

MONITORING MUNICIPAL SERVICES WITH A MIGRATION LENS: ISTANBUL DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Executive Summary and Policy Recommendations for
Donor Organizations



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ISTANBUL DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONOR ORGANIZATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic tests migration governance along with all other governance models. Monitoring Municipal Services with a Migration Lens: Istanbul During COVID-19 Pandemia report examines the role of local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in migration governance in Istanbul during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report would facilitate the efforts to build effective and fair migration governance by providing policy recommendations for national and international donors funding the migration governance in Turkey.

According to data by the Directorate General of Migration Management, at least 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection reside in Turkey while the International Organization for Migration (IOM) states a figure of over 5.8 million refugees and immigrants. Turkey -which has the largest population of refugees in the world- should not be regarded as a country in need of international cooperation but an area for innovative models of governance and cooperation.

In the first phase of the project, research was carried out with the participation of 13 NGOs, 13 district municipalities in

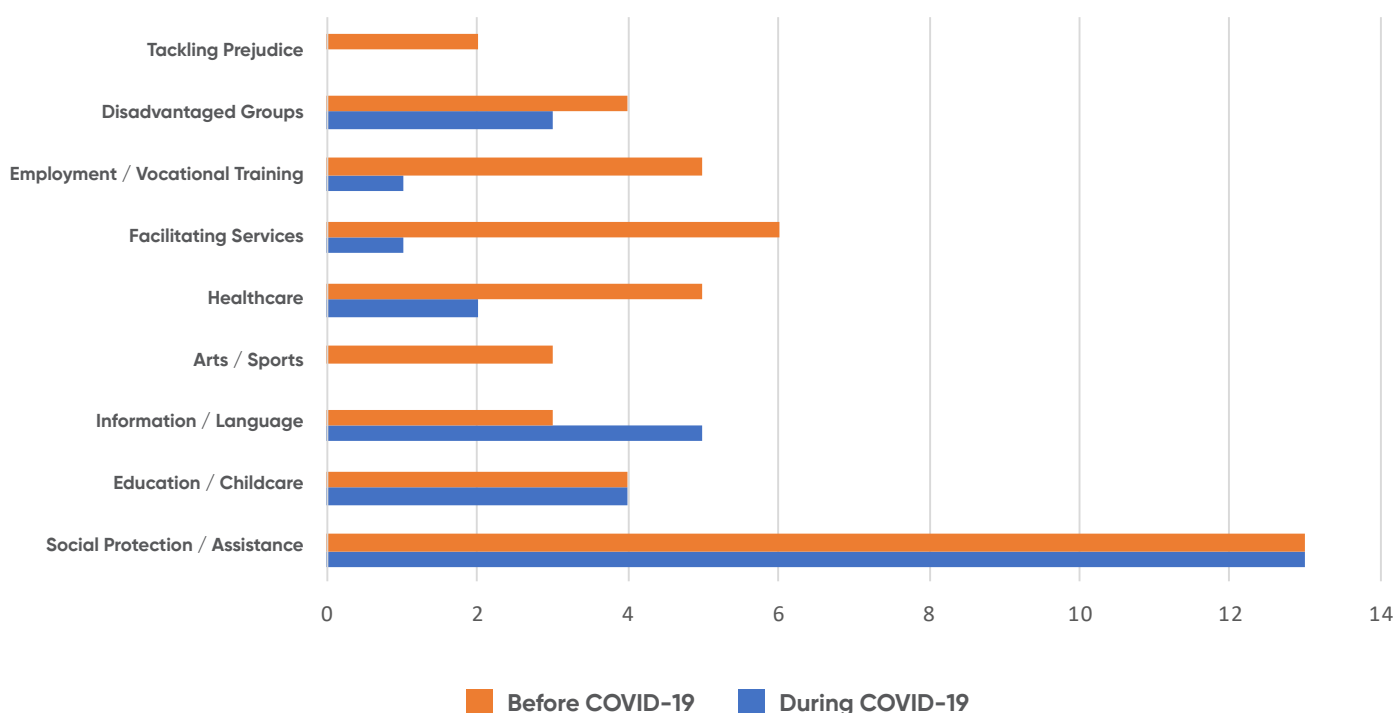
Istanbul, and the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. Local governments and NGOs provided information about their policies and activities for refugees before and during the pandemic and stated their problems and needs. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed and reported. In the second phase, on 26 November 2020, an online meeting was organized with some 30 local government representatives from different regions of Turkey. Participants have discussed the report findings and suggested policy recommendations for donor organizations.

The reports depicting the situation of refugees and migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal some striking facts.

In some areas, the risk of infection is 5 times higher for immigrant populations than for local people.

The unemployment rate among refugees has reached 80% in some regions. Deep poverty has increased migrants' and refugees' aid dependency to access basic needs such as food up to 90% in some cities. It is observed that 20-50% of refugee children cannot access education. Considering the serious and urgent situation, it is a necessity to empower municipalities as effective role-players in migration governance and to benefit their acquaintance to the local dynamics and their capacity to develop rapid reactions.

Municipal Services Before and During COVID-19



Although considered as key actors of national migration governance, earthquakes and pandemic revealed some resilience problems for the central government and NGOs and it casts doubts on the sustainability of the existing governance model. NGOs, facilitating access to urban services and fundamental rights, had difficulties in adapting their services to the needs of the epidemic during the pandemic. For instance, although local government and civil society representatives agreed what refugees needed most was food during pandemics but only local governments were able to provide this service uninterrupted. Both parties also stated that healthcare units belonging to the central government were out of service and food assistance units were unresponsive during the first two months of the pandemic.

Another problematic issue is that migration governance consists of services targeting only immigrants. Providing services exclusively to refugees in order to overcome the language barrier is an empowering option but this approach makes social integration difficult. Given that the same services are currently offered by

municipalities for all society, project-based and exclusive service provision lead to redundancy and inefficient distribution of resources which could be employed to improve the service capacity in quality as well as receiver quantity.

Civil society-local government partnerships, established within a governance model based on public policy and services, can be seen as the solution to the mentioned problems. Currently, local governments cooperate with NGOs primarily to develop financial and labor resources. However, project-based resource allocation, inconsistencies between the local agenda and the expectations of international organizations, and inefficient use of resources due to inadequate interpretation of local dynamics undermine local government-civil society partnerships. The six policy recommendations below are deemed as an effort to improve migration governance as well as a call for bottom-up democratization in Turkey.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONOR ORGANIZATIONS

1. LOCAL GOVERNMENTS SHOULD DIRECTLY BENEFIT FROM FUNDING PROGRAMS:

Local governments can address the local needs and provide services in many sectors such as healthcare, eldercare, childcare, housing, education, social protection, culture, vocational training, and personal development. Local governments with insufficient resources (especially first-tier district municipalities) allocate minimal resources for refugees and migrants for reasons including; insufficient budget, lack of qualified personnel, risk of receiving negative reactions from voters, risk of sanction by the Court of Accounts and other auditing bodies since the subject matters of municipal budget use is left ambiguous. On the other hand, share from state tax revenues are the main source of municipalities and it will decrease due to the economic effects of the pandemic. It is important to create external financing opportunities to prevent the work for refugees from being affected by this budget deficit. Funds specifically allocated for local governments will encourage them to work in this area. Furthermore, municipalities should not be motivated to adopt unsustainable resource-development methods, such as applying funding programs incongruent to the local needs as co-partners or establishing shadow-NGOs. The financial and human resources spent on these management processes must be used to improve the service itself.

2. PROGRAM-BASED AND LONG-TERM FUNDING APPROACH SHOULD REPLACE PROJECT-BASED AND SHORT-TERM FUNDING APPROACH:

Although the short-term projects increase the local civic engagement and provide some motivation for the local governments to take action for migrant communities, they fall short in terms of the sustainability of services and cooperations. The short-term and project-based approach causes the projects to end before the necessary transformation within the local governments take place; the local decision-makers lack the motivation to invest in financial and organizational sustainability and therefore local governments become dependent on external resources. For this reason, the duration of funding programs should be longer and priority should be given to long-term, sustainable and transformation-based programs. In addition to the social protection and integration workers, supports should include the employment of professionals in areas such as project cycle management, implementation, reporting, and impact assessment.

3. SUPPORT TO INSTITUTIONALIZE MIGRANT-INCLUSIVE PRACTICES INSTEAD OF CREATING MIGRANT-SPECIFIC SERVICES:

Exclusive services for refugees and immigrants make social integration difficult and cause inefficient use of resources. If the removal of language and information barriers within the existing services were targeted instead of devising new services out of the institutional frame, it would entail huge budget savings and accelerate integration. Such an approach would reduce urban legends about the funding available to refugees only. Furthermore, the expertise accumulated by the NGOs professionals is withdrawn from the service provision mechanism when civic cooperation is over. Permanent institutional transformation instead of “temporary” centers will accelerate the social acceptance process by reducing the misperception that refugees will return. Lastly, it will reduce urban rumors about the funds spent on the refugees only.

4. INTERNATIONAL CRITERIA FOR FUND ALLOCATIONS SHOULD BE REVIEWED ACCORDING TO LOCAL DYNAMICS:

While funding programs adhere to the priorities of global migration governance, they are distracted from real local needs when these priorities do not correspond to the current priorities of local migration governance. Political polarization at the local level, democratization efforts, and political risks of interpreting the municipal laws in an immigrant-inclusive way can be disregarded by funding programs. Funding organizations should consult the experts on municipal law and administration.

Turkish local governments are highly strategic service providers even though they have smaller budgets and policy discretion compared to their counterparts in Europe and the US. Models developed locally can set examples for the central government or encourage it to perform better in specific topics such as migration governance. Fund organizations should be aware of local dynamics, the potential offered by local governments, and the benefits of inclusive urban service provision.

5. LOCAL GOVERNMENTS SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO PLAN AND HOLISTICALLY IMPLEMENT IMMIGRATION POLICY:

Due to operational concerns such as reporting and impact assessment, funding organizations prefer practices with observable outcomes yielded in a short period. However, such practices are far from institutional transformation. Donor organizations should fund training programs for local policy-makers which will enable them to produce and implement integrated migration governance strategies. The resources to enhance the expertise of the migration-related personnel in local governments should be increased. Monitoring and evaluation should not be limited to the concrete outputs of the funding program but should be able to look at the overall improvement at the local level, should consider the spill-over effects, and take into account the transformation of the local government in the long-term.

6. COORDINATION AND COOPERATION BETWEEN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED:

Migration governance on the local level should not be considered independently of political polarization and democratic concerns in Turkey. Many institutions do not share information and do not cooperate due to political reservations. Participation of other relevant organizations should also be requested in supported projects. Resources should be allocated for practices that will strengthen the data ecosystem between local governments and other public institutions. Multi-stakeholder practices at the local level should be prioritized. Cooperation and mutual learning processes between civil society and municipalities should be supported. Non-governmental organizations should be informed about local services and empowered to participate in local governance. NGOs should be informed and supported about the organizational structures, contact, and communication methods of the municipalities. Coordination activities and cooperation between NGOs and municipalities should be supported.



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