

The Attitudes Towards Coal Power Plants
and Coal Mining in

Tavşanlı and Roadmap for a Just Transition



Tunçbilek Coal Power Plant
Photo: Hülya Çeşmeci Cengiz



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Tunçbilek coal miner statue: "Coal is a wealth that will revitalize Turkey." M. Kemal Atatürk

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on field research conducted between June and August 2024 in Tavşanlı, a district in Türkiye's Kütahya province. The research involved over 50 hours of interviews with 71 individuals from the region, including coal miners, coal power plant workers and their spouses; local authorities; members of political parties, chambers and trade unions; academics at universities; opinion leaders; and investors.

The aim was to understand the perceptions and attitudes of the people of the region – especially those of coal miners, coal power plant workers and their families – towards coal power plants and coal mining, and to determine potential entry points for a just transition. Interviewees were asked about their views on coal, coal sector labour, the coal economy, and the region and prospects for phasing out coal, in an attempt to determine the commonalities and differences in their approaches to these issues.

This five-chapter report draws a picture of the current situation in Tavşanlı, a district whose economy has long relied on coal. It focuses on the effects of the concrete reality that the district's economy is still based on coal, despite the decline in coal-based employment and shrinkage of the coal economy. For decades, the people

of Tavşanlı have contributed to Türkiye's energy supply – generating electricity from coal mines in the region –, but have borne the cost through serious health impacts and violations of their rights.

The report explores how transformation can be achieved in a way that ensures decent jobs and a climate-friendly, resilient local development for the people of Tavşanlı.

General Observations on Tavşanlı

'A hinterland addressing a population of approximately 10 million'

With a population of 100,651, Tavşanlı is the second-most populous district in Kütahya province. It lies just a few hours from major industrial, commercial and tourism centres like Bursa, Eskişehir and İzmir – home to millions. Seventy-two per cent of the district population lives in the district centre and 28 per cent reside in surrounding villages. The literacy rate is high, with the majority of the educated residents having completed at least secondary education. Tavşanlı's young population has steadily declined since the coal economy began to weaken in the 2000s, limiting demographic growth. However, the district's remaining coal industry has so far prevented economic collapse and large-scale depopulation, keeping its economic activity relatively strong.



Directorate of West Lignite Enterprise

One of the main barriers to economic development is the absence of an intercity road network. Tavşanlı also faces gaps in basic social services, including education and healthcare. Although the education system includes high schools and vocational colleges, there are incompatibilities between the content of education provided and the district's main employment sectors. As a result, many young people either migrate to other provinces in search of work or fall back on the coal sector, which remains the most economically viable option locally. Despite recent increase in industrial employment for women, Tavşanlı lacks vocational training programmes specifically designed to prepare girls for future careers. Access to healthcare is also a challenge: while the district has a new hospital, there is a shortage of specialist doctors.

Tavşanlı resembles a bustling city but social life is largely confined to private spheres and the social structure is inward-looking. Interviewees voiced a strong desire for "social change" and "greater openness" to the outside world though this push for transformation has also created tensions within the community. Local actors – including public institutions, the district administra-

tion,, the Tavşanlı Chamber of Commerce and Industry and its investors, the Chamber of Agriculture, various unions and associations, political party representatives and bureaucrats, trade unions for coal sector employees and the university – play an important role in connecting with the wider world.

Livelihood Activities in Tavşanlı

Industry collected what was left from the coal

The industrial sector is the sector with the highest employment density in Tavşanlı. The Tavşanlı Organised Industrial Zone (TOSB), established in 2001, hosts 25 companies employing 9,476 people, alongside five small industrial sites. Although local people generally express satisfaction with TOSB, the Zone's economic structure is criticised. Most enterprises are large, attracted through external incentives, show weak demand for qualified labour and tend to pay only the minimum wage. By comparison, coal sector jobs are perceived as more economically advantageous, with average incomes at least double the minimum wage. For the industrial sector to contribute meaningfully to local prosperity, it is essential

to attract companies that require skilled rather than unskilled labour, and to support medium-sized local investors and young entrepreneurs. Although the development of TOSB has reportedly increased women's employment in Tavşanlı, gender norms remain a significant barrier to women's full participation in the formal economy.

Tavşanlı mountainous terrain and continental limit agricultural variety, with grain and fodder dominating production. Livestock breeding, particularly meat and dairy farming, is a prominent sector with products reaching both local and national markets. Although 72 per cent of the population lives in the district centre, the proximity of villages enables regular movement between rural and urban areas, helping maintain continuity of agricultural production. Locals view agriculture as a support economy that complements the coal and industrial sectors.

The tourism sector, while rich in potential through thermal tourism, has yet to realise its economic value. This is attributed to the absence of a comprehensive development strategy, insufficient infrastructure, limited access to investment, and the region's inward-looking character.

The Coal Economy in Tavşanlı

A sector that started with mules and manual labour

Coal mining in Kütahya province dates back to the early republican period of the 1930s, when one of the first lignite mines in Türkiye was established in the town of Değirmisaz, Tavşanlı. Following the foundation of Etibank in 1938 and nationalisation efforts, the coal lignite deposits in Tunçbilek were brought under state control. By 1940, the Değirmisaz, Tunçbilek and Soma enterprises were merged under the newly established Garp Lignite Enterprise (GLİ). During this period, state efforts to increase coal production led to forced labour practices, where local people were compelled to work in mines under 19040s obligatory paid labour directives. For this reason, mining in Tavşanlı was initially seen by locals as an undesirable occupation. This changed in 1958 with the advent of trade union representation, which helped

end forced labour and improve income conditions.

Although the balance between the three changed from time to time, mining operations continued to be a blend of state, private and mixed state-private enterprises until the 1990s, when state investments in mines started to decrease. In 2003, a wave of privatisation began. The Tunçbilek Coal Power Plant was privatised, and the state effectively withdrew from energy production in the region. The workforce in state-owned mines and enterprises, which once constituted the region's largest employer with 8,000 employees, has since declined to 1,100.

According to 2024 data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security on Distribution of Mine Workers to Enterprises (2024), Tavşanlı currently hosts 20 coal mining enterprises –19 private and one a state enterprise (GLİ). Two private enterprises operate underground mines, while 17 through open-pit mining. In the state-owned enterprises, coal production is carried out by both mining methods.

In addition to the mining operations in the region, the privately owned Tunçbilek Coal Power Plant (365 Mwe) and Kütahya Polat-1 Coal Power Plant (51 Mwe), which became operational in 2014, constitute the largest markets for the coal produced in the area. Approximately 50 per cent of the annual coal production is directly used by the Tunçbilek Coal Power Plant. The remainder is distributed by the Ministry of Family and Social Services as a "social aid package" and social support programmes, used by the Ministry of National Education in public institutions such as schools, or sold on the domestic market. Although the state's operational role in the mining sector in Tavşanlı has noticeably diminished, it continues to shape the district's relationship with coal.

In a region that witnessed one of Türkiye's first trade union movements, both trade unionism and coal sector labour belong to the area's historical fabric and the heritage of many local families. Private-sector underground mine operators, which have various recruitment contracts with the state, grant underground miners the

right to union representation according to their contracts. While there is not enough union representation in the surface mines, 80.2 per cent of the region's total coal mine workers are union members.

The coal economy transformed Tavşanlı from a rural district into an industrial town. It contributed to urbanisation, created jobs, increased access to national resources, and elevated the region's influence in local governance. By contrast, its negative impacts included the weakening of entrepreneurship; forced expropriation; a decline in agriculture water scarcity, air pollution, deforestation and ongoing health crises.

Employment in the coal sector is still perceived positively due to the job opportunities it provides, its stability, higher wages and pensions as well as regulated working hours. However, concern persists over health and safety risks, rights violations and the impact of privatisation policies. Especially for those who receive an income just above the minimum wage, coal sector workers still have to rely on the support of their extended family and do additional work after their main working hours in order to secure their livelihood.

Approaches to Coal Exit and Just Transition

Carbon footprint is now something our customers emphasize to us.

'How much attention do you pay to it?' they ask.

Most of the greenhouse gases that cause climate change come from the production of energy from fossil fuels. Almost 40 percent of carbon dioxide emissions caused by fossil fuels consumed for energy production come from coal. As the most polluting fuel it is expected to be phased out first in efforts to tackle the climate crisis. While coal-phase out is driven by global climate goals and national policy, its impacts are most strongly felt in coal-producing geographies. In this sense, although political decisions and regulations regarding coal phase-

out are global and national in scale, the phase-out is regional and should be built on regional sensitivities and expectations.

Furthermore, in Tavşanlı, access to information on climate change, coal phase-out and just transition is highly unequal. This imbalance creates barriers to inclusive decision-making and undermines trust. Although coal is now considered to have lost its leadership in employment figures to the Organised Industrial Zone (OSB), it remains the backbone of the local economy. Coal jobs offer higher wages and early retirement benefits, making them more attractive than current OSB positions. Therefore, an unplanned coal exit could leave Tavşanlı socially and economically isolated.

Despite the risks, there are real opportunities for a just transition in Tavşanlı. These include the presence of state-owned enterprises in the coal sector; high levels of unionisation; weakening dependence on coal economy; growth of the industrial sector in the region and related incentives; the continuation of ties with rural life; the existence of relationships with decision-makers, investors and bureaucrats; the desire for social change and the existence of stakeholder groups that will support this change; and the fact that new generations do not want to see themselves employed in the coal sector.

Still, barriers that may be encountered and that could delay or derail the process of coal exit and just transition include unequal access to accurate information and the vulnerability to disinformation; the dominance of coal in the local economy; the complexity of the multi-factor nature of the coal economy; risks of creating new vulnerable groups; the deep cultural value of mining; differing environmental conditions and needs within the region; and the national agenda and current conditions.

Since Tavşanlı is a region where not only coal mines but also mining activities for different types of minerals have



West Lignite Enterprise coal mine site entrance

been developed, it is thought that other types of mining could be an alternative to coal. However, the industrial sector is considered to be the best alternative to coal. Compared to mining, industrial work offers regular working hours, stable income, safer conditions and requires technical skills.. However, the industrial sector as it exists today is yet fit for purpose: it depends on cheap, low-skilled labour and is not aligned with the skills and expertise of coal workers. Therefore, the people of Tavşanlı are calling for an industrial economy built on skilled labour, high added value, and that prioritises social rights.

Among the industrial production in the region, the production of electrical automotive equipment particularly stands out. The automotive industry is followed by the textile and ceramic industries as primary industrial sectors. The Zafer Development Agency's 2024-2028 Regional Development Plan highlights efforts to diversify products in these sectors, as well as in the electrical automotive equipment sector, the energy storage (battery) and ceramics industries.

Agriculture, especially livestock and dairy production, should be considered as a secondary sector for Tavşanlı in the exit from coal. Tourism, on the other hand, has limited potential due to limited transport infrastructure, low accommodation capacity and the lack of investment in tourism facilities.s. Currently, thermal tourism is the sector's main driver.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Attitudes Towards Coal Power Plant and Coal Mining in Tavşanlı and Roadmap for a Just Transition Report explores the perspectives, concerns and expectations of the people of Tavşanlı regarding the coal sector and coal phase-out process. It also identifies opportunities and challenges for a just transition and tries to determine the strategy to guide it. The main conclusions and recommendations based on this field research can be summarised as follows:

- The coal sector in Tavşanlı is more than an economic activity – it shapes local cultural identity. An exit from coal and a just transition must acknowledge the emotional and cultural dimensions of coal. This includes recognising social mourning over its loss, converting former coal sites into memory sites, recording cultural heritage through oral history studies, and assigning active roles to the bearers of cultural heritage .
- The emotional relationship of people in the region with coal is strong, but has also been significantly eroded over time and by various factors. This opens space for transition but should not be mistaken as a lack of resistance to such an exit. State-owned coal enterprises continue to offer job security, wages double the minimum wage in the private sector and early

retirement – advantages that are not easy to obtain in other sectors and that contribute in making coal more attractive than other industries in the region.

- The state is the driving force of the coal sector, both through direct employment and procurement of services. A state-led coal phase-out and just transition should therefore be based on long-term plans and programmes, legislation and rights.
- There is an urgent need to close the information gap between different stakeholders. Equal access to information about the coal phase-out and just transition is essential for inclusive, informed participation.
- The high rate of unionisation in the region provides an important opportunity for workers to play a policy-making role in transition processes. In a just transition, it is critical to create an inclusive structure that reflects the direct participation of workers and the diversity of their views.
- Since the labour force is not homogeneous, it is imperative to develop a holistic transition strategy that takes into account the different socio-economic statuses and working conditions of workers.
- The closest alternative for coal sector workers is considered to be the industrial sector. The people of the region dream of a multi-layered and diversified industrial sector for Tavşanlı, ranging from large-scale enterprises to medium and small-scale investors. In this industrial sector, they sometimes see themselves as members of the labour force and sometimes as entrepreneurs. The automotive industry for electric vehicles is the standout in this sector.
- Agricultural production is a candidate to be a secondary sector to accompany industry in Tavşanlı's transition from coal. Interest in agricultural production can be increased through arrangements to be made in national policies on agricultural production,

regional development programmes in line with these plans, rehabilitation of mines in the region and elimination of deficiencies based on the construction of irrigation infrastructures and encouragement of small and medium-scale producers.

- In Tavşanlı, the natural, historical and cultural structure of the region allows nature, history and gastronomic tourism branches to be active along with the existing thermal tourism sector in a mutually reinforcing way. In a just transition, tourism can be considered as a tertiary sector in the region.
- The exit from coal requires planning and support that will contribute to the transformation of small and medium-sized investors in the coal sector.
- Coal mining in the region has visibly damaged the area's geography. Rehabilitation planning for mining areas should take into account their multifaceted utilisation needs and potentials. These areas are home to examples where renewable energy and agricultural applications have been successfully implemented.
- Even in Tavşanlı, where the environmental impacts of coal are strongest, objections to the impacts are more muted due to economic concerns. This is a factor that needs to be taken into account in communication planning for a just transition.
- The need for major infrastructure investments as part of the just transition should be addressed.
- The culturally closed social structure of the district can be seen as an area of resistance in terms of exit from coal. For this reason, communication around a just transition should be continued by taking into account the sensitivities of the region.
- It should be kept in mind that even the best-planned just transition processes can be overshadowed by the country's economic, political and social agenda.



West Lignite Enterprise underground quarry entrance



Lignite Enterprise underground coal miner

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Tunçbilek Coal Power Plant Construction
Photo: Tunçbilek Municipality



Underground coal miners
Photo: Tunçbilek Municipality

