SUSTAINABLE APPROACHES TO HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE IN THE FIELD OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR ADULT REFUGEES IN TURKEY

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About the Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative

The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.
Introduction

With the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011, many Syrians came to Turkey to seek refuge. At the beginning, Turkey implemented an open-door policy and incurred public expenditures for humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees. Following the influx of refugees’ migration to Europe, Turkey and the EU implemented a deal through which the EU committed to release billions of euros in funding for humanitarian assistance activities for three years under the program Facility for Refugees in Turkey. According to the latest data from Turkey’s Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM), as of April 2018 there are more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey whose stay is regulated under the Temporary Protection Regulation. As most refugees appear to be settling in Turkey for the medium or long term, language instruction plays a particularly important role impacting all fields, including access to education, healthcare, and the labor market. In light of these figures and while international funding continues, Turkey is continuously developing new plans and strategies to cope with the challenges of the protracted refugee situation, including the provision of language education. Language education also figures within the items covered by the second largest portion of the EU funds, which goes to education.

In light of calls to address the most pressing needs of Syrians and toward the formation of a “consensus on longer-term program of aid initiatives aimed at building inclusive institutional processes,” this policy brief aims to recommend ways to improve the sustainability of humanitarian assistance provided through civil society organizations and state institutions to support language education for refugees. It does so by offering background on the state of the existing language education options for refugees in Turkey, highlighting potential risks and limitations, and then making recommendations toward sustaining humanitarian funds for language education.

Current State of Language Education Programs and Institutions for Refugees in Turkey

The language education landscape for refugees in Turkey has been progressively evolving to try to accommodate the influx of refugees since 2011; however, the related institutions still face significant challenges. There are two main channels through which language-learning opportunities are provided to adults through official state institutions apart from private centers (which vary in cost and quality). The first channel is language education for young Syrian adults who want to pursue higher education. Funding for this program comes through the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). This institution offers scholarships to foreigners, covering expenses throughout university education, including one year of language education for foreigners of all nationalities. As the number of Syrians in Turkey began to increase, the YTB implemented special scholarship programs for Syrians in 2013, including a scholarship program for one year of Turkish language instruction for the Advanced Level of Turkish Education Program (İleri Düzey Türkçe Eğitim Programı), with financial assistance from the EU. This program started in refugee camps and then expanded to cities in 2016. It is implemented in collaboration with around 20 universities. In order to be eligible for the program, participants must be a Syrian citizen under Temporary Protection, between 17 and 24 years old, hold a high school diploma (with a grade point average of at least 60 over 100), and show the desire to pursue a higher education degree. In the academic year 2017/18, a total of 3,000 students were selected from 8,000–9,000 applications. However, the amount of funding from the EU towards this program is decreasing year after year as Syrian students are expected to progressively be incorporated into Turkish schools. The second channel for language education is under the Ministry of Education’s lifelong learning umbrella. Language learning programs are carried out within the Ministry’s Public Education Centers or under municipality centers for vocational training such as Istanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Sanat ve Meslek Eğitim Kursları (İSMEK) in the case of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (İBB). In both of these centers, classes are provided free of charge.
As language instruction has been placed under institutional structures that are not geared toward this service, there are several limitations for Syrians who wish to take advantage of these opportunities. These include insufficient capacity in terms of number of teachers, classrooms, and resources. Though the offered course levels and number of attendees seem to increase, the proportion of Syrian adults that these initiatives reach still appears to be very low, especially if we compare them to the total population of Syrians in Turkey. In Public Education Centers all over Turkey, between 2014 and 2018 around 155,000 Syrians took A1 level courses. Additionally, between 2015 and 2018 approximately 34,000 Syrians took A2 level courses, and 3,000 took B1 level courses. In İSMEK, since 2013, a total of 9,000 Syrian students have registered in levels A1 to C1. Waiting times between courses are long: the number of courses, teachers, and classrooms is low. In addition, the courses are not tailored to different needs. Students are grouped together regardless of age, level of education, and literacy skills, and the same curriculum is offered to all students. As participation in these courses is left to the individuals themselves and their resources, the individuals who are more likely to attend and stay in classes tend to have higher levels of literacy. Furthermore, teachers are not trained to offer instruction in Turkish as a second language but are only required to hold a university degree in Turkish language or Turkish literature.

In order to address some of these limitations, several initiatives have emerged, which are mostly EU-funded and implemented through Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). These EU projects are funded by the aforementioned Facility for Refugees in Turkey. Toward this end, the EU was expected to release yet another tranche of three billion euros in June 2018; however, as of publication, these funds have not yet been released. Initially, some of these funds were used by CSOs to teach language on an ad-hoc emergency response basis. This changed after the 2016 coup as state control over these organizations increased. Now, CSOs are required to sign a protocol with the Ministry of Education to operate in Turkey, and they sometimes operate in collaboration with existing state structures, namely the YTB and lifelong learning institutions within the Ministry of Education or municipalities. There are currently nine international and seven national projects implemented through the ministry’s protocol. Each protocol is different: some provide financial compensation for attendance and for transportation, while others pay for the salary of teachers and/or provide free books depending on the project. Though these projects fit into the existing system and aim “to increase the capacity to offer Turkish language courses and skills training,” they have all been project-based, time- and resource-bound at the local level. The state institutions then become mere implementors of these initiatives.

Based on interviews with several actors in state institutions, the majority favor a shift toward a more centralized system in terms of funding through the protocol system, in contrast to the more ad-hoc format prior to 2016. State actors mentioned several reasons for which this system is preferable: firstly, it is perceived to have given the state more control over actors involved in the process. Secondly, centralization is thought to be essential to ensure quality control as the teachers and curriculum have to be approved by the ministry, the courses are audited by representatives of the ministry, and if standards are met, students receive certificates. This point was highlighted by civil society actors as well. Lastly, centralization is believed to have led to more efficient use of funding. As funding is appropriated through the ministry, it now uses existing educational resources for courses already offered and contributes to improving pre-existing structures and capacity. Yet, despite the fact that the discourse of state actors shows that centralization is believed to be essential, the idea of widening access to language in a sustainable, policy-driven manner is absent in the official discourse. Once the funding stops, the centralization efforts are not sufficient to ensure long-term sustainability.
Suggestions & Recommendations

In order to move from a project-based model to a more sustainable one, we propose the following suggestions. These suggestions are based on an assessment of the experiences gained through numerous literacy education campaigns since the start of the Turkish Republic. They reflect on the possible role civil society organizations can play in Turkey and other refugee-receiving countries.

First and foremost, in order for humanitarian assistance to become sustainable, efforts need to focus on building a particular body to organize and coordinate refugees’ language learning. Language education needs to be considered as a public service and institutionalized. The need to offer language instruction has only newly emerged, and unlike other fields (such as healthcare and social assistance), a structure for this field has to be created anew. This involves management at the national level through the migration department under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Family and Social Affairs, among others, to ensure the wider reach of language education and to monitor the distribution of funds. The overarching structure can then coordinate and oversee the efforts that are currently implemented by the above-mentioned structures (the Ministry of Education’s Public Education Centers and municipality-led vocational centers such as İSMEK), referring individuals to these institutions, tracking their progress, and monitoring who has access and who does not. This structure can also oversee capacity issues and enable these institutions to use additional buildings to increase course capacity. Learning from the literacy campaign experience, municipalities can build new schools toward this end if deemed appropriate for educational purposes.
Second, CSOs with international funding can then play a supportive role providing resources and expertise in setting up the above-mentioned structure and in addressing related needs such as the development of pedagogical curricula, design of specific teacher training, and access to certain marginalized groups. On the one hand, CSOs can participate in initiatives to facilitate access to certain groups, namely women, by providing childcare as well as flexible language learning options for men working long hours. There should also be efforts to raise awareness among Syrians about the importance of learning Turkish. More contact should be established through the migration department databases or in coordination with Turkish Red Crescent disbursement of cash through debit cards.

On the other hand, the Syrian refugees in Turkey are by no means a homogenous group but instead consist of a diversity of socio-economic profiles with different needs related to language learning: namely in terms of age group, level of education, socio-economic status, geographic origin, and ethnic identity. The level of literacy is thus also variable: some may be illiterate in their native language, others are unfamiliar with the Latin alphabet. The level of formal education also varies from primary school to holders of doctorate degrees. This requires creating an ideal assessment tool for literacy skills for course applicants. CSOs can then be involved in the development of pedagogical curricula to teach different types of language skills to different audiences and be involved in the design of specific teacher training curricula for teaching Turkish as a second language including literacy education in collaboration with institutes with long language training experience such as TÖMER language schools.

During the Republican-era literacy campaign, state-recruited volunteers (with minimum criteria in terms of level of education) were trained to teach literacy skills, too. A similar initiative may be launched in terms of teaching language. As the Turkish public is not sympathetic to sharing a future with Syrians, developing volunteer opportunities that include both locals and Syrians may contribute to a stronger sense of cohesion between the two communities. Another way to involve volunteers in a constructive way is to enable practicing language skills in day-to-day life. CSOs could play a coordination role with municipalities in bringing together Syrian students with native Turkish speakers to organize nationwide activities that are integrated into language classes.

In short, the Turkish state needs to strengthen its effort toward planning a long-term, sustainable, centralized system for language education for refugees. The development of this system needs to begin immediately as humanitarian assistance continues to flow into the country. This involves setting up a particular structure to organize and coordinate refugees’ language learning and determining the possible role of CSOs in that structure. There is an urgent need for experts and stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and state officials, to further elaborate upon these recommendations in order to develop more targeted and achievable policy recommendations.
Endnotes


8 | Note: These course levels opened in 2015, one year after A1 courses were opened.


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