



LONG-TERM EXCLUSIONARY EFFECTS OF COVID-19 FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN IN THE GERMAN AND TURKISH EDUCATION SYSTEMS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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

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Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has impacted the lives of many people around the globe. While affected governments implemented at least some policies to contain the virus, little attention was given to the particular needs of the most marginalized groups in societies. Among other groups, refugee¹ children² and their families are exceptionally impacted by the pandemic.³ Not only do they disproportionately belong to the lower socio-economic strata of society, but they are also particularly affected by the current border closures put in place in response to the pandemic. Furthermore, refugees are often excluded from government solidarity measures, which are mainly directed at the countries' citizens. Thus, the crisis does not affect all equally.

Both Turkey and Germany have hosted a large population of refugees over the last decade. Despite integration efforts undertaken in both contexts—also in light of the EU-Turkey agreement implemented in 2016—the pandemic has exacerbated existing injustices faced by refugee children and their families in both countries. In addition to facing limited access to means of livelihood, additional health risks, increased risks of labor exploitation, inadequate accommodation, and poor nutrition and hygiene conditions,⁴ nationwide school closures in both Turkey and Germany during the pandemic have posed serious challenges for refugees and may impact their conditions in the long run.

In this policy brief, we will examine the current situation of refugee children in Turkey and Germany, focusing on the increased educational inequalities caused by the measures taken due to the pandemic. For this, we will briefly outline the general situation of refugee students in Germany and Turkey as well as key political measures that have been implemented in both education systems since the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, we argue that distance learning in times of COVID-19 proves to be particularly challenging for refugee students, while political responses to the pandemic on the nation-state level often ignore the special needs of refugee families and open new gateways for discrimination against refugee children in schools. Further, civil society initiatives aiming to support

the needs of refugee children have faced unique challenges since the outbreak of the virus. As the pandemic reveals significant preexisting inequalities, we suggest longer-term solutions to leave no child behind in the German and Turkish education system, not only during the pandemic but also after.

Preexisting Educational Challenges Faced by Refugee Children in Germany and Turkey

In both the Turkish and German contexts, refugee children are subjected to significant disadvantages as compared to their national peers.

As of 2019, Germany has hosted almost 1.8 million registered beneficiaries of protection, asylum seekers, and persons whose removal has been suspended (*Duldung*).⁵ The main countries of origin for these persons include Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Iran. Around 500,000 persons were accompanied or unaccompanied children under the age of 18.

Although all children in Germany have a right to education in compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights, refugee students face numerous barriers and disadvantages in the education system.⁶ Due to the federal organization of the German education system, compulsory education and access to education for refugee children are regulated differently across the country. In most of the 16 federal states, children in reception centers are temporarily excluded from compulsory schooling due to long waiting periods (from three to six months) and because their right to attend school is often linked to their assignment to a municipality.⁷ In some federal states, specific age limits hinder or prevent access to education for refugee youth who have reached 18 years of age.⁸

Apart from this, refugee children in Germany are segregated in school. In many federal states, the students are initially enrolled in separate preparatory classes that are designed to prepare newly arrived students for regular classes for one or two years—and sometimes longer. Consequently, some children do not have any contact with children of the same

age and without a migration background for at least parts of their school trajectory.⁹ Preparatory classes are more often found in secondary schools that offer only lower school qualifications than in schools that prepare students for university and advanced academic studies. In a highly stratified education system such as the German one, which is characterized by limited upward mobility, this can entail disadvantages for later educational pathways.¹⁰

Further, these forms of segregation in the German school system are often accompanied by other direct and indirect discriminatory school practices.¹¹ Societal perceptions of migration-related difference and belonging penetrate into the school, its institutional framework, and educational concepts as well as into the attitudes and actions of teachers and can lead to different forms of (institutional) discrimination as it may be observed with regard to minority students in school.¹²

Turkey hosts around four million registered refugees (including at least 3.5 million Syrian nationals as well as Afghans, Iraqis, among others).¹³ Among these, more than 1.6 million are below 18 and thus of school age. Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and maintains the geographical limitation only to people originating from Europe. Despite this limitation, it provides non-European refugees with protection and temporary asylum, pending UNHCR's search for durable solutions elsewhere. All children in Turkey, including foreign nationals, have, in theory, the right to access "basic education" services delivered by public schools, free of charge, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 42 of the Turkish Constitution, which stipulates that "no one shall be deprived of the right of learning and education."

The protracted nature of the war in Syria significantly amended Turkey's national immigration policies. In 2014, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection provided legal status to Syrians who came under "Temporary Protection" and provided rights and obligations to its beneficiaries.¹⁴ This gave Syrians access to education, health, and the labor market. Initially, Temporary Education Centers (TECs) were created to host Syrians. Yet as time progressed and Syrians' stay in Turkey became protracted, these centers were progressively

closed. As a result, the number of Syrians in public schools increased over the years (from 40,000 in the 2014/15 academic year to 534,922 in the 2018/19 academic year).¹⁵ In 2017, a cash assistance program was implemented to improve school enrollment for Syrian students only, which also significantly contributed to increasing their enrollment in Turkish schools.

Studies and reports that examine the educational experiences of refugee children in Turkey highlight the challenges that (Syrian) refugees face in TECs or public schools. Enrollment rates of refugee students are low for middle school and high school, mainly due to socioeconomic factors such as cost of transportation and supplies. The opportunity cost for not generating income can be prohibitive for some families.¹⁶ Children who interrupted their education for several years and passed the age limits (of 15 years for primary and 19 for secondary school) are directed to distance learning. Even though "integration" classes were created in the 2019/20 academic year for migrants to "catch-up," the monolingual culture in Turkish schools as well as nationalist elements in the monocultural curriculum have led to different forms of exclusion that potentially result in pushing refugee children out of school.¹⁷ There are also issues identified with regard to teachers' lack of resources and proper training to teach non-native speakers and the impact of prejudices in the media that influence teachers' behavior toward immigrant students in Turkish schools.¹⁸

Monolithic Education Policies during COVID-19 in Both Contexts

In both national contexts, the governments were quick to react to the advent of the pandemic, closing schools and launching online learning. Yet, the approach generally did not take into account the particular needs of refugee children but rather offered a one-size-fits-all solution to all children.

In Germany, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all schools were closed in mid-March. Each school was responsible for developing concepts that ensure that learning opportunities are available to students during the period of school closure, as most schools have switched to differ-

ent digital learning formats. For children of parents who had to continue working, especially health-care workers and those considered to be performing essential services, emergency childcare was provided in schools and daycare facilities. This was later extended to other parent groups, depending on the federal states. However, overall only a few families made use of this service (six percent of the children of primary school age and two percent of older children).¹⁹

In late April, the federal states announced concrete steps for a partial school reopening. Despite various demands for a coordinated approach, the gradual return to regular schooling proceeded with different timescales in each federal state.²⁰ Meanwhile, all federal states introduced regular lessons for most students of all age groups, carried out in alternating shifts in order to provide the opportunity for all students to visit the school on a daily or weekly basis. For this purpose, classes were divided into different learning groups and taught separately from each other. Yet, homeschooling continued in parallel. Some federal states later resumed regular schooling, but several schools had to close again in recent weeks due to the high number of coronavirus cases among students and teachers.

By the end of April, the governing parties in Germany adopted a 500-million-euro program to provide schools and disadvantaged students with digital devices.²¹ In addition, the federal government implemented various forms of support for families with children in June 2020.²² These include tax benefits for single parents, adjustments in the legislation on parental benefits, and an emergency child allowance for working parents who do not have access to short-time work or unemployment benefits. Furthermore, as of the beginning of June, the federal government passed a child benefit bonus, which is a one-time bonus of 300 euro per child.²³

Meanwhile, in Turkey, the Ministry of National Education's response to COVID-19 has consisted of closing schools of all levels starting March 16. An online distance learning program known as *Eğitim Bilişim Ağı* (or EBA) website was launched shortly after, during the week of March 23, for all students across the country.²⁴ Further, TRT TV channel has run pre-recorded videos by public school teachers for stu-

dents of all levels. In addition, a hotline was created to provide support to distance learning, and all operators provided free access to the EBA website.

In the second week of school closures due to COVID-19, specific Turkish language programs were added to EBA TV for Syrians who attend "cohesion classes" (*uyum sınıfları*). However, there have not been any initiatives to support families or children during this period, neither in terms of financial support nor technological support. After a long period of uncertainty about the opening of schools and grades, the government's latest decision was not to re-open schools at all for the remaining part of the 2019/20 academic year.

Exacerbating Preexisting Educational Challenges among Refugee Children

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on schooling of refugee children and put their families at a larger disadvantage, exacerbating preexisting inequalities in both Germany and Turkey. According to several reports, a large proportion of children enrolled in school cannot access online education.²⁵ This is particularly the case for refugee students.

The lack of access to technological devices and an internet connection emerges as the main priority in helping refugee children access online education. While this issue affects a significant proportion of students who do not have internet access or do not possess a TV,²⁶ phone, tablet, or computer²⁷ at home, leading to the inability of teachers to reach students digitally, this situation particularly affects refugee children as compared to the general public in both contexts. In Turkey, about half of refugee children (48%) cannot access distance learning²⁸ due to not having access to technical means such as a television or computer. Similarly, in Germany, there is no free internet in many refugee accommodations. According to an online survey on the current situation in refugee shelters, children usually have no rooms, equipment, or support to cope with their schoolwork.²⁹ In addition, the conditions in shelters are not suitable for homeschooling. Support for their schoolwork as well as access to

suitable computers and space to do their schoolwork are all limited.³⁰

Language barriers also emerge as a difficulty in both contexts. For refugee students in Turkey, the pre-recordings (on the EBA system) are difficult to understand without interacting with teachers. Further, information about schooling is not made available in other languages, which leads to confusion about school openings and about the system in general. The contact of students with their teachers is often limited among children. The contact varies from one teacher to another and is mostly through communication applications.³¹ This also applies for the German case.³²

Lack of communication between parents and teachers is prevalent. When schools were open, there were translators for refugee children and their families. In this situation, parents who do not know the language struggle to fill the gap for their children's education.³³ This directly impacts their follow-up process. Children are given a lot of homework, and parents who are unable to help experience psychological stress and anxiety.³⁴

Special schools and rehabilitation centers for special needs students closed during the pandemic. Online courses are not appropriated for students with special needs.³⁵ These types of programs also exclude students who have visual impairment, as there is no voiceover for graphs and shapes, and hearing impairment, because there are no subtitles or sign language.³⁶

Political Responses to COVID-19: Opening New Gateways for Discrimination against Refugee Children In and Outside of School

The closing of borders around the world due to the COVID-19 crisis has reemphasized nation-state thinking and the importance of and privileges that come with citizenship. As borders reemerged, citizenship enabled a return "home" for some, but often placed "foreigners" in even more precarious positions.³⁷ The strengthening of nationalist notions of solidarity in times of COVID-19 led to a situation in which the special needs of refugee children and

their families were often ignored. For instance, refugees were partially excluded from family support programs in Germany. Under the current regulations, parents whose deportation had been temporarily suspended or who are still awaiting their asylum decision do not receive the above-mentioned child benefit bonus. Similarly, in Turkey, while only refugees who meet very specific conditions (such as large families, the elderly, single females, single-headed households, and people living with disabilities) receive social assistance through the Emergency Social Safety Net, they were not entitled to receive the additional monthly support provided by the Turkish state.

In addition, unaccompanied minors who fear deportation or whose parents are currently unable to follow them to Germany are exposed to enormous psychological stress, which severely impairs their ability to focus on their education. The temporary closure of the visa offices has brought family reunification to a standstill.³⁸ As a consequence, unaccompanied minors who have come of age in recent months fear losing their right to family reunification.³⁹ In addition, young asylum seekers whose deportation was temporarily suspended (*Duldung*) and who could receive a residence permit if they find vocational training in Germany are unable to do so currently. Indeed, it has become considerably more difficult to find vocational training opportunities in light of the economic pressure that has ensued from the lockdown measures.⁴⁰ Thus, the likelihood of being deported has significantly increased.

National and particularistic perceptions of the principle of solidarity also weaken global governance and cooperation in favor of refugee children. This is inter alia reflected in the temporary suspension of resettlement and humanitarian admission programs.⁴¹ A lack of international solidarity is also evident in cases of those children living in camps on the Greek islands of Chios, Samos, and Lesbos. In April, after a series of delays, only 47 of the 14,000 children and adolescents under 18 years old from the camps were transferred to Germany.⁴² While the closure of borders and national isolation is presumably temporary, it can be assumed that some measures will be extended due to various motives and further prevent refugee children from accessing schools and learning in a safe environment.

Increasing anti-immigrant sentiments and political discourses in light of COVID-19 reinforce the aforementioned developments. In the search for scapegoats, minorities and other vulnerable groups become targets of racist attacks and different forms of exclusion in both the German⁴³ and Turkish⁴⁴ contexts. The experience of the pandemic may have a long-term impact on implicit prejudices against immigrants, among others in schools, and thus can cause further difficulties in terms of their schooling.⁴⁵ Prejudices and discriminatory practices hamper refugee students' learning and affect their sense of belonging as well as their chances of settling successfully. As immigrant students often perceive themselves according to how they are perceived or labeled, their performance in school might be negatively influenced by "being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group" (stereotype threat).⁴⁶

Challenges for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Supporting the Educational Needs of Refugee Children during and after COVID-19

In times of COVID-19, CSOs are often the only source of solidarity for refugee families. They play a significant role in supporting the educational needs of vulnerable groups and in mitigating the negative impacts of the pandemic on refugee families. Non-formal educational initiatives in Germany and Turkey worked under high pressure to adapt their educational programs to the current situation, e.g., by moving their activities online.

The Berlin-based educational project "Cabuwazi Beyond Borders,"⁴⁷ for example, which is offering circus courses for children in refugee shelters, reacted rapidly to the new situation. In addition to producing online training videos in which acrobatics and juggling courses are taught digitally, the initiative also responded to the situation that many children have no or only limited internet access in their accommodations. Cabuwazi prepared backpacks with circus materials, written instructions, and exercises, which were distributed in the shelters. In order to stay in contact with the children, letterboxes were set up in the shelters allowing the

children to ask questions and give feedback on the training materials and stay in contact with Cabuwazi.

Small Projects Istanbul launched several online activities to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on the local refugee community.⁴⁸ Online activities included online education and leisure time activities for children; Turkish speaking clubs for children and women; online science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses for children; and online volunteer gatherings. They have also been providing case-by-case support to families wishing to get in touch with teachers and schools.

However, COVID-19 also poses numerous challenges for CSOs in both contexts. As they had to move their activities to digital spaces, the initiatives lack participation fees, donations, or revenues for events, workshops, and seminars to finance the expenses incurred. In addition, educational initiatives and organizations in Germany are mostly non-profit and therefore are not allowed to accumulate larger financial reserves to compensate for financial shortfalls due to COVID-19. After long protests and negotiations with the government, social services like those providing education, counseling, and assistance for refugees were placed under the provisions of the social security package set up in late March.⁴⁹ Yet, many education initiatives fear insolvency because they are either not recognized as part of the social service sector, are financed by private actors such as private foundations, or do not meet the various requirements of the social security package for further financial support from the state. In Turkey, organizations were not allowed to launch fundraising campaigns in an effort of the government to centralize the process of fundraising and offering support. Yet, the support process continued to exclude refugees.

Moreover, the day-to-day work of CSOs under COVID-19 became more challenging. For example, educational activities had to be carried out in much smaller groups due to physical distancing rules. As a consequence, e.g., in the case of school cooperation, several workshops have to be held in order to reach the whole school class. Furthermore, CSO actors reported that they had to invest time to obtain permission from donors to redirect project funds

toward online services. They also devoted considerable time and emotional resources in supporting refugee families to manage additional challenges caused by COVID-19, such as fears for livelihood or coping with the loss of family members due to the pandemic.

Recommendations

The widespread call among national and international CSOs to leave no one behind during the coronavirus crisis⁵⁰ also implies an obligation to maintain and secure an inclusive educational setting for all children in Germany and Turkey. However, the preexisting educational challenges and injustices faced by refugee children as mentioned in this policy brief were already exacerbated during the COVID-19 period. Educational policies should thus take into account their specific vulnerabilities in times of the pandemic to avoid long-term systemic inequalities.⁵¹ Policies, institutions, and actors must respond to the diverse needs of students as well as to barriers and obstacles that may limit equal participation in schools and thus their right to education and non-discrimination. In practice this means, for instance, ensuring distance learning for refugee children under conditions similar to children who are nationals, including providing all students with free internet access in and outside reception facilities and with computers that can be used at home. Teachers also need further training to improve their online teaching skills.⁵² This includes considering different language requirements as well as different parental resources to support their children in school. To increase equal opportunities in education, schools' demands on parents in times of COVID-19 should be kept to a minimum.

In order to shed light on and address the complex forms of exclusion refugee children and their families face in education, further data is needed—namely regarding the participation of non-Syrian refugee children in the Turkish education system, absenteeism, and dropout rates. Further, there is a need for studies that investigate how policies during the COVID-19 crisis open new gateways for discrimination in diverse educational settings. To further develop educational processes that are sensitive to diversity and discrimination, govern-

ments should strive to consult a wide range of social groups, including representatives of refugee and migrant organizations. Taking CSO actors and their expertise into account would allow them better access to marginalized groups and better understand their needs.

Government policies should ensure that refugee children grow up in an environment that is safe and free of fear in order for them to have a successful educational trajectory, especially in such times. Direct financial assistance to families should be provided independently of their residential status and without specific allocation criteria in order to benefit families at risk and for the civil society organizations supporting them, in addition to the provision of comprehensive healthcare and a secure housing situation.

Governments should also take more responsibility in protecting refugee children and their families from discrimination, racist hate speech and/or attacks, as they increasingly occur in times of COVID-19. Authorities need to be especially vigilant in monitoring and combating different forms of “othering.”⁵³ This also counts for schools when developing pedagogical approaches and materials. As the historically entrenched nexus of nationhood and education still provides a powerful framework for processes of inclusion and exclusion, schools have to establish a “critical lens through which global content is taught in an effort to emphasize universalism over divisiveness or chauvinism.”⁵⁴

Solidarity for refugee children should go beyond national borders. On the contrary, the fact that COVID-19 is a global phenomenon should function as an incentive to restructure Turkey-EU asylum and inclusion policies to consider the special needs and rights of families with children as well as of unaccompanied children. Thus, instead of using the pandemic to prohibit the right to family reunification for refugee children or to legitimize their deportation, a new universal notion of solidarity should be exercised and established that guarantees, among others, an education for all, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic but also after this period.

Endnotes

- 1 | While the legal definitions of the term “refugee,” their statuses and rights differ widely in Germany and Turkey, our understanding of “refugee” in this policy brief refers to all people who for various reasons were forced to flee their country of origin and cannot return safely.
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- 7 | The Act on the Acceleration of Asylum Procedures, which was adopted in 2015, has led to an increased length of stay in initial reception centers: Asylum seekers now reside there for up to six months, while people from so-called safe countries of origin stay until their asylum procedure has been completed. As a consequence, in federal states with corresponding regulations, refugee children are not assigned to a municipality at all and, thus, do not have the right to attend school.
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