation must be established in the workplace to ensure active participation by laborers in management and control.
9. As a result of economic genocide in Kurdistan, people have disengaged from their productive capacities. To re-engage the society with its productive capacities and to occasion a change in people's attitudes, educational and public awareness raising activities must be enacted.

### Local Governments

1. Existing development agencies cannot provide a fair distribution of public funds. At the local level, agencies must consist of elected members and shall be transformed into democratic investment agencies.
2. At the municipal level, new budgets that are participatory, transparent, and emancipatory with regard to women must be created with the people's participation, taking into account communal-confederate economic needs.
3. Housing is a basic human right. In opposition to housing constructed for excessive profit, housing cooperatives that meet the needs of the people without intermediaries, are adaptable to the ecosystem, and do not cause social isolation must be established and supported by local government regulations.
4. Capitalist modernity has created urban-rural division in which urban spaces are associated with awareness, modernity, and wealth, while rural spaces represent backwardness, poverty, and ignorance. Rural areas, while being very well adapted for development of a communal eco-economy, quickly depopulate. Therefore, settlements must be approached from a holistic perspective and planned as habitable spaces.

### Democratic Autonomy

1. Based on the principles of a democratically autonomous economy, in each city, local economic structures must be governed by economic councils and a parliament.
2. Working groups focused on energy, water, mining, trade and finance, agriculture (crop cultivation and stockbreeding), industrial production, social policy, etc., must be established.
3. Changing the economic mindset is not enough in itself. It must be accompanied by leadership to organize and implement this change. To this end all relevant institutions need to be treated at the same time as academies that aim to produce solutions. Academies must be widely established in places ranging from schools to practical training centers and cooperative training sites.
4. An institute that would conduct fieldwork and create an inventory of raw materials, local resources, and productive capacities must be established.

5. Proposed working groups must organize workshops and conferences related to each sector of the local economy.
6. The Democratic Economy Conference considers the establishment of a Democratic Economy Congress as an objective.
7. This conference is dedicated to Kader Ortakkaya, who personifies all the martyrs of Kobanê; to women seasonal workers from Isparta who lost their lives in a work accident; to those who lost their lives in workplace murders in Soma, Ermenek, Istanbul, Zonguldak, and Şırnak.

—Translated by Yahya M. Madra

**Note**

- 1 For the full declaration in Turkish, see [jinha.com.tr/search/content/view/13418?page=1&key=b12d318ef4584394dc05366594a3d01c](http://jinha.com.tr/search/content/view/13418?page=1&key=b12d318ef4584394dc05366594a3d01c).