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Published in:
Disasters

DOI:
[10.1111/disa.12438](https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12438)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Cetinoglu, T., & Yilmaz, V. (2021). A contextual policy analysis of a cash programme in a humanitarian setting: the case of the Emergency Social Safety Net in Turkey. *Disasters*, 45(3), 604-626.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12438>

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A contextual policy analysis of a cash programme in a humanitarian setting: the case of the Emergency Social Safety Net in Turkey

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The Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) programme, which was launched in 2016, has become the central element of the humanitarian response to the plight of Syrian refugees in Turkey and an instrument of European migration control policies. This paper offers a contextual analysis of this European Union-funded cash assistance scheme by examining the modes of interaction between its major assumptions and the broader humanitarian response in the context of Turkey. It finds that the ESSN comes with compromises on humanitarian principles and standards, amplifies the protection and assistance divide, and fails to address the realities of Turkey with respect to the country's housing and labour markets and weak protection framework. The paper concludes that a more inclusive approach to eligibility and higher transfer payments can contribute to the addressing of assistance needs provided that cash support is combined with robust protection programming and the implementation of sector-specific projects and policies.

Keywords: cash programmes, cash transfers, European Union, humanitarian assistance, refugee protection, refugee welfare, social policy, Turkey

Introduction

Since the commencement of war in Syria in March 2011, massive population displacement has taken place inside and outside the country, accompanied by severe conflict-related mortality and morbidity and grave human rights and humanitarian law violations within the country (Couatts, McKee, and Stuckler, 2013; Doocy et al., 2015; UN OCHA, 2016a). Neighbouring states bear the brunt of the displacement, with Lebanon and Jordan hosting 879,529 and 659,673 Syrians as of 2020, corresponding respectively to 16.1 and 6 per cent of their total populations (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). Turkey currently hosts the largest refugee population in the world in terms of absolute numbers. As of November 2020, some 3.6 million Syrians were under temporary protection (DGMM, 2020a). While less than two per cent of them are in camps (temporary accommodation centres) built by the Disaster

and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), the overwhelming majority are situated in non-camp settings (DGMM, 2020a). In addition, Turkey hosts about 368,000 international protection applicants, mostly Afghans, Iraqis, and Iranians (UNHCR, 2020), and received more than 114,000 applications for international protection in 2018 (DGMM, 2020b).

Turkey, adopting an open-door policy, initially labelled Syrians as ‘guests’, a frame that places welfare at the mercy of the host and instils uncertainty and confusion into the governance of the lives of refugees (Biehl, 2015; Gümüş and Eroğlu, 2015). In 2013, though, it granted temporary protection status to them (Republic of Turkey, 2013), representing a clear departure from the previous exclusionary immigration regime while still maintaining its geographical limitation in granting refugee status. Despite the fact that the introduction of temporary protection status symbolises progress for Turkey in this regard, it also reflects the global trend towards reduced opportunities to acquire refugee status and the erosion of legal protections (Zetter, 1985, 2007; Bendel, 2005; Gatrell, 2016; Landau and Achiume, 2017). The agreement of March 2016 between the European Union (EU) and Turkey that sought to end migratory flows from Turkey towards Europe (European Council, 2016) provided international recognition of Ankara’s decision to grant temporary protection to Syrian refugees.

Turkey became a humanitarian destination soon after the outbreak of conflict in Syria, with several aid agencies and governmental bodies actively involved in addressing a broad range of issues connected to the hosting of refugees. The EU-funded Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), a cash transfer scheme launched in 2016 to meet the basic needs of refugees, has become the flagship initiative.

In line with calls (Harvey, 2007; Gentilini, 2014, 2016) for context-specific analysis of cash programmes, this paper critically assesses the ESSN in relation to the Syria response within Turkey. In so doing, it investigates the ESSN by placing it within the broader policy environment and humanitarian practice. This study subscribes to critical policy studies that ‘focus analysis on relations between discursive and material elements of social life’ (Fairclough, 2013, p. 177). It scrutinises interaction between the ESSN and the overall humanitarian response that shapes the functioning of the endeavour as a basic needs cash assistance arrangement. In this regard, the study demarcates from the outcome and impact evaluation literature that yields valuable insights into the effectiveness of cash programmes in humanitarian settings.

This paper is based primarily on a comprehensive review of 15 policy documents published by the organisations directly involved in or monitoring the ESSN and secondary literature on the socioeconomic and policy environment in Turkey. The documentary analysis is complemented by the *Final Evaluation Report* of the ESSN (Maunder et al., 2018a) and its *Annexes* (Maunder et al., 2018b), as well as by in-depth interviews conducted by the authors with 22 people—four of whom were international personnel—engaged with different stakeholders in the cities of Gaziantep and Istanbul in early 2017: nine people working with Turkish humanitarian organisations, seven employed by international humanitarian organisations, and six United

Nations (UN) staff members; four informants were directly involved in the ESSN programme. Thematic content analysis is applied to the documents and interviews to explore emergent issues concerning the functioning of the ESSN in this setting. To maintain the anonymity of the interviewees, the discussions were not cited directly; interview data were used instead to supplement the main review.

The first section of this paper contains an overview of the scholarly debates on the rise of cash-based programming in the humanitarian sector. The second section presents the major premises of the ESSN, while the third section explores challenges to the scheme in its functioning within the broader humanitarian response in the socio-economic and policy environment of Turkey. In particular, it examines two key problems that stem from the programme design and its interaction with the socioeconomic and policy environment: issues surrounding the allocation of assistance; and specific protection matters. The final section offers a contextual analysis of the ESSN.

The rise of cash-based programming in humanitarian settings: policy, evidence, and funding

This paper uses the term ‘cash programme’ in a generic fashion to refer to unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) and conditional cash transfers (CCTs), including cash-for-work and cash-for-assets schemes. Historically, cash programmes have been a component of domestic social assistance systems in middle- and high-income countries (Gough, 2001); their systematic application in humanitarian contexts, however, is a relatively recent occurrence. Although cash-based programming generally contributes to a social protection scheme and integrates a poverty reduction perspective (Farrington and Slater, 2006; Davies, 2009) into international development work, it has also been utilised in disaster settings (Doocy et al., 2006) and used to address chronic or recurrent food insecurity in places with a history of famine (Kebede, 2006) after entering the humanitarian response realm in the mid-2000s. Over the past decade, cash programmes have gradually expanded to conflict-affected areas (Slim et al., 2018) and been implemented as short-term interventions in post-conflict situations and at the onset of humanitarian emergencies (Harvey, 2007). The implementation modalities were facilitated by emerging technologies, mostly in the form of electronic payment systems (Vincent and Cull, 2011). Cash transfers were applied across sectors for expenditure on food, health, shelter, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (O’Reilly, Shrestha, and Flint, 2013; WASH Cluster, 2016). Designed principally to address basic needs in emergencies, multi-purpose cash programmes were promoted as an alternative to in-kind relief, and at times they were linked to specific humanitarian protection or health outcomes.

Most research on this topic focuses on the benefits and drawbacks of cash-based interventions and their feasibility and effectiveness. By way of example, Mattinen and Ogden (2006) concluded that a cash transfer is a promising alternative to in-kind assistance as it helps to empower the beneficiaries and can be used effectively in

insecure countries, such as Somalia, as long as it is introduced in consultation with the people, responds to needs, and is context-specific. In addition, Davies and Davey (2008) highlighted the positive impact of cash transfers on local economies, especially with regard to farmers and small businesses. Cash transfers have also been associated with regularity and predictability vis-à-vis beneficiaries (Kebede, 2006), and are recognised as low-cost interventions because they require fewer inputs for programming and implementation. Despite coordination challenges, cash-based programming has also been praised as a practical assistance mechanism, especially in urban and non-camp settings (Smith and Mohiddin, 2015); cash transfers are seen as a modality to reform aid. Promising a way to alter the *modus operandi* of humanitarian action, cash assistance has thus been acclaimed for its potential to transform the humanitarian aid system (Overseas Development Institute, 2015; Bailey and Harvey, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017).

MacAuslan and Reimenschneider (2011, pp. 60–61) stated that '[f]indings are mixed' regarding 'the impact of cash transfers on social relations within and between households', concluding that such an impact is 'large and often negative' because cash assistance necessarily includes other governance mechanisms, such as targeting and registration, which affect power dynamics and social relations, creating resentment, exclusion, and increased conflict. Based on a review of projects funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), Davies (2009) reported mixed results regarding the effect of cash transfers on food security, economic growth, and poverty reduction, underscoring the importance of contextual differences and the robustness of specific programme designs. Gentilini (2016, p. xi) noted that '[a]vailable comparative evidence' on the advantages and disadvantages of in-kind and cash transfers also varies in different sectors. Where evidence is available, as in relation to food security, the effectiveness of these in-kind and cash assistance efforts 'is similar on average' (Gentilini, 2016, p. xi). Pega et al.'s (2014, 2015) meta-analysis to assess the effectiveness of UCTs 'in improving health services use, health outcomes, social determinants of health, health care expenditure, and local markets and infrastructure' in low- and middle-income countries found 'the overall quality of the evidence to be very low for all primary outcomes' and that follow-up of the suggested results was poor (Pega et al., 2015, p. 34).

Research findings underline the importance of complementary programmes and services that increase the effectiveness of cash programmes. For example, Pega et al.'s study (2015, p. 34) pointed to the lack of evidence to propose safely that UCTs are more effective as standalone projects, arguing that 'neither the UCT nor the co-intervention (i.e., a food transfer) may be effective, the combination of both (i.e., additional income together with food) may be'. Likewise, in a study of CCTs in Latin American countries, Rawlings (2005, p. 133) also observed that conditional schemes effectively improve protection outcomes only if they function as a demand-side complement to services in locations where there is a sufficient supply of health-care and education services. More specifically, a review of multi-purpose cash assistance emphasised 'strategic complementarity' (Harvey and Pavanello, 2018, p. 6)

of cash and sector-specific activities aligned with humanitarian principles and standards. Identifying inadequate transfer value as one of the main limitations of improved sectoral outcomes, Harvey and Pavanello (2018, p. 5) emphasised too that 'protection and sector-specific programming remains essential', as cash assistance alone 'cannot tackle systemic issues' such as access to services and the labour market and the quality and standards of services, and nor can it remedy protection concerns and replace such activities.

Cash-based programming sits, therefore, at an interesting junction in the humanitarian protection and assistance framework. The protection and assistance divide in humanitarian action (Darcy, 1997) was a topic of heated discussion during the 1990s. One aspect in the past decade that transcended this lacuna is the stress on the importance of mainstreaming protection in all humanitarian actions. Tools and guidelines that set minimum standards for humanitarian programming have been developed with interagency consensus to ensure that protection issues are an integral part of any assistance framework, such as The Sphere Project (2011, 2012). The standards that the latter set 'signal a broadening of the normative base of humanitarianism where the needs-based principles are complemented with principles and standards that are easily translated into rights-based approaches' (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2012, p. 897). As such, the identification of minimum standards and their acceptance as constitutive of the normative basis of humanitarian action further bridged protection and assistance. The same decade also saw the development of protection programmes that use case management as a key tool, designed to address particular issues, including gender-based violence, mental health and psychosocial support, community-based safety, and the protection of children and civilians.

There is, however, limited discussion in the literature on how to design cash programmes that capture the protection and assistance nexus, although the matter has been explored in the development literature (see, for example, Molyneux and Thomson, 2011). One point of discussion is how protection concerns should be integrated into cash assistance schemes in general, and more broadly, how cash assistance programmes interact with, contradict, or complement programmes with a specific protection focus. A literature review found that 'many [cash] programmes still do not comprehensively consider broader protection concerns and more specifically age, gender, or diversity in the initial design, which predictably led to protection risks' (Berg and Seferis, 2015, p. 7). So far, context-specific studies that analyse the linkages between protection programmes and cash assistance in humanitarian settings are also lacking.

Nonetheless, a consensus has been reached among policymakers, donors, and most humanitarian agencies within the past decade: cash assistance should be central to humanitarian response, UCTs should be given priority, and local markets, infrastructures, and accountability systems should be assessed accordingly (Overseas Development Institute, 2015). The understanding is that there is now enough evidence to suggest that 'cash is one of the best ways to provide emergency relief' (Danish Refugee Council, 2017a). Overall, cash-based programming has been promoted as a scheme that captures the humanitarian-development nexus (Overseas Development Institute, 2015;

Gentilini, 2016), as it caters to the narrative of resilience-building and self-reliance. When implemented ‘in appropriate contexts’, the Council of the European Union (2015, p. 4) noted that assistance in cash is ‘not only effective and efficient, but is a way to meeting needs responsibly, while helping to promote recovery and resilience’.

Increasing attention to and enthusiasm for cash programmes is reflected in increased funding. Development Initiatives (2017, p. 83) estimated that in 2015, ‘approximately US\$2 billion was spent on cash-based programmes’, a figure that is steadily rising. Cash-based programming emerged as the preferred model of most donor institutions, such as DFID, the World Bank, and the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). ECHO (2012, 2013, 2015) produced a set of guidelines and policy briefings alongside other humanitarian agencies and policymakers (International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, 2007; Mercy Corps, 2015, 2018; HCT Cash Working Group Philippines, 2016). In 2015, a European Council working group agreed on the ‘Draft Council Conclusions on Common Principles for Multi-Purpose Cash-based Assistance to Respond to Humanitarian Needs’, which was submitted to the Council of the European Union for approval, encouraging the EU and its member states to prioritise cash assistance (Council of the European Union, 2015). The Draft Council Conclusions characterised cash assistance as an innovative approach, particularly in dealing with the ever-increasing numbers of people in need of humanitarian assistance and considering the scale of the crises confronting the humanitarian system.

Subsequently, cash transfer was one of the key themes of the three-year preparatory phase for the first World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) held in Istanbul, Turkey, from 23–24 May 2016 (World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat, 2015), as well as during and in the aftermath of the WHS (Gordon, 2015; Ki Moon, 2016; UN OCHA, 2016b; Ramacciato, 2017). Several high-level panels were organised, which spotlighted cash assistance as a new and pragmatic way of dealing with rising numbers of people affected by conflict and disaster, including migrants and refugees. With the launch of the ‘Grand Bargain’ at the WHS, which refers to a set of commitments by humanitarian donors and actors, cash assistance has emerged as a preferential instrument in shaping response priorities while enabling immediate and scaled-up results that donors can easily explain to the public. The ESSN was listed as a ‘pilot’ scheme contributing to the Grand Bargain (WFP Turkey, 2017), playing a part therefore in the reform and transformation agenda of humanitarianism.

The ESSN

Cash-based programming has gained momentum over the past decade with the influx of Syrian refugees into neighbouring countries, notably in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, and with greater numbers of refugees heading towards Europe. Gabiam (2016, p. 383) argued that ‘the Syrian refugee crisis . . . served as a laboratory for experimenting with solutions’ and significantly shaped global humanitarian policies. As of 2015, the largest tranche of humanitarian assistance funding channelled to Syria was allocated to cash programmes (Development Initiatives, 2017). In addition, the

neighbouring countries received substantial external funding for cash transfers to refugees (Development Initiatives, 2017).

In Turkey, a multitude of international and domestic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have implemented their own small-scale in-kind and cash programmes for Syrians (Armstrong and Jacobsen, 2016)—and to a lesser degree, for international protection applicants—since the outbreak of the crisis. The ESSN, targeting both Syrians under temporary protection and others under international protection, replaced the overwhelming majority of these initiatives.

The ESSN, a multi-purpose cash benefit programme, emerged as a product of the EU–Turkey agreement of March 2016, commonly referred to as the ‘refugee deal’. As noted, it materialised as a response to the mass movement of refugees on perilous journeys towards Europe that had gained pace in summer 2015 (Öner and Genç, 2015). With this accord, the EU officially succeeded in preventing Syrian refugees from leaving Turkey, keeping them away from European borders. For its part, Turkey gained international prestige and secured financial support from the EU for Syrian refugees inside the country (Cetinoglu, 2019). Analysts and practitioners emphasised the negative effects of the mechanism for refugee containment and poor burden-sharing based on outsourcing of protection responsibilities put in motion with the arrangement. Questioning the moral premises and the legality of the agreement, the critiques highlighted that it served to ‘institutionalise’ the reduced opportunities to obtain refugee status and the erosion of legal protections, ultimately turning refugees into a political bargaining chip in the region (Neuman, 2016; Ulusoy and Battjes, 2017; Danish Refugee Council, 2017b; Human Rights Watch, 2018). The ESSN is a product of this agreement and political process.

The EU allocated EUR 3 billion to the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRiT) with the objective of financing humanitarian assistance, education, healthcare, infrastructure, and socioeconomic support projects (European Commission, 2017). Of these endeavours, the EU declared the ESSN to be ‘the biggest humanitarian project it has ever funded’ (European Commission, 2016). The implementation of the scheme started in December 2016 and was expected to continue until the end of 2019,¹ eventually reaching 1.4 million refugees. The *Needs Assessment Report* for the FRiT, however, was only made public in 2018 (European Commission, 2018), almost two years after the launch of the ESSN. The ESSN, funded by ECHO, originally received EUR 348 million and later obtained an amount that took the total to EUR 1.5 billion as of February 2020 (European Commission, 2020a).

It was almost six years after the start of the Syria crisis that an emergency basic needs programme came into being. This tardy response points to two key issues. The first is the failure of the earlier domestic policy response to the emergency, which was expected to be temporary (Öner and Genç, 2015). The second concerns belated international and domestic political recognition of the need for an organised scaled-up response to the urgent basic needs of refugees. Humanitarian action of this magnitude manifested only when the situation became an alarming migration management problem for the EU.

As with other cash programmes, the ESSN is presented as an initiative that respects the choices of beneficiaries. The policy preference for addressing basic needs with a cash programme is presented as ‘an acknowledgement that, despite their hardships, refugees should have the freedom to choose how to manage their own lives’ (European Commission, 2020b). In addition to the emphasis on choice, the cash programme is deemed ‘appropriate for Turkey, where markets and financial structures are strong’ (WFP Turkey, 2016a). The EU stresses that the ESSN is a product of a ‘common, integrated and targeted approach to address basic needs at household level’ and a ‘hybrid social assistance scheme anchored on and aligned with government systems and integrating crucial humanitarian safeguards’ (ECHO, 2016, p. 7). The scheme has been celebrated more forcefully in global and domestic policy circles as a response that finally accords dignity to refugees, who can now spend the money in line with their own preferences (Ardittis, 2017; Pitel, 2017).

The ESSN is a multi-purpose UCT programme that is expected to enable refugees to satisfy their basic needs across sectors. To qualify, refugees must have registered for temporary or international protection in Turkey and provided an official residence address; in addition, they have also to be in one of the eligible groups that are presented in the next section. With the ESSN card, refugees receive a monthly flat-rate benefit of TL 120 (around EUR 17) per family member (European Commission, 2020b). Only one person in a household can submit an application, and if the household is found to be eligible, that same person receives the total amount on behalf of the other members. Cash benefits in the local currency are distributed monthly to Syrian refugees through a debit card supplied by a state-owned Turkish bank.

Multiple agencies have been involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the first two phases of the ESSN programme (from December 2016 to March 2020), including the EU, the Government of Turkey and related public authorities, such as AFAD and the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services (MoFLSS), as well as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Turkish Red Crescent (TRC). Drawing on its expertise in implementing large-scale cash programmes, the WFP serves as a reliable expert organisation and a humanitarian partner of the EU with a mandate to monitor and evaluate the programme. For its part, the TRC, the largest humanitarian organisation in Turkey, enjoys semi-public status and is the main implementing agency in the country, collaborating with relevant state institutions.

The ESSN relies largely on public-sector capacity for social assistance programmes. This dates back to social assistance legislation ratified in the late 1980s (Republic of Turkey, 1986), creating a Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation (SASF) in each district. Their legal status is that of a government-organised NGO run by a board of trustees and chaired by appointed district governors. Their brief has been to provide in-kind and cash benefits to households living below the poverty line.

In the context of the ESSN, the SASFs are complemented by 18 TRC-established ESSN application centres in cities where the number of Syrian refugees is high. The authors learned during fieldwork that home visits were postponed in many places in order to reach the intended number of beneficiaries in a short amount of time.

While it is the SASF boards that officially issue the final decision on applications, their role is limited to procedural approval of the assessment made by SASF and TRC staff on the basis of the programme's eligibility criteria.

Given its centrality in humanitarian and domestic policy responses to the Syria crisis within Turkey's borders, the ESSN is an interesting case with which to examine the modes of interaction between major assumptions that underlie the design and implementation of the programme and the broader humanitarian response in the socioeconomic and policy environment of Turkey. The next section situates the scheme within largely unregulated labour and housing markets, and the subsequent section places it within a weak protection environment in the country.

The ESSN in unregulated labour and housing markets

The contextual analysis applied here to the ESSN in the context of Turkey reveals that there are four areas where the assumptions of the programme do not match the reality of the socioeconomic and policy environment of Turkey, especially in reference to prevalent informality in labour and housing markets (Buğra, 1998; Buğra and Keyder, 2006):

- the two-staged registration requirements;
- the reliance on targeting;
- the determination of the benefit level; and
- the interaction with the housing market.

First, to apply for the ESSN, refugees must have first completed their registration with the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM). Refugees are expected to register in the province where they initially arrived. Having founded the DGMM in 2013 after the outbreak of the crisis in Syria, Turkish authorities succeeded in creating a functioning registration system in a short period. Yet, over time, the changes in the system that required refugees to renew their registration resulted in a backlog. Owing to the immense workload of migration authorities, newcomers to the country face long waiting times for registration. In fact, the WFP-led Comprehensive Vulnerability Monitoring Exercise presented evidence that 43 per cent of non-applicants to the ESSN cited 'not having registered' as their main reason for not applying for the scheme (WFP Turkey, 2018, p. 8).

Once refugees register, they can make use of their entitlements only in that province. This regulation, however, does not always correspond to the reality of people's experiences. Refugees migrate to find work or to unite with family members. Those who leave their province of registration confront difficulties in transferring their registration. In fact, the WFP found that eight per cent of non-applicants to the ESSN reported that they were registered in a different province when asked for the principal reason for not applying (WFP Turkey, 2018, p. 8).

Furthermore, refugees are expected to provide an official residential address for the registration system. While Turkey successfully established its address-based population registration system in 2007, the informality of the housing market (Buğra, 1998) restricted its effectiveness to record all available units. In light of their disadvantaged position in Turkey's largely unregulated housing market, refugees face anything but a straightforward process in supplying a valid address. Some refugees, especially those in metropolitan areas, reside in places that are not listed as residential areas in the system, such as annexes, barns, cellars, and ruins. People who live in such places, and those who refrain from registration procedures altogether (Kutlu, 2015, pp. 5–7), have limited potential to benefit from the ESSN. Although a five per cent quota was introduced in 2017 to allow the programme to reach out to those who are excluded, it applied only to registered refugees (European Commission, 2018). These preconditions led to a considerable risk of categorical exclusion of those who are unregistered and without a formal address. The evaluation of the programme also found that the ESSN 'did not sufficiently anticipate the challenges that some households would face in application – including registration – or include activities to mitigate the consequences' (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. v).

Second, the ESSN aims to help the 'most vulnerable refugees pay for the things they need most' (European Commission, 2020b). In other words, it was not designed in a universalistic manner that would cover all people under temporary or international protection. Instead, the scheme relies on the following six demographic vulnerability indicators in setting eligibility criteria for the programme: women living alone; single-parent households; elderly individuals aged 60-plus without any younger family members in the household; households with at least one member with a disability; households with four or more children; and households with a significant share of people in need of care—dependency ratio equal to or more than 1.5 (Mauder et al., 2018b, p. 90).

Two interrelated questionable assumptions underlie the use of these needs categories as proxies for eligibility for cash benefits:

- The ESSN uses the number of people in need of social care as its basis for allocating cash benefits. While this choice may be explained in terms of these households having limited earning capacity and a higher burden of care, a one-to-one correspondence cannot be assumed. There may be households with a low care burden that nevertheless confront obstacles to satisfying their basic needs, such as those who live in dire unregistered shelters.
- The ESSN relies on an assumption of a regulated labour market that delivers decent work opportunities and a living wage. For example, households composed only of single men of working age clearly constitute a group that falls outside of the scope of the ESSN. However, informality has long been a key feature of the Turkish labour market (Buğra and Keyder, 2006), and employment 'has been essentially disregarded, in both humanitarian and social policy programmes' (Yilmaz, 2019, p. 721). Having a sufficient number of working-age adults in a household does not necessarily imply that they can find (decent) work that pays a

living wage. In fact, formal employment opportunities for refugees are extremely limited in Turkey. As of 2018, some 35,000 Syrian refugees (out of roughly one million working-age refugee men) were granted work permits (MoFLSS, 2019). Research into the country's labour market indicated that many more Syrian refugees have been employed in informal jobs in the labour-intensive sectors (Tumen, 2016), who are paid significantly less than already low-paid Turkish citizens in the informal sector (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel, 2017). The *Final Evaluation Report Annexes* showed, too, that the majority of refugees participating in focus-group discussions reported that they worked long hours in precarious jobs while receiving pay less than the minimum wage (Mauder et al., 2018b, p. 103).

The Syrian refugee population in Turkey constitutes 'a largely homogenous, group of poor refugees' (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. vii) who are living in a country with a largely unregulated labour market, which renders targeting unnecessary. The ESSN's reliance on targeting in this context unjustifiably leaves many refugees in need of the programme (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. vi). The *Final Evaluation Report* on the scheme also highlighted that the number of beneficiaries was set by the donor agency, rather than on the basis of needs assessments (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. 9).

Third, while the programme is a basic needs programme, it does not clearly define basic needs, which leaves the matter of setting monthly benefit levels in limbo. The ESSN's contribution to the refugee household economy is a monthly benefit of TL 120 per person. Although 'the primary objective of the project was to fully cover the basic needs of the most vulnerable refugees' and the necessary amount was estimated to be TL 180 per person per month, the amount negotiated with the government corresponded to '74% of the initial estimated need' in June 2017, which 'continuously lessens the impact of the project on the most vulnerable beneficiaries' (European Court of Auditors, 2018, pp. 35–36). The *Final Evaluation Report* of the ESSN also supports the conclusion of this study by noting that 'the underlying analysis of refugee needs was limited' (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. vii). Owing to the recent devaluation of the Turkish Lira, the value of TL 120 declined from around USD 1.3 per person per day during the initial stages of the programme to less than USD 1 in 2018, and as of November 2020, it corresponded to USD 0.5 per person per day, well below the World Bank's indicator of extreme poverty: USD 1.90 per person per day.

Fourth, the unregulated housing market in Turkey, which the ESSN does not clearly address, increases the need for cash among refugee households and undermines the effectiveness of the money that they receive. The analysis of the focus-group discussions in the *Final Evaluation Report Annexes* demonstrated that the primary concern of refugees is that they pay high amounts to rent inadequate houses (Mauder et al., 2018b, p. 100). In fact, one-third of the participants reported that they spent the cash benefit directly on rent (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. 29). Stakeholder interviews in the same document exposed that some landlords increased the rent arbitrarily once they noticed that the tenant household was receiving the ESSN benefit (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. 31).

Given the four points of mismatch between the assumptions pertaining to the design of the ESSN and the realities of the Turkish labour and housing markets, the paper concludes that the ambiguity underlying the targeting and the determination of the ESSN's benefit level ends up reproducing broad categories of deservingness, which are not specifically centred on needs and protection rights.

The ESSN in a weak protection context

This section of the paper further contextualises the ESSN programme, identifying five aspects where its assumptions do not match the realities of the protection framework on the ground:

- the weak protection policy and institutional context in Turkey;
- the curtailed latitude for international NGOs (INGOs) and their protection programmes in the country;
- the impact of the ESSN on the protection programmes of NGOs and INGOs;
- the reproduction by the ESSN of the protection and assistance divide; and
- the failure of the ESSN to incorporate protection measures.

First, the protection context in Turkey has historically been weak in terms of establishing practices and institutions for social and humanitarian relief work. Owing to operating in a system 'which does not yet have its own social work code of ethics' (Ornellas et al., 2019, p. 1190), poor-quality social services in the country faced significant challenges long before the outbreak of the Syria crisis, including the prevention of and responding to violence against women and domestic abuse (Sahin and Sahin, 2003; Ekal, 2011; Özcan, Günaydın, and Çitil, 2016), forced and underage marriage (United Nations Population Fund, 2014), and child labour (Öncü et al., 2013). In addition, the involvement of Turkish NGOs and state institutions in humanitarian relief work is also relatively new, gaining momentum after the start of the Syria crisis (Binder, 2014; Kutlu, 2015). The influx of refugees has exacerbated the already considerable protection challenges in Turkey, placing the newcomers at risk of abuse, violence, and coercion. For instance, the opportunities for Syrian women to access decent jobs are hampered, they are paid less than refugee men, and they are sometimes subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse (Kivilcim, 2016; Knappert, Kornau, and Figengül, 2018).

The conundrum regarding protection concerns, such as begging, child labour, child marriage, and gender-based violence, and the choices that refugees make to manage their household economies and daily lives, has been well documented (Letsch, 2014; MAZLUMDER Women Studies Group, 2014; Tahaoglu, 2014; Barın, 2015; Habertürk, 2015; Parker, 2015; UN Women, 2018). This dilemma, in turn, necessitates more targeted and specific interventions that secure protection for refugees in conjunction with a holistic approach to assisting their household economies.

Second, within this weak protection context, the protection activities of experienced humanitarian agencies, including UN organisations and INGOs, have been vital to implementing humanitarian standards. However, access by and registration of such organisations have been generally cumbersome, as keeping the international actors at bay is a longstanding policy of the central government (Memisoglu and Ilgit, 2017, pp. 323–324; Cetinoglu 2018). Many INGOs were denied renewal of their permission to operate and several Turkish and Syrian NGOs were shut down, especially in 2017, which incidentally coincided with heightened political turmoil in Turkey (Sanchez, 2017). The *Special Report* of the European Court of Auditors (2018, p. 37), which reviewed the overall intervention of the FRiT, documented some of these points, highlighting in particular that the ‘difficult and changing operating environment for (I)NGOs in Turkey led to the suspension, modification or cancellation of planned activities’ and ‘the revision of initial targets’, thus narrowing the space for action.

Third, the programme also rendered redundant many other existing initiatives that used basic needs programmes as an entry point to protection work. Although avoiding duplication is a positive feature, the launch of the ESSN resulted in the termination of several basic needs programmes of NGOs, which had a specific protection focus. The *Special Report* of the European Court of Auditors (2018, p. 30) also confirmed that the ‘EU projects implemented by INGOs, which had been working in Turkey until that date, experienced significant delays or reductions in the scope of their activities. . . . The [EU] Commission also faced difficulties in obtaining the Turkish authorities’ approval for the involvement of INGOs at funding stage’. This had a particular impact on protection activities: ‘For instance, the MoFSP [Ministry of Family and Social Policies; currently the MoFLSS] did not agree to authorise INGOs to carry out certain key protection activities, namely case management and household visits. The Commission had to cancel four projects with a total budget of €14 million even though they were considered relevant for funding to address the pressing need for protection of the refugee population’ (European Court of Auditors, 2018, p. 30).

ECHO continued to support specialised protection endeavours alongside the ESSN, yet other programmes have been cancelled or delayed during the programming process of the FRiT, while the ESSN was being contemplated as a flagship project at the same time. In this sense, the ESSN also served the Government of Turkey’s reluctance to address protection issues and involve international organisations and NGOs, as discussed above. The low leverage of EU institutions to negotiate the inclusion of protection standards and principles in programming is proven in the government’s refusal to grant access to programme data, as in the case of EU auditors and the WFP, despite their monitoring responsibilities (European Court of Auditors, 2018, pp. 13–14, 32, Annex 8). Consequently, the entry of the ESSN into the response framework in Turkey both coincided with increased pressures on the protection programmes of INGOs and indirectly contributed to their marginalisation in the overall response framework.

Fourth, the ESSN served to reproduce the protection and assistance divide by scaling up assistance while leaving protection fragmented and weak. On the one hand, the ESSN practitioners interviewed for this study carefully underlined that the scheme comprises assistance only and does not concern itself with protection issues. They presented it as a low-key intervention of modest scope, limited to addressing basic needs. On the other hand, the ESSN embraces an ambitious agenda with regard to ‘humanitarian safeguards’ (ECHO, 2016) and what cash distribution may deliver in the short and long run with respect to protection outcomes. The scale of the programme creates the semblance that all essential needs of the most vulnerable refugees are being covered, henceforth resolving the protection issues refugees face in managing their lives. The intervention environment the ESSN assumes is the consumer market where needs and rights are expected to be actualised, and the scheme construes many protection issues, such as begging, child labour, and child marriage, as ‘negative coping mechanisms’ on which people rely (European Commission, 2018, p. 6) as being solvable within this market space. The underlying expectation is that the ESSN will help people not to revert to such mechanisms. Given the contextual constraints of the overarching protection framework, the programme thus implicitly disregards serious protection challenges and conceives beneficiaries as agents who are free to choose products and services that are available in the market.

Fifth, the ESSN fails to incorporate protection measures. While its theory of change states that ‘gender dimensions’, ‘safety’, and ‘protection’ concerns are to be mainstreamed within the programme, these concerns figure as assumptions (WFP Turkey, 2016b, Annex 5, p. 4). The *Final Evaluation Report* also underlined that the scheme was not informed by any ‘specific gender or protection assessments’ and ‘[n]o programme documentation references gender-specific needs, nor does one show whether or how these needs were incorporated into the design of the ESSN’ (Maunder et al., 2018a, p. 17). Similarly ‘[g]ender did not significantly influence programming decisions and it was treated superficially in the ESSN proposal’ itself (Maunder et al., 2018b, p. vii). Although one of the key indicators of the ESSN is the household ‘coping strategy index’, it is limited to measuring the negative and harmful choices that heads of households make to sustain a living (Maunder et al., 2018a, Figure 4). Furthermore, the results framework of the FRiT has ‘no aggregated indicators measuring progress with regards to sexual and gender-based violence, school dropouts, or child protection due to disagreements with the Turkish Government’ (European Court of Auditors, 2018, p. 33), pointing to the absence of emphasis on protection issues and instruments that would help to mainstream responses to such matters at higher levels of EU programming.

The ESSN has become the main centralised humanitarian programme in Turkey, around which all other initiatives are expected to be organised. Field visits and interviews with relevant stakeholders underlined that the lack of emphasis on protection mainstreaming in the ESSN has also limited the opportunities that it could create for coordination. Referral mechanisms developed mostly in an ad hoc manner as problems arose during implementation, further limiting protection safeguards. The *Final*

Evaluation Report Annexes corroborates the findings of this study, underscoring that ‘[w]hile the ESSN was not a protection programme, it missed an opportunity to systematically identify and refer potential protection cases to a full range of service providers’ (Maunder et al., 2018b, p. vii). The document stresses that ‘opportunities were missed in the design’ to incorporate complementary protection services provided by humanitarian organisations (Maunder et al., 2018a, p. v). As a result of this deficiency in its design, the ESSN failed to identify and refer systematically protection cases to other services (Maunder et al., 2018a, p. vi).

The ESSN, therefore, also generated tensions among humanitarian NGOs in articulating their protection programmes. The NGO practitioners interviewed for this research flagged the targeting strategy as one of the key problems with the ESSN, hampering referrals to the programme, since refugees with protection needs were refused because they did not satisfy the eligibility criteria. The ESSN’s targeting strategy (explained in the previous section) also falls short in serving people, considering their rights and specific needs, as its vulnerability criteria are neither broken down by specific vulnerabilities (such as young boys and ‘unmarried’ girls) nor flexible and broad enough to cover all those with protection needs.

This section has examined some of the assumptions and expectations of the ESSN, arguing that these may not materialise in a weak protection context where humanitarian actors have limited leverage to negotiate the programme design and standards, and unless a cash transfer is complemented by comprehensive protection programmes. The analysis reveals the limitations regarding protection work and the application of humanitarian standards and norms in service provision, while interacting with the ESSN. Lastly, it also highlights the political and policy challenges in Turkey that hinder the prioritisation of protection issues and their mainstreaming in programme design.

Conclusion

This paper assesses the ESSN as one of the main products of the EU–Turkey agreement of 2016, incorporating its political baggage that served to curtail determination of refugee status and durable solutions, and undermine international burden-sharing with respect to the EU’s exclusionary asylum politics and Turkey’s lofty foreign policy ambitions. It documents how the international political environment that gave rise to the ESSN paved the way to compromises on and limitations to humanitarian programming, and the application of humanitarian principles and standards. More importantly, the originality of this paper lies in its treatment of the ESSN as an entry point for studying the influence of the EU–Turkey agreement of 2016 on the humanitarian response framework in Turkey.

The ESSN certainly offers valuable relief to some of the heavily-burdened Syrian refugee households in Turkey. First and foremost, it provides them with some regularity and predictability with regard to income. Almost all NGO actors interviewed

welcomed the ESSN for extending a degree of regular financial support to a large portion of refugees, albeit belatedly and in fairly low amounts, thus with limited ability to improve sector-specific outcomes for the households.

The pertinence and the added value of the ESSN, however, depends very much on the broader humanitarian response framework and the domestic socioeconomic and policy framework within which it operates. This paper finds that the scheme erroneously assumes a regulated labour market that delivers a living wage and a regulated housing market that offers decent shelter to the refugees, neither of which correspond to the social reality of refugees in Turkey. On the contrary, high rental rates and low-quality housing pose significant obstacles to the protection of refugees and to their ability to meet basic needs. The lack of decent work opportunities only deepens their economic and social vulnerability. In the absence of a robust intervention in the labour and housing markets, those refugees who benefit from the ESSN will have to continue to make tough decisions regarding whether to buy food or to pay their rent and utility bills. Cash programmes alone, including the ESSN, are unable to address these structural problems; they need to be complemented by broad policies pertaining to labour and housing market regulations. In this respect, the ESSN also differs from other basic needs programmes of international NGOs that have sector-specific components, such as water, sanitation, and hygiene activities and initiatives that aim to improve the conditions of shelter (household upgrades, for instance), and negotiated contracts with landlords to protect refugees. Replacing these programmes with a single instrument cash transfer scheme may not always be sufficient to ease the difficulties facing refugees in accessing basic needs.

Likewise, a weak protection system, which is not equipped to incorporate actions to prevent and respond to the consequences of violations such as gender-based violence and child labour, determines the contours of the humanitarian response in Turkey. This is compounded by the absence of robust and widespread specialised protection programming in a context in which the ESSN dominates the humanitarian response as the sole scaled-up reaction to a complex set of needs and rights claims. The centrality of this programme in Turkey risks reproducing the protection and assistance divide in humanitarian response and contributing to the marginalisation of protection programming in the country. Overall, the responsibility for protection is transferred to the refugees themselves, who bear the ultimate burden of steering through the dilemmas that the ESSN preserves. Hence, the programme risks obscuring the violations that people endure as well as the structured mechanisms of exploitation that people experience.

In line with insights in the literature (Harvey, 2007; Gentilini, 2014, 2016), this study stresses the importance of contextual analysis that incorporates the broader humanitarian response and domestic socioeconomic and policy context in examinations of the functioning of cash programmes in humanitarian settings. It supports the former emphasis in the literature on the limits of cash programmes as standalone projects to deliver the expected positive outcomes (Rawlings, 2005; Pega et al., 2015; Harvey and Pavanello, 2018).

This paper focuses on the stature of the ESSN within the overall response framework in Turkey, an overview of which highlights the constraints of protection programming in general and efforts to mainstream protection concerns into humanitarian assistance schemes in particular. In such a context, it is all the more important to ensure that the scope of the programme is inclusive enough, reflecting socioeconomic requirements and their connection with protection needs. In the case of Turkey, the use of broad demographic categories and the way in which registration with authorities functions as a precondition to select the target population fall short of effectively meeting the needs and rights of individual members of the selected households, while failing to reach out to others in need.

This paper concludes that designing multi-purpose cash programmes necessitates a careful contextual analysis of how those programmes would interact with different sectors, such as care, food security, shelter, the labour market, and protection services. It suggests that the way in which cash transfer programmes construe essential needs and the choices that refugees make to manage their lives in specific social settings are closely linked, and to elaborate on this connection requires an understanding of the policy and programming environment within which cash assistance is envisioned. Finally, the paper proposes that a more inclusive approach to eligibility and higher transfer amounts can contribute to addressing needs provided that cash assistance is combined with robust protection programming and implementation of sector-specific programmes and policies.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all of the anonymous peer reviewers for their suggestions and their former research assistant, Ayşe Meryem Gürpınar Akbulut, for her help in organising the fieldwork for this study. The research was co-funded by Boğaziçi University in Turkey (Research Fund Grant Number 12723) and the University of Manchester in the UK (Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute studentship).

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Endnotes

¹ The programme did not end at the end of 2019, however: the third phase of the ESSN started in April 2020, led by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in collaboration with the Turkish Red Crescent.

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