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A contextual policy analysis of the cash programme in a humanitarian setting:

The case of the Emergency Social Safety Net

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Abstract

With the launch of the European Union-funded Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) programme in 2016, the cash programme emerged as the central action of the humanitarian response for Syrian refugees in Turkey and an instrument of European migration control policies. This paper offers a contextual analysis of the ESSN by examining the modes of interaction between its major assumptions and the broader humanitarian response in the Turkish context. The article 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 the Turkish context with respect to the country's housing and labour markets and the weak protection framework. The article concludes that a more inclusive approach to eligibility and higher transfer amounts can contribute to addressing assistance needs provided that cash assistance is combined with robust protection programming and implementation of sector-specific programmes and policies.

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

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011, massive population displacement has taken place both inside and outside Syria, along with conflict-related mortality and morbidity and grave human rights and humanitarian law violations inside the country (Coutts, McKee and Stuckler, 2013; Doocy et al., 2015; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2016a). Neighbouring countries bear the brunt of the displacement, with Lebanon hosting 997,905 Syrians, corresponding to 16 per cent of its total population, and Jordan hosting 654,903, corresponding to 6 per cent of its population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017). Turkey currently hosts the largest refugee population in the world in terms of absolute numbers. As of January 2019, 3.6 million Syrians were under temporary protection (Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), 2019a). While around 7 per cent of Syrians stay in camp settings (temporary accommodation centres) built by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), the overwhelming majority live in non-camp settings (DGMM, 2019a). In addition, Turkey hosts around 368,000 international protection applicants, mostly Afghans, Iraqis and Iranians (The United Nations (UN) Refugee Agency, 2020) and in 2018 received over 114,000 applications for international protection (DGMM, 2019b).

Adopting an open-door policy, in the beginning, Turkey labelled Syrians as 'guests', a frame that places refugee welfare at the mercy of the host and governs refugee lives through uncertainty and confusion (Biehl, 2015; Gümüş and Eroğlu, 2015). Then in 2013, Turkey granted temporary protection status to the Syrian refugees (The Republic of Turkey, 2013), representing a clear departure from its previous exclusionary immigration regime. Despite the fact that the introduction of temporary protection status symbolises progress for Turkey's immigration regime, it also reflects the global trend towards reduced opportunities to obtain refugee status and the erosion of legal protections (Zetter, 1985; Bendel, 2005; Zetter, 2007; Gatrell, 2016; Landau and Achiume, 2017). The agreement between the European Union (EU) and Turkey in 2016 that intended to end the migratory flows from Turkey towards Europe (Members of the European Council and the Republic of Turkey, 2016) provided an international recognition for Turkey's decision to grant temporary protection to the Syrian refugees. Following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Turkey became a humanitarian destination with several humanitarian and governmental agencies actively involved in addressing a broad range of issues in hosting refugees. The EU-funded 'Emergency Social Safety Net' (ESSN) project, a basic needs cash transfer programme for refugees, was launched in 2016 and has become the flagship programme.

In line with calls (Harvey, 2007; Gentilini, 2014, 2016) for context-specific analysis of cash programmes, this article provides a critical analysis of the ESSN in the Syria response within Turkey. In doing so, the article investigates the ESSN by placing it within its broader policy environment and the humanitarian practice. This study subscribes to the critical policy studies, which 'focus analysis

on relations between discursive and material elements of social life' (Fairclough, 2013). This analysis examines the interaction between the ESSN and the overall humanitarian response that shapes the functioning of the ESSN as a basic needs cash programme. In this regard, the study demarcates from the outcome and impact evaluation literature on cash programmes in humanitarian settings which offers valuable insights to the effectiveness of these programmes.

This article is primarily based on a comprehensive review of 15 policy documents published by the organisations directly involved in or monitoring the ESSN programme and the secondary literature on the socioeconomic and policy context in Turkey. We complemented our documentary analysis with the mid-term evaluation report of the ESSN (Mauder et al., 2018a) and its annexes (Mauder et al., 2018b) and in-depth interviews we conducted with 22 people—four were international staff—working with different stakeholders in Istanbul and Gaziantep in early 2017. Informants included nine staff working in Turkish humanitarian organisations, seven staff working in international humanitarian organisations and five UN staff. Four informants were directly involved in the ESSN programme. Thematic content analysis is applied to the documents and interviews to explore emergent issues surrounding the functioning of the ESSN in this context. To maintain the anonymity of interviewees, we did not cite interviews directly and instead used interview data as complementary to our documentary analysis.

The first part of this article offers an overview of the scholarly debates on the rise of cash-based programming in the humanitarian sector. The second part presents the major premises of the ESSN programme. The third part examines challenges to the ESSN in its functioning within the broader humanitarian response in the Turkish socioeconomic and policy context. That section discusses two major challenges that stem from the programme design and its interaction with the policy context: the issues surrounding the allocation of assistance, and the specific protection issues. This final part offers a contextual analysis of the ESSN programme in the Turkish case.

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

In this article, we use the term cash programmes in a generic manner to refer to the unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) and conditional cash transfers (CCTs) including the cash-for-work and cash-for-assets schemes. Cash programmes historically have been a component of domestic social assistance systems in both middle- and high-income countries (Gough, 2001); their systematic application in humanitarian settings, however, is relatively recent. Although cash-based programming generally contributes to a social protection scheme and adopts a poverty reduction perspective (Farrington and Slater, 2006; Davies, 2009) in international development work, it has also been implemented in disaster settings (Doocy et al., 2006) and used to address chronic or recurrent food insecurity in

contexts with a history of famine (Kebede, 2006) as it entered the humanitarian response in the mid-2000s. Over the last decade, cash programmes have gradually expanded to conflict-affected settings (Slim et al., 2018) and implemented as short-term interventions both 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 systems (Vincent and Cull, 2011), and cash transfers were applied across sectors for expenditures on food, health, shelter, water-sanitation and hygiene (O'Reilly et al., 2013; Global WASH Cluster Markets Technical Working Group, 2016). Designed primarily to address basic needs in emergencies, multi-purpose cash programmes were promoted as an alternative to in-kind relief assistance, 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. As an example of positive assessments of cash-based interventions in humanitarian settings, Mattinen and Ogden (2006) concluded that cash assistance is a promising alternative to in-kind assistance as it helps empower the beneficiaries and that it can be used effectively in insecure contexts such as Somalia provided that it is introduced in consultation with the populations, responds to needs and is context-specific. In addition, Davies and Davey (2008) highlighted the positive impact of cash transfers on local economies, especially on farmers and small businesses. Cash transfers have also been associated with regularity and predictability for its 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) in which cash assistance is discussed 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 (ODI), 2015; Bailey and Harvey, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017).

Other scholars indicated that '[f]indings are mixed' regarding 'the impact of cash transfers on social relations within and between households' (MacAuslan and Reimenschneider, 2011, p. 61). They (2011, pp. 60-61) concluded that such impact 'is large and often negative' because cash assistance necessarily includes other governance mechanisms such as targeting and registration which affect the power dynamics and social relations, creating resentment, exclusion, and increased conflict. Based on a review of the United Kingdom (UK) Department for International Development (DFID) funded projects, Davies (2009) noted mixed results with regard to the impact of cash transfers on food security, economic growth and poverty reduction to highlight the importance of contextual

differences and the robustness of specific programme designs. 'Available comparative evidence' on the benefits and shortfalls of in-kind and cash transfers also varies in different sectors (Gentilini, 2016, p. xi). Where evidence is available, as in food security, the effectiveness of these in-kind and cash assistance efforts 'is similar on average' (Gentilini, 2016, p. xi). In 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, they concluded that 'the overall quality of the evidence to be very low for all primary outcomes' and added that follow-up of the suggested results was poor (Pega et al., 2015, p.34).

Research findings highlight 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 safely suggest that UCTs are more effective as stand-alone 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 on CCTs in Latin American countries, Rawlings (2005, p. 133) also suggested that conditional schemes effectively improve protection outcomes only if they function as a demand-side complement to services in contexts where there is 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 with sector-specific activities aligned with humanitarian principles and standards. Identifying inadequate transfer value as one of the main limitations for improved sectoral outcomes, the review (Harvey and Pavanello, 2018) also underlined that 'protection and sector-specific programming remains essential' as cash assistance alone 'cannot tackle systemic issues' such as access to services and labour market, quality and standards of services, nor remedy protection concerns and replace such activities.

As such cash-based programming also sits 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 discussions during the 1990s. One effort in the last decade that transcended the protection and assistance divide is the emphasis 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 (The Sphere Project, 2011, 2012). The standards that the Sphere Project 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 actions further bridged protection and assistance. The same decade also saw the development of protection programmes, which use case management as a key tool, designed to address specific issues such as gender-based violence, mental health and psychosocial support, community-based safety, child protection and civilian protection programmes.

There is, however, limited discussion in the literature on how to design cash programmes that captures the protection and assistance nexus albeit the issue has been explored in the development literature (e.g. 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, co-habit, 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.

A consensus has nonetheless been reached among policymakers, donors and most humanitarian agencies within the last 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 (ODI, 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 (DRC), 2017a). Overall, cash-based programming has been promoted as a scheme that captures the humanitarian-development nexus (ODI, 2015; Gentilini, 2016), as it caters to the narrative of resilience building and self-reliance. When implemented 'in appropriate contexts', the European Council noted, assistance in cash is 'not only effective and efficient, but is a way to meeting needs responsibly, while helping to promote recovery and resilience' (General Secretariat of the Council, 2015, p. 4).

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 increasing. Cash-based programming emerged as the preferred model for most donor institutions as the DFID (2013), 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 Committee of the Red Cross and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent, 2007; Mercy Corps, 2015; HCT Cash Working Group Philippines, 2016; Mercy Corps, 2018). 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' (hereafter Draft Council Conclusions), which was submitted for the approval of the Council of the European Union, encouraging the EU and its member states to prioritise cash assistance (General Secretariat of the Council, 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 the humanitarian system is facing.

Subsequently, cash transfer was one of the key themes during the three-year preparatory phase for the first World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) held in Istanbul in May 2016 (WHS Secretariat, 2015) as well as during and in the aftermath of the WHS (Gordon, 2015; Ki Moon, 2016; OCHA, 2016b; Ramacciato, 2017). Several high-level panels were organised spotlighting cash assistance as a new and pragmatic way of dealing with increasing 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 their public. The ESSN was listed as a 'pilot' scheme contributing to the Grand Bargain (World Food Programme (WFP) Turkey, 2017) hence contributing to the reform and transformation agenda of humanitarianism.

The ESSN

Cash-based programming has gained momentum over the last decade with the influx of Syrian refugees into neighbouring countries, notably in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and with increasing 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). Additionally, 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 (I/NGO) 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 (2019), targeting both Syrians under temporary protection and others under international protection, replaced the overwhelming majority of these programmes.

A multi-purpose cash benefit programme, the ESSN came out as a product of the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement, commonly referred to as the 'refugee deal'. The EU-Turkey agreement emerged as a response to the mass movement of refugees in perilous journeys towards Europe (The Members of the European Council and the Republic of Turkey, 2016) that had gained pace in the summer of 2015 (Öner and Genç, 2015). With this agreement, the EU officially succeeded in preventing Syrian refugees from leaving Turkey, keeping them away from European borders, and it gave Turkey international prestige and secured financial support from the EU to support the Syrian refugees inside Turkey. Analysts and practitioners highlighted the negative effects of the mechanisms for refugee containment and poor burden-sharing based on outsourcing of protection responsibilities put in motion with the EU-Turkey deal. Questioning the moral premises and the legality of the agreement, the critiques highlighted that the deal served to 'institutionalise' the reduced opportunities to obtain refugee status and the erosion of legal protections, and finally turning refugees into a political bargaining chip in the region (Neuman, 2016; Ulusoy and Battjes, 2017; DRC, 2017b; Human Rights Watch, 2018). The ESSN, a humanitarian programme that this article examines, is a product of this agreement and political process.

The EU allocated €3 billion to the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRiT) with the objective of financing humanitarian assistance, education, health care, infrastructure and socio-economic support projects (European Commission (EC), 2017). Among these, the EU declared the ESSN 'the biggest humanitarian project it has ever funded' (EC, 2016). The implementation started in December 2016 and was expected to continue until the end of 2019, eventually reaching 1.4 million refugees. Needs assessment report for the FRiT, however, was made public in 2018 (EC, 2018), almost two years after the launch of the ESSN. The ESSN, funded by ECHO, originally received €348 million and later obtained an amount that reached €1.5 billion as of February 2020 (EC, 2020).

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

As with other cash programmes, the ESSN is presented as a programme that respects the choices beneficiaries make. The policy preference for addressing basic needs with a cash programme is presented as ‘an acknowledgment that, despite their hardships, refugees should have the right to choose how to manage their lives’ (ESSN, 2019). 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 (ECHO, 2016, pp. 6-7) emphasises 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’. In global and domestic policy circles, the ESSN has been more forcefully celebrated as a response which finally brings dignity to refugees, who now can spend the money in line with their own choices (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 for ESSN benefits, refugees must have registered for temporary or international protection in Turkey and provided an official residence address after which they also have 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 per family member (ESSN, 2019). Only one person in a household can apply, and if the household is found eligible, that same person receives the total amount on behalf of the others in the household. Cash benefits in the local currency are distributed monthly to Syrian refugees through a debit card provided by a state-owned Turkish bank.

Multiple agencies are involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of the ESSN programme. These agencies included the EU, the Turkish government, the WFP, the Turkish Red Crescent (TRC) and related public authorities of Turkey, including but not limited to the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services (MoFLSS) and the AFAD. The EU is both the financial provider and co-designer of the programme. Drawing on its expertise in implementing large-scale cash programmes, the WFP is included in the ESSN as a reliable expert organisation and a humanitarian partner of the EU with a mandate to monitor and evaluate the programme. The TRC, the largest humanitarian organisation in Turkey that enjoys a semi-public status is the main implementing agency that collaborates with relevant Turkish state institutions.

The ESSN relies largely on the public sector capacity for social assistance programmes. The establishment of public sector capacity in the provision of social assistance in Turkey dates back to the social assistance legislation ratified in the late 1980s (The Republic of Turkey, 1986), which established a Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation (SASF) in each district. Their legal status is

that of a government-organised non-governmental organisation that was 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, in cities where the number of Syrians is high, SASFs are complemented with the TRC-established 18 ESSN application centres. In our field visits, we learned that home visits were postponed in many places to a later stage in order to reach the intended number of beneficiaries in a short period 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 programme provides an interesting case 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 Turkish socioeconomic and policy context. While the first section situates the ESSN within largely unregulated labour and housing markets, the second section places the ESSN within a weak protection context in Turkey.

The ESSN within unregulated labour and housing markets

The contextual analysis that we apply to the ESSN in the Turkish context shows that there are five areas where the assumptions of the programme do not match the reality of the Turkish socioeconomic and policy context, especially in reference to prevalent informality in labour and housing markets (Buğra, 1998; Buğra and Keyder, 2006). These areas are two-staged registration requirements, the programme's reliance on targeting, the determination of benefit level and the programme's interaction with the housing market.

First, in order to apply to the ESSN, refugees must have first completed their registration with the DGMM. Refugees are expected to register in the province where first they arrived. Having established the DGMM after the outbreak of the Syria crisis, Turkish authorities succeeded in creating a functioning registration system in a short period of time. But over time, the changes in the registration system that required refugees to renew their registration created a backlog in the system. Due to the high workload of migration authorities, newcomers to Turkey face long waiting times to get registered. In fact, the WFP-led Comprehensive Vulnerability Monitoring Exercise provided evidence that 43 per cent of non-applicants to the ESSN stated 'not having registered' as their main reason for not applying (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 refugees' reality. Refugees migrate to find work or to unite with family. Those who migrate from their province of registration face difficulties in transferring their registration. In fact, the WFP found that 8 per cent of non-applicants to the ESSN reported that they were registered in a different province as their main reason for not applying (WFP Turkey, 2018, p. 8).

In the second step of the process, 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 in the housing market (Buğra, 1998) restricted its effectiveness to register all available housing units. Due to their disadvantaged position in Turkey's largely unregulated housing market, providing a valid address for refugees is anything but a straightforward process. Especially in metropolitan areas, some refugees reside in places that are not listed as residential areas in the address registration system—ruins, barns, cellars, annexes, and so on. 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. While a 5% quota was introduced in 2017 to allow the programme to reach out to those excluded, this quota was used for the registered refugees (European Commission, 2018). These preconditions lead to a considerable risk of the 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).

Third, the ESSN aims to target 'the most vulnerable of refugee families' (ESSN, 2019). In other words, the ESSN was not designed in a universalistic manner that would cover all people under temporary or international protection. Instead, the ESSN relies on the following six demographic vulnerability indicators in setting eligibility for the programme: women living alone, single-parent households, elderly individuals over age 60 without any younger family member 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 equals to or higher than 1.5) (Mauder et al., 2018b, p. 90).

Two interrelated questionable assumptions underlie using these needs categories as proxies for eligibility for cash benefits. First, 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 facing a higher burden of care, a one-to-one correspondence

cannot be assumed. There may be households with a low care burden that nevertheless face obstacles to satisfying their basic needs such as those who live in dire unregistered shelters.

Second, households consisting only of single men of working age clearly constitute a group that falls outside the ESSN scope. The exclusion of this group is based on an assumption of a regulated labour market that delivers decent work opportunities and a living wage. However, the ESSN arrived in a context where 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). Therefore, having a sufficient number of working-age adults in a household does not necessarily imply that these adults can find [decent] work that pays a living wage. In fact, formal employment opportunities for refugees are extremely limited in the Turkish case. As of 2018, roughly 35 thousand Syrian refugees—out of roughly 1 million working-age refugee men—were granted work permits (MoFLSS, 2019). Research on the Turkish labour market indicated that many more Syrian refugees have been employed in informal jobs in the labour-intensive sectors (Tumen, 2016). In these jobs, refugees are paid significantly less than the already low-paid Turkish citizens in the informal sector (Baban et al., 2017). The ESSN evaluation also showed that the majority of refugees participating in focus group discussions reported that they worked long hours in precarious jobs while receiving wages less than the minimum wage (Mauder et al., 2018b, p. 103).

As the evaluation report of the ESSN found, the Syrian refugee population in Turkey constitutes ‘a largely homogenous, group of poor refugees’ (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. vii) 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 out of the programme (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. vi). The mid-term evaluation 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).

Fourth, while the programme is a basic needs programme, the ESSN does not clearly define basic needs, which leaves the question of setting monthly benefit levels in limbo. The ESSN’s contribution to refugee household economy is a monthly benefit of 120 Turkish Liras (TL) per person for eligible households. 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 180 TL 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 (ECA), 2018, pp. 35-6). Due to the recent devaluation of the Turkish Lira, 120 TL came down from around 1.3 US dollar per person per day at the initial stages

of the programme to less than a dollar in 2018, and as of March 2020, it corresponded to 0.66 US dollars per day per person, which was well below the World Bank indicator of 1.90 US dollars per person for extreme poverty.

Fifth, the unregulated housing market in Turkey, which the ESSN does not clearly address, both increases the need for cash for refugee households and undermines the effectiveness of the cash they receive. The analysis of the focus group discussions in the mid-term evaluation demonstrated that the primary concern of refugees is that they pay high amounts in rent for inadequate houses (Maunder et al., 2018b, p. 100). In addition, one-third of the focus group participants reported that they spent the cash benefit directly on rent (Maunder et al., 2018a, p. 29). Stakeholder interviews in the same report highlighted that some landlords increased the rent arbitrarily once they noticed that the tenant household was receiving the ESSN benefit (Maunder et al., 2018a, p. 31).

Taking the five points of mismatch between the assumptions in 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 benefit level in the ESSN ends up reproducing broad categories of deservingness which are not specifically geared on needs and rights for protection. The mid-term evaluation of the ESSN also supports our conclusion by noting that 'the underlying analysis of refugee needs was limited' (Maunder et al., 2018a, p. vii).

The ESSN within a weak protection context

This section further contextualises the ESSN, identifying five areas where the assumptions of the programme do not match the realities of the protection framework in Turkey. These are the weak protection policy and institutional context, the curtailed latitude for international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and their protection programmes in Turkey, the ESSN's impact on protection programmes of I/NGOs, its reproduction of the protection and assistance divide and its failure in incorporating protection measures.

First, Turkey has historically been a weak protection context in terms of establishing practices and institutions in social work and humanitarian relief work. Operating in a system 'which does not yet have its own social work code of ethics' (Ornellas et al., 2019), poor social services in Turkey have faced significant challenges, including the prevention of and response to violence against women and domestic violence (Sahin and Sahin, 2003; Ekal, 2011; Özcan et al., 2016), forced and underage marriages (UN Population Fund, 2014) and child labour (Öncü et al., 2013) long before the outbreak of the Syria crisis. In addition, the experience of the Turkish NGOs and the Turkish state institutions in humanitarian relief work is also relatively new and gained momentum after the Syria crisis

(Binder, 2014; Kutlu, 2015). The influx of refugees has exacerbated Turkey's already considerable protection challenges, putting the newcomers at risk of abuse, violence and coercion. For example, opportunities for Syrian women to access to decent jobs are further hampered, they are paid less than refugee men and are subject to sexual exploitation and abuse (Kivilcim, 2016; Knappert, Kornau and Figengül, 2018). The conundrum between protection concerns (such as child marriage, child labour, gender-based violence, and begging) and the choices refugees make to manage their household economies and daily lives, has been documented (Letsch, 2014; MAZLUMDER, 2014; Tahaoğlu, 2014; Barın, 2015; Habertürk, 2015; Parker, 2015; UN Women, 2018). This conundrum, in turn, necessitates more targeted and specific interventions that secure protection for refugees in conjunction with a holistic approach in assisting their household economies.

Second, in this weak protection context, the protection activities of experienced humanitarian agencies including UN organisations and INGOs have been vital for implementing humanitarian standards. However, access and registration for such organisations have been generally cumbersome as keeping the international actors at bay is a longstanding policy (Memisoglu and Ilgit, 2017, pp. 323-24; Cetinoglu 2018). Many INGOs were denied renewal on their permission to operate and several Turkish and Syrian NGOs were shut down during this period, which incidentally coincided with heightened political turmoil in Turkey (Sanchez, 2017). The ECA's special report (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 down the space of action.

In addition to these two contextual limitations within which the ESSN operates, third, the programme rendered redundant many other existing programmes that used basic needs programmes as an entry-point to protection work. Although avoiding duplication is a positive point, the launch of the ESSN led to the termination of several NGO basic needs programmes, which had a specific protection focus. The audit report (ECA, 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' with particular impact on protection activities: 'For instance, the MoFSP [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' (ECA, 2018, p. 30). Although ECHO continued to support specialised

protection activities alongside the ESSN, other programmes have been cancelled or delayed during the programming process of the FRIT while the ESSN being contemplated as a flagship project at the same time. In this sense, the ESSN also served the Turkish government's reluctance to address protection issues and involve international organisations as discussed above. The low leverage of EU institutions to negotiate protection standards and principles into programming is proven in the government's refusal to access to programme data as in the case of EU auditors as well as of WFP despite its monitoring responsibility (ECA, 2018 pp. 13-14, 32, Annex 8). Therefore, the entry of the ESSN into the response framework in Turkey both coincided with increased pressures on protection programmes of INGOs and indirectly contributed to their marginalization in the overall response framework.

Fourth, the ESSN served the reproduction of the protection and assistance divide by scaling up assistance while leaving protection fragmented and weak. On the one hand, ESSN practitioners we interviewed carefully underlined that the programme consists of assistance only and does not concern itself with protection issues. They presented it as a low-key intervention with a 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 ESSN creates the semblance that all essential needs of the most vulnerable refugees are being covered henceforth resolving the protection issues refugees face to manage their lives. The intervention environment that the ESSN assumes is the consumer market where both needs and rights actualise and it construes many protection issues such as child marriage, begging, and child labour as 'negative coping mechanisms' that people rely on (EC, 2018, p. 6) as solvable within this market space. The underlying expectation is that the programme will help people from reverting 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 the ESSN theory of change mentions 'gender dimensions', 'safety' and 'protection' concerns are to be mainstreamed in the programme, these concerns figure as assumptions (WFP Turkey, 2016b, Annex 5, p. 4). The mid-term evaluation report also highlighted that the programme 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' (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. 17). Similarly '[g]ender did not significantly influence programming decisions and it was treated superficially in the ESSN proposal' itself (Mauder et al., 2018b, p. vii). Although one of the

key indicators of ESSN is the household 'Coping Strategy Index', it is limited at measuring the use of negative and harmful choices heads of households employ to sustain a living (Mauder et al., 2018a, fig. 4). Additionally, 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' (ECA, 2018, p. 33) pointing at the absence of emphasis on protection issues and mechanisms that would help mainstream responses to such concerns at higher levels of EU programming.

Despite its being framed as a low-key intervention, the ESSN has become the main centralised humanitarian programme in Turkey, around which all other programmes 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 the programme could create for coordination. Referral mechanisms developed mostly in an ad hoc manner as problems arose during implementation thus further limiting protection safeguards. The mid-term evaluation report corroborates our findings underlining 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' (Mauder et al., 2018b, p. vii). The report noted that 'opportunities were missed in the design' to incorporate complementary protection services provided by humanitarian organisations (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. v). As a result of this deficiency in its design, the ESSN failed to systematically identify and refer protection cases to other services (Mauder et al., 2018a, p. vi).

Thus, ESSN also created tensions for humanitarian I/NGOs in articulating their protection programmes with the ESSN. I/NGO practitioners we interviewed highlighted the targeting strategy as one of the key problems with ESSN hampering referrals to the programme as refugees with protection needs were refused because they did not match the eligibility criteria. ESSN's targeting strategy—explained in the previous section—also falls short in serving people considering their rights and specific needs, as the vulnerability criteria it adopts are neither broken down by specific vulnerabilities (such as young boys, unmarried girls) nor flexible and broad enough to cover all those with protection needs.

This section examined some of the assumptions and expectations of ESSN arguing that these may not materialise in a weak protection context where humanitarian actors have limited leverage to negotiate programme design and standards, and unless cash transfer is complemented with comprehensive protection programmes. The analysis here reveals the limits with regard to protection work and the application of humanitarian standards and norms in service provision in

their interaction with the ESSN. It also highlights political and policy challenges in the Turkish context hampering the prioritisation of protection issues and their mainstreaming within programme design.

Conclusion

This article examined the ESSN as one of the main products of the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement. In this regard, the ESSN carries the political baggage of this agreement that served to curtail refugee status determination and durable solutions, and undermine international burden-sharing in the context of EU's exclusionary asylum politics and Turkey's lofty foreign policy ambitions. The article documented how the international political context that gave birth to the ESSN came alongside with compromises and limitations on humanitarian programming, and the application of humanitarian principles and standards. More importantly, the originality of this article lies in its treatment of the ESSN as an entry-point for studying this agreement's influence on the humanitarian response framework within Turkey rather than assuming that it was a stillborn programme.

The ESSN certainly brings valuable relief for some of the heavily burdened Syrian refugee households in Turkey. First and foremost, it provides some regularity and predictability of income for refugee households. Almost all I/NGO actors we interviewed welcomed the ESSN for bringing a degree of regular financial support to a large portion of refugees, albeit belated and in fairly low amounts thus with limited ability to improve sectorial outcomes for the households.

The pertinence and the added value of the ESSN, however, depends highly on the broader humanitarian response framework and domestic socioeconomic and policy framework within which it operates. This article finds that the ESSN 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 the Turkish context. On the contrary, high rental rates and low-quality housing pose significant obstacles to the protection of refugees and to their ability to satisfy 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 face tough decisions of whether to buy food or pay their rent and utilities. Cash programmes alone including but not limited to the ESSN are unable to address these structural problems; they need to be complemented by broad policies of labour and housing market regulations. In this regard, the ESSN also differs from other basic needs programmes of I/NGOs that have sector-specific components such as water, sanitation and hygiene activities and activities that aim to improve the conditions of shelter such as household upgrades, and negotiated contracts with the landlords to protect refugees. Replacing

these programmes with a single instrument cash programme may not always be sufficient to ease refugees' access to basic needs.

Likewise, a weak protection system, which is not equipped to incorporate actions to prevent and respond to the consequences of violations, determines the contours of the humanitarian response in Turkey. This is compounded with the absence of robust and widespread specialised protection programming in the context which the ESSN dominates the humanitarian response as the sole scaled-up response 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 Turkey. Overall, the responsibility for protection is transferred to the refugees themselves who bear the ultimate burden of steering through dilemmas which the ESSN preserves. Thus, the ESSN risks obscuring the violations that people endure as well as the structured mechanisms of exploitation that people experience.

Following the previous insights in the literature (Harvey, 2007; Gentilini, 2014, 2016), this study highlights the importance of contextual analysis that incorporates the broader humanitarian response and domestic socioeconomic and policy context in examining the functioning of cash programmes in humanitarian settings. The insights, which this article offers, support the former emphasis in the literature on the limits of cash programmes as stand-alone projects in delivering the expected positive outcomes (Rawlings, 2005; Pega et al., 2015; Harvey and Pavanello, 2018).

This article focused on the stature of the ESSN within the overall response framework in Turkey, an overview of which highlighted the limits 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, reflects socio-economic needs and their connection with protection needs. Whereas in this case, the use of broad demographic categories and the way registration with authorities functions as a precondition to select the target population fall short to effectively address the needs and rights of individual members of the selected households while missing to reach out to others in need.

This article concludes that designing multi-purpose cash programmes requires a careful contextual analysis of how those programmes would interact with different sectors such as shelter, labour market, food security, care, and protection services. This article suggests that the way in which cash transfer programmes construe essential needs and the choices refugees make to manage their lives in specific social settings are closely linked, and to elaborate on this link necessitates an understanding of the policy and programming environment within which cash assistance is

envisioned. Finally, the article suggests that a more inclusive approach to eligibility and higher transfer amounts can contribute to addressing assistance needs provided that cash assistance is combined with robust protection programming and implementation of sector-specific programmes and policies.

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