

“Child Labour in Turkey: Situation of Syrian Refugees and the Search for Solutions” Conference Report

The conference “Child Labour in Turkey: Situation of Syrian Refugees and the Search for Solutions” addressed the issues of working Syrian refugee children in Turkey. The conference took place in Istanbul Bilgi University on 11 March 2016 through the collaborative efforts of Support to Life, UNICEF and Istanbul Bilgi University Centre for Migration Research. The conference attracted 240 individuals from various national and international institutions including universities, public sector, private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), unions and governmental bodies. The conference was a day long event encompassing three distinct sessions, where different stakeholders gave presentations on relevant research, existing mechanisms of alleviation and potential solutions. The first session constructed an overall framework of child labour in Turkey at large and among Syrian population through the lenses of children’s rights activists, academics and representatives of UN bodies. In the second session, research-based case studies from across Turkey were presented with tangible examples to portray the dimensions of the issue. The third and final session allowed representatives of ministries and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to describe the response mechanisms in place to prevent child labour and protect children. This report includes brief summaries of the presentations in the conference as well as the headlines from the *Question & Answer* sections, which followed each session.

FIRST SESSION

Moderator: Associate Professor Pinar Uyan Semerci - Istanbul Bilgi University Centre for Migration Research

The first session was aimed at providing the legal and contextual overview of child labour in Turkey. In the opening speech, Assoc. Prof. Semerci highlighted the nature of child labour as a pervasive problem in Turkey, which predated the arrival of Syrian refugees. In the past five years, 2,733,000 refugees have been registered in Turkey by The Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). However, the necessity to produce durable solutions to this humanitarian crisis is only now becoming clear. In Turkey, refugees have entered a largely informal labour market, where they have limited stability. The language used to address their status is of crucial importance in defining their

issues and their rights. Semerci stated that we are passing through a great test of humanity with the arrival of refugees, where the notions of human rights, the inseparable rights of children regardless of their ethnicity and the greater benefit of children are being lost. As the situation of refugees, the perceptions of them and the reactions to them are changing in Turkey, all organisations and institutions working in the field are in need of self reflection and examination to better understand this adjustment period.

Seda Akço - Humanist Bureau - Suggested there is a disparity between the laws, which require minimal improvement, their implementation and the actual situation. The conditions of child labour are determined by an economy that is 37% informal and now receiving millions of refugees. Akço listed informal economy, inequality fostered by the social and economic policies of the government, poverty and the cycle of poverty as the driving forces of child labour. Other major points from her presentation can be summarised as follows: Article 18 of the United Nations Children's Rights Convention emphasizes governments' role in creating and implementing adequate social and economical policies. NGOs and the public sector that put children's rights in their focus, fail to pressure the Turkish government in recognising and/or guarding the Special Status of Children. Furthermore, International Non Governmental Organisations fail to pressure governments to not engage in policies that violate children's rights. Thus, three recommendations can be made: (1) Stronger international NGOs that will have an impact on global and national policies; (2) National NGOs and public sector must carry out advocacy for the recognition of children's Special Status; (3) Children should be active participants as the main stakeholders in issues concerning them.

Dr. Bülent İlik – Başkent University/Support to Life – Elaborated on observations from the field: Refugee children pick up work in urban areas, previously carried out by local children. Meanwhile, Turkish children are moving onto more marginal jobs with greater risks. Child labour in Turkey is an ongoing issue for generations, particularly in agriculture, which is an informal sector. Although Turkey is in the **G20**, it is one of the riskiest countries in the distribution of income levels and ranks 72 in the Human Development Index.¹ Data on the population of families, children's considerable contribution to the family income, early marriage, illiteracy among mothers and lack of education displays the mechanisms that cause child labour in this sector. Syrian families are increasingly joining the workforce

¹ Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite statistic of life expectancy, education and income for capita indicators, which are used to rank countries in four tiers of human development. The Group of Twenty (**G20**) is an international forum for the governments and central bank governors from 20 major economies.

in the agricultural fields (e.g. Ordu) along with their children since 2012. Although NGOs carry out important and meaningful projects, they do not take actions to fundamentally terminate or change the course of child labour. The government doesn't effectively implement legislation and lacks meaningful social and economical policies to accomplish lasting solutions that could alleviate unequal distribution of income and living standards. Solutions to this multi faceted problem should tackle the unequal distribution of income among regions, cycle of poverty and lack of meaningful social policies.

Nejat Kocabay – International Labour Organisation - Provided a brief history of ILO's approach to child labour and the general context of the issue: The global driving forces of child labour include: poverty; the importance of children's income for the economy of the household; inability to access education; poor standards of education; low rates of continuation to education and future success; lack of vocational training opportunities; cultural and traditional contexts; lack of comprehensive legislation and effective implementation; cheap labour force; lack of livelihood opportunities in rural areas; and migration. Families, employers, schools and teachers should be part of the education, livelihood, social and development policies aimed at alleviating the issue. Education is the main driving force to solve these issues and break the cycle of poverty and child labour. Thus, the following are necessary: implementation of laws related to child labour and education; quality educational programmes and vocational trainings; a well-trained and professional education staff situated in decent working conditions; social policies that encourage attendance to school; protection of young workers from employment with inhumane conditions.

Iraz Öykü Soyalp – UNICEF - Presented data on Syrian refugee children in Turkey and elaborated on UNICEF's methods of intervention in the areas of education and social protection: Education is an area that requires improvement with 500,000 school-aged Syrian children unable to reach school. Social protection mechanisms also need to be strengthened as Syrian children are at heightened risks of abuse, exploitation and neglect. Problems in education and social protection are the main causes of child labour, where mechanisms that aid breaking the poverty cycle are not strong enough or not in place. Thus, more systematic and comprehensive social policies need to be provided, where four pillars should be taken into account simultaneously: (1) combatting poverty by strengthening social protection mechanisms and supporting access to livelihood methods; (2) targeting social norms of both Syrian and Turkish families where the importance of education is highlighted; (3) raising awareness and consciousness among employers concerning child labour; (4) providing school support to children who have been out of education.

Highlights from the Question & Answer Section

Issues were raised on the ability of Turkish government to accommodate Syrian students and other refugee children if the demand is there. Concerns regarding the dual Turkish and Syrian curriculum and obstacles in the refugees' ability to reach higher education were discussed. Other issues raised included the impacts of terminology used to address refugees in the policies regarding social and economical cohesion; projects aiming to alleviate poverty and impact social policies; influencing private sector to eliminate child labour; and whether seasonal agriculture or the conditions of seasonal agriculture cause child labour, abuse and neglect.

SECOND SESSION

Moderator: Dr. Sema Genel Karaosmanoğlu - Support to Life

The second session aimed at providing in-depth information and data on Syrian child labour. In her opening speech, **Dr. Sema Genel Karaosmanoğlu** explained the longevity of the protracted crisis and the vulnerability of children to all forms of exploitation and violence. The highlights of her opening speech are as follows. It is necessary to move away from the humanitarian aid perspective towards a developmental approach to find long lasting solutions to structural problems such as poverty and lack of infrastructure. All national and international stakeholders should coordinate and collaborate in the same platforms for producing alternative opinions, policies and implementation mechanisms. Thus, we will achieve comprehensive programmes and necessary infrastructure to eliminate child labour, abuse and neglect and ensure access to education

Prof. Dr. Kuvvet Lordoğlu – Kocaeli University - Provided a brief history of policies concerning immigrants and refugees working in regular and temporary jobs in Turkey and the current situation in border cities: Syrian refugees concentrate in the border cities Şanlıurfa, Hatay, Kilis, Mardin and Gaziantep, where the largest amount of refugee populations can be found. Livelihood opportunities in businesses exist and some refugees own small establishments. Although unemployment rate is high and employment is often temporary, refugees also create new areas of work in these cities. However, the majority work informally as unskilled labourers in low-paid jobs that are often unwanted by the locals. Cohesion with locals alter from city to city. The livelihood opportunities are varied accordingly based on the socio-cultural and economical elements present in the area. Thus, conditions are not homogenous and solutions must be based on local conditions. Unemployment rate among refugee youth is soaring

and nationless new-borns' numbers are growing. Rights-based approaches need to be applied to prevent dependency and ensure socio-economical cohesion.

Prof. Dr. Ayhan Kaya – Istanbul Bilgi University - Presented the results of the needs assessment survey conducted by Support to Life in six districts of Istanbul. A comprehensive investigation, where surveys, focus groups and interviews were utilised to collect data on education, health, nutrition and livelihood of Syrian families: Istanbul now hosts the largest Syrian population (450.000), where families arrive through networks established historically, culturally and organically. Refugees cannot access social services outside of the cities, where they were registered and many of the Syrians are registered in cities other than Istanbul. 28% of families state that their children cannot go to school due to their important contribution to the family income. Majority of children work in the textile sector in inhumane conditions with greater risk of abuse and neglect. Inability to reach employment and language barriers are important causes of Syrian families' poverty. The prejudice of the ideologically nationalistic Turkish public against Syrians further disadvantages the social cohesion and inclusion of Syrian families in social and economical life. Thus, such barriers need to be broken and this period needs to be seen as a time to not only study the refugees but also our own behaviour.

Sezen Yalçın – Support to Life: Presented data from surveys, focus groups and in depth interviews that were utilised to collect information on the issue of child labour and the needs of Syrian families at large in the cities of Hatay and Şanlıurfa: Studies have shown that 95% of Syrian breadwinners work as unskilled labourers in temporary jobs. Children contribute to the family income in both cities and the main reason given for children's inability to reach education and child labour is poverty. 70% to 80% of children work at least 6 days a week and 90% work more than 8 hours a day. 30% of children expressed some form of abuse in the work place and pains due to heavy workload. Recommendations include: rights-based approach to social services; registered and regular livelihood opportunities for Syrian families; awareness raising activities on the adverse effects of child labour for both school administrations, employers and families; and introduction of adequate laws to tackle the issue of child labour and effective implementation of these laws.

Prof. Dr. Adnan Gümüş – Çukurova University: Presented data on the Syrian children and families collected through in-depth research in Adana, where 2800 individuals were reached: Lack of permission to collect data hinders research and disables providing help and managing cases. Women's access to labour market is relatively low among Syrian population, it is usually men and children who are the main breadwinners in Adana. Only, 20% of the school-aged children have access to education. Child

marriage, lack of transportation opportunities to school and child labour are given as the prominent reasons for not attending school. Majority of the children that work do not attend school. Localised actions should be taken to combat poverty at the micro level and access to education at the macro level needs to be addressed to end child labour. Overall, European Union's refugee deal with the Turkish government is expected to cause further disadvantages for the local populations and the refugees.

Highlights from the Question & Answer Section

Concerns were raised on the issues of sexual exploitation and abuse of vulnerable refugee children. Early marriage as a negative coping mechanism to financial vulnerability was discussed. Methods of access to working children during research were elaborated on and issues concerning child street vendors and begging children were raised.

THIRD SESSION

Moderator: Associate Professor Serra Müderrisoğlu - Boğaziçi University

The third session aimed at providing a platform to discuss Syrian child labour among multiple stakeholders and to understand the current perspectives and plans of governmental departments.

Ercan Mutlu – Chief Advisory of Immigration and Humanitarian Aid – Suggested the main three reasons for the establishment of the Chief Advisory of Immigration and Humanitarian Aid are coordinating the projects carried out in the area of migration; monitoring and reviewing the projects; and facilitating the efforts of those who work in this field. Syrians in Turkey are Persons Under Temporary Protection, the government refrains from calling them refugees. It is important to work one-on-one with Syrian families and take information directly from the field in addition to desk review of the issues. An important and comprehensive needs assessment analysis had been conducted to identify the needs of Syrian families and children in collaboration with the relevant ministries, UN agencies and local NGOs. In terms of health services, the government does not take a contribution from Syrian individuals when they receive services from state hospitals. In addition, the Advisory provide an AFAD Card for refugees inside the camps and Kizilay Card for those outside, which allow them to purchase food products or access cash. Furthermore, various projects are brought to life for enabling refugee children's access to schools such as conditional cash transfer programs started in order to facilitate

Syrian children's social cohesion. However, various obstacles persist, lack of infrastructure, disparities among Syrian and Turkish curricula and limited financial resources are among these. In 2015, 323,000 refugee children accessed education and in 2016 it is aimed to facilitate the access of a further 450,000 refugee children to education. Conditional cash transfer is used as a tool to eliminate child labour among Syrian refugees and ensure attendance to school.

Emin Eraslan – Ministry of Family and Social Policies – Suggested that children are the most vulnerable population in the society with the greatest need of social support. Eraslan stated that currently there are 2.7 million Syrians in Turkey and 1.3 of them are children; the largest, most fragile and vulnerable proportion of the refugees; the child protection policies of Turkey are inclusive of all children regardless of their nationality or ethnicity. Directorate of Child Services' policy emphasizes the protection of children through supporting them as they reside with their family rather than in institutions. If this is not possible, the Directorate aims to place the children in foster care. Syrian refugees and refugee children can access all the services provided by the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, if they register with the official registration system.

Elif Bor & Zeynep Daldal – Ministry of Labour and Social Security – Stated that the legal framework of child labour in Turkey is very developed, in line with international standards and agreements, therefore it does not require improvement. But, there are obstacles in other areas: The Ministry of Labour and Social Security is aware of the obstacles in the implementation of these laws and there are various projects carried out with national and international institutions to overcome these issues. It is possible to observe a decrease in the rate of child labour. However, this decrease falls deficient in developed and developing countries. In Turkey, the ministry is also sensitive to this issue. Bor and Daldal further suggested that the Ministry of Labour and Social Security has collaborated with ILO in the context of the IPEC project to target three worst forms of child labour in Turkey with a programme initiated in 2005. 2.194 cases of child labour have been identified and there are awareness raising and counselling efforts taking place for 795 families. It is important to note that the child labour policies of the ministry apply to national and international children. Since 2011, the Ministry granted working permission to 9,346 Syrians, who have obtained residency. On January 15, 2016 working permission was granted for all Syrian refugees who have registered six months previous to their permit application. The speakers further explained that employers have to apply to obtain these permits for the individuals or individuals can apply for themselves to start their own business. Businesses have a quota: for every 10 Turkish employee, they can hire one Syrian depending on the city and the nature of the work. No working permits

need to be obtained for Seasonal Agriculture and Animal Husbandry sectors, where children often find employment.

Yazgülü Sezgin – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – Provided information on the units of UNHCR operating within Turkey and the education policies adopted to alleviate the conditions of Syrian refugees living in Istanbul and the Marmara region, particularly the Temporary Education Centres: The right to education is directly related to child labour. In Istanbul, 50 Temporary Education Centers (TECs) have signed a protocol with The Ministry of National Education, where free education is available to Syrian children. 37,000 students are receiving education in TECs and state schools. Further, 1500 Syrian education professionals are working in Istanbul. UNHCR aims to understand the issues of refugees through direct consultations with them and does not identify their needs without their participation. One of the main issues facing the families is lack of information and language barrier for reaching information on the systems in place for social policies and child protection. UNHCR collaborated with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies to provide economical and social support to families through 18 service centers. This allows giving direct support to families or refer them to services. Post traumatic stress due to war is a significant obstacle to children's attendance to school and collaborative efforts can be carried out to ensure psychological support and social cohesion. The existing system for eliminating child labour in Turkey can be improved through collaboration with governmental institutions. UNHCR provides support and livelihood opportunities for vulnerable Syrian families to prevent their children from working.

Highlights from the Question & Answer Section

Concerns were raised on the limiting nature of laws that prevent Syrian refugees from accessing services and work outside of their registered cities. Strengthening the safety networks of children and providing training to teachers in schools for educating traumatised children were proposed as potential mechanisms to ensure child protection. Although the working permit has been granted to Syrian refugees, continuing issues with the informal and unstable employment of the majority were raised.