

The case of Syrian refugees in Türkiye: Successes, challenges, and lessons learned

Background paper to the *World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies*

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Abstract

Tackling with the socioeconomic consequences of forced displacement and addressing the challenges of integrating refugee populations have been among the most pressing global policy issues recently. Building on the lessons learned from past crises to develop more effective mitigation and prevention policies is of utmost importance for the welfare of all individuals around the world. This paper presents a broad overview of the socioeconomic integration of some 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Türkiye, with a particular focus on the existing policies, key takeaways, and challenges ahead. The discussion is organized around five topics. First, the paper briefly discusses the background and complex political nature of the Syrian civil conflict. Second, it provides a snapshot of the Syrian population in Türkiye by displaying their numbers, movement patterns, regional composition, and characteristics. Third, it discusses the integration policy framework implemented by the Turkish government, with a particular focus on labor market, education, health, and social protection policies. Fourth, it reviews the academic literature studying the impact of refugee influx on various key outcomes of both nationals and refugees. Finally, it discusses the main challenges faced and lessons learned during the refugee crisis, and briefly discusses the implications of the devastating February 2023 Kahramanmaraş-Hatay earthquakes for the refugee integration issues.

Keywords: Forced displacement, Syrian refugees, socioeconomic integration, Türkiye

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Introduction

The Syrian civil war, which was sparked in early 2011, can be described as a large-scale civilian movement caused by wide discontent with the Syrian government. It emerged as part of the Arab Spring protests that fundamentally affected the political landscape in the entire Middle East and North Africa region. The initial peaceful protests rapidly evolved into armed conflict, which was eventually suppressed violently by the Syrian armed forces. The sociopolitical background of the protests was quite complex and also partly took its roots from a large set of longstanding historical and religious debates. Direct involvement of a number of foreign countries—such as the United States, Russia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Türkiye—into the conflict further complicated the situation and fed the deadlock.

The second half of 2011—the “early insurgency phase” of the Syrian conflict—witnessed violent clashes between the Syrian army and oppositional forces. Those clashes resulted in massive destruction in physical infrastructure and generated a huge degradation in institutions. Millions of Syrian people have been forced to leave their homes. They initially moved toward safer regions within Syria. However, after mid-2011, the rapid geographical expansion of violence and conflict triggered an unprecedented movement of Syrian “refugees” into nearby countries—mainly Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and the Arab Republic of Egypt.¹ The Syrian refugee influx can be described as an unexpected, sudden, and massive population shock from the viewpoint of the refugee-hosting countries.

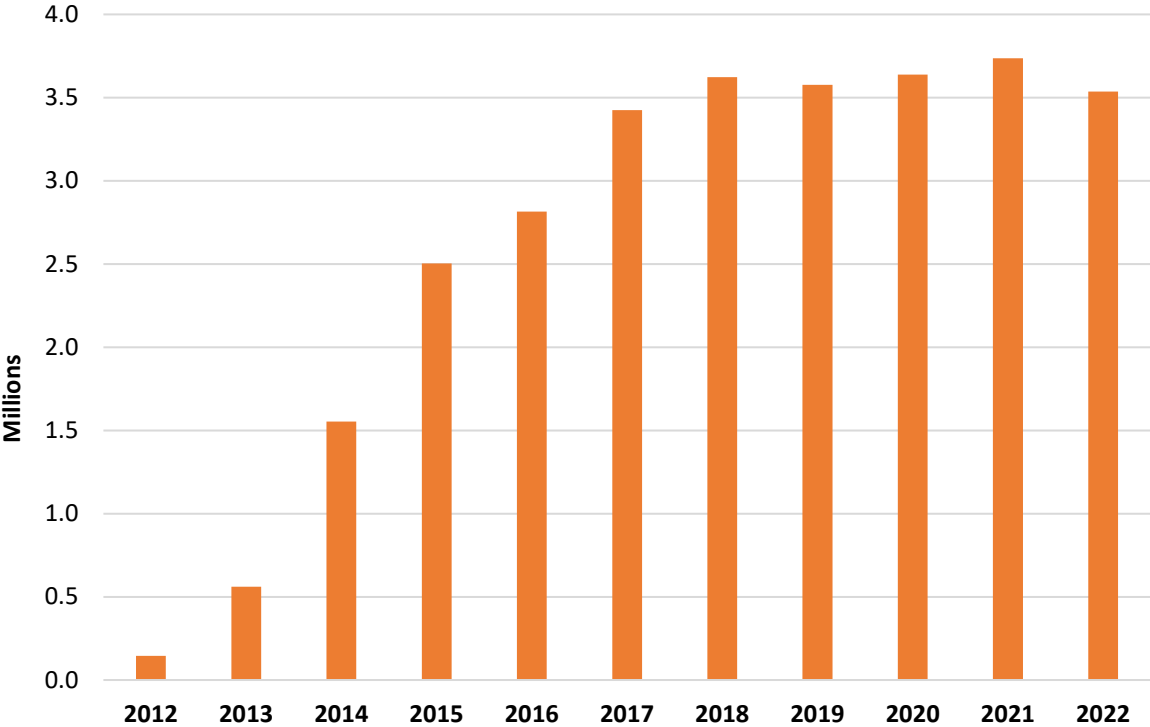
The reasons for Türkiye’s involvement into the Syrian conflict can be evaluated along six main dimensions: (1) the humanitarian aspect of the crisis; (2) strong cultural and historical ties between Türkiye and northern Syrian regions; (3) national security concerns due to heightened risks of terrorist activities around the Syrian border; (4) the high volume of the trade in goods and services between southern Turkish provinces and northern Syrian governorates; (5) geopolitical issues (such as oil supply, tensions in the eastern Mediterranean territory, and so on); and (6) the key role that Türkiye plays as a transition country on the route of refugees from Syria to the Western countries. These factors help explain the motivation for Türkiye’s presence in the region and highlight the critical role that Türkiye plays in the management of refugee movements.

This chapter presents an overview of socioeconomic integration of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Understanding the case of Syrian refugees in Türkiye—the largest host country for Syrian refugees—is very important because tackling with the socioeconomic consequences of forced displacement and addressing integration challenges have been among the most pressing global policy issues recently. The second section provides a broad background discussion of Syrian refugee inflows into Türkiye in terms of trends, composition, characteristics, and so on. The third section discusses the main framework for integration policies implemented by the Turkish government, with a particular focus on labor market, education, health, and social protection policies. The fourth section briefly reviews the existing academic literature evaluating the impact of refugee influx on various key outcomes of both nationals and refugees. The fifth section discusses the main challenges faced and lessons learned by Türkiye during the refugee crisis, and briefly discusses the policy response to the February 2023 Kahramanmaraş-Hatay earthquakes. The final section concludes.

Background

There were approximately 3.5 million registered Syrian refugees in Türkiye as of the end of 2022, according to data from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The total number has been fluctuating at about this level since 2017 (figure 1).

Figure 1. Ten-year trend in the number of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, 2012–22



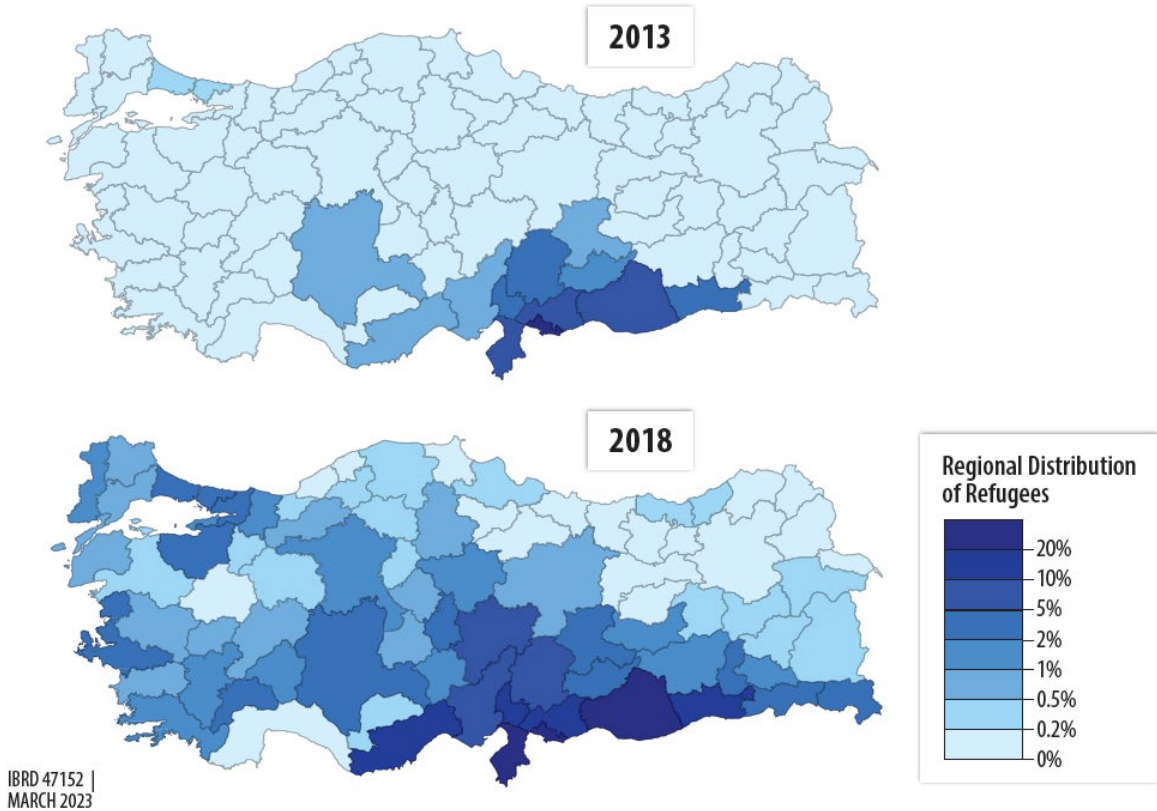
Source: United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113>.

The inflow started in mid-2011 and it continued at a rather moderate pace until the second half of 2014. The total number of Syrian refugees in the country was less than 1 million by the end of the third quarter of 2014. Intensity of armed conflict and violence increased substantially toward the end of 2014 with Russia’s active involvement in the Syrian conflict. Acceleration of violence and conflict in 2014 was a game changer; it became clear that the crisis would not end soon.

During the initial stages of the crisis, Syrian refugees mostly resided in large Temporary Accommodation Centers constructed by the Turkish government nearby the main border-crossings along the Turkish-Syrian border. In other words, refugee presence was limited to areas very close to the border. Integration of Syrian refugees was not considered to be a significant challenge because all major stakeholders were thinking that the crisis would be temporary and Syrian people would return to Syria soon following the resolution of conflict. Accordingly, no major integration policy was implemented. As the armed conflict and violence in Syria accelerated, and triggered a massive influx of refugees, the Turkish government had to change its accommodation policy to an “out-of-camp” approach that could also be interpreted as a switch to a self-reliance model. After that point, refugees started to behave like economic migrants and got mobilized within Türkiye—that is, they started to relocate based on economic incentives and location preferences—which generated a massive internal movement of Syrian people from the border regions to the other regions (mostly western regions and metropolitan areas). Map 1 compares the regional distribution of Syrian refugees across Türkiye in 2013 and 2018.

Map 1. Change in regional distribution of refugees in Türkiye, 2013–18

Ratio of refugees to nationals by province



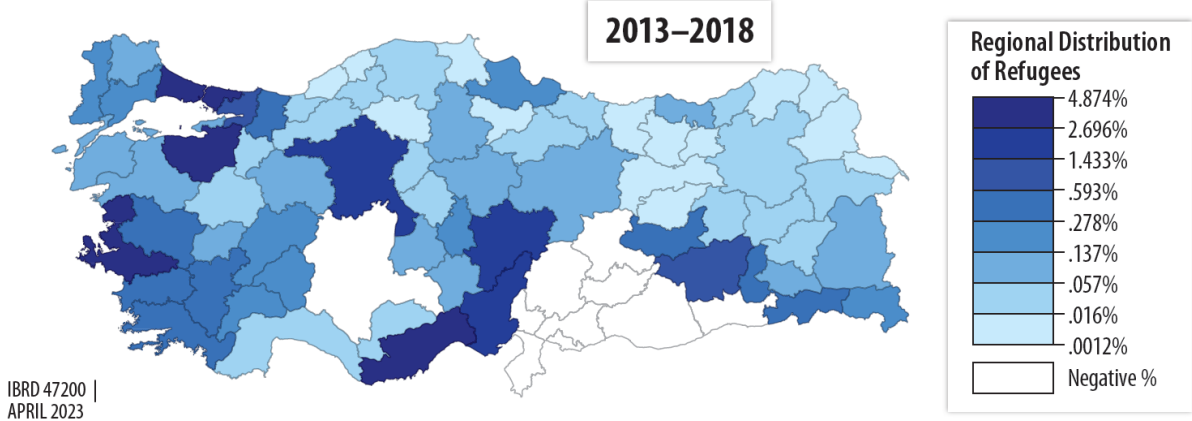
Source: Presidency of Migration Management, Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Türkiye.
Note: In panel a, the light blue indicates an absence of refugees. In both panels, the darker the color, the higher the ratio.

Two main patterns are evident in map 1. First, the refugee-to-population ratios are much higher in provinces closer to the Syrian border. Second, refugees have spread across the country and moved toward the western regions over time. Although these patterns are useful to understand the distribution of refugees relative to the population of Turkish nationals and how this relative distribution changed over time, it may mask the fact that a significant fraction of refugees have moved out of the regions close to the Syrian border toward metropolitan areas with better economic opportunities. Map 2 demonstrates refugee movement over time toward economic opportunities in larger provinces and metropolitan areas. In particular, map 2 plots the difference between refugee concentration in each province between 2013 and 2018, where refugee concentration is measured as the ratio of the number of refugees in a given province divided by the total number of refugees in the country in the corresponding year. The white color indicates a “negative” number, suggesting a decline in refugee concentration from 2013 to 2018, while darker colors suggest an increase.

The total number of Syrian refugees and their distribution across Turkish provinces did not change significantly between 2018 and 2022. Then, in February 2023, southeastern provinces of Türkiye and most of northern Syria were hit by a series of devastating earthquakes that happened along the Eastern Anatolian Fault Zone. Tens of thousands of buildings collapsed and a large number of deaths were reported in 11 Turkish provinces, including Adana, Adiyaman, Diyarbakir, Elazig, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaras, Kilis, Malatya, Osmaniye, and Sanliurfa. Severe damage and many deaths were also reported in the Syrian regions including Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Idlib. The affected Syrian and Turkish provinces are the main origin and hosting regions, respectively, for the Syrian population in

Türkiye. The earthquakes generated a huge wave of internal migration within Türkiye for both the nationals and refugees who resided in the affected provinces. Some Syrian refugees were also reported to have returned to Syria following the earthquakes. The earthquakes are expected to generate a significant change in the distribution of population, regional demographics, and composition of economic activity within Türkiye. There may also be a permanent shift in location preferences from overcrowded regions with high earthquake risk (such as Istanbul) toward less populated areas with more moderate risks of natural disasters.

Map 2. Alternative representation of the change in regional distribution of refugees, 2013–18



Source: Presidency of Migration Management, Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Türkiye.
Note: The map shows the change in the ratio of the number of refugees per province to the total number of refugees in Türkiye between 2013 and 2018. White indicates a decline. The darker the color, the greater the increase.

Syrian refugees are, on average, younger and less educated/skilled than nationals, according to data obtained from the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM). The share of individuals of age 15 and above is about 76 percent for nationals, while it is only 58 percent for refugees. The average number of children born to a fertile woman is about 2 for nationals and more than 5 for refugees. These two figures jointly suggest that the refugee population is younger and is growing more quickly than the Turkish population, which means that refugees will stay younger, on average, for some time until fertility rates converge. In terms of educational attainment among the adult population (age 25 and above), completion rate of a high school degree and above is 34 percent for the Turkish population, while it is only 5.5 percent for refugees. About 45 percent of adult refugees (most of whom are women) do not have a school degree and educational attainment is “unknown” for another 28 percent. Therefore, the refugee influx can be characterized as a low-skilled population shock.

Educational enrollment figures have improved rapidly for refugees. As of the end of 2020–21 academic year, approximately 1.37 million school-age refugees (ages 5–17) were in Türkiye. Among them, 940,000 were enrolled (36,000 in preschool, 444,000 in primary school, 349,000 in middle school, and 111,000 in high school), while 433,000 remain out of school. School enrolment is about 98 percent at the primary school level and decreases with age. The overall enrolment rate is close to 70 percent. The existing trends suggest that the enrollment gap between refugee and Turkish students may shrink further, if not totally disappear, over time. However, socioeconomic gaps and inequalities may persist for the current generation.

There are also significant numbers of non-Syrian immigrants/refugees in Türkiye—mostly consisting of immigrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somali, Sudan, and other countries. The total number of non-Syrian immigrants/refugees is estimated to be about 500,000 to 700,000 as of the end of 2021. The non-Syrian group is heterogeneous and tends to move based on economic incentives: that is, most of them could be labelled as economic immigrants. Although individuals in this group might also be exposed to conflict in their origin countries, they differ from Syrian refugees in two main respects. First, unlike the Syrian case, there is neither a sudden outbreak of violent conflict nor a novel crisis that generates an urgency of leaving the origin country in most of those cases. Second, apart from the Iraqi case, there is

a large geographical distance between Türkiye and the regions of origin, which does not immediately justify the preference for *en masse* movement into Türkiye. This chapter focuses on Syrian refugees and abstracts from any specific arguments related to non-Syrian groups. Despite the nuances along various dimensions, most integration concerns and policy arguments that are raised for Syrian refugees might also hold for non-Syrian groups and refugee-like individuals.

Main policy areas

The Turkish government has implemented comprehensive integration programs for refugees. International organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have also implemented various programs, which are also key ingredients of the overall policy framework for refugee integration in Türkiye. This section presents the main policy framework for refugee integration in Türkiye by focusing on four main areas: labor market policies; education and skills policies; social protection policies; and health policies.

Funding for the integration programs has been obtained from two main sources: government's resources and funds made available by the European Commission (EC) through the European Union (EU) Facility for Refugees in Türkiye (FRIT). Resources from international organizations and NGOs have also been used for refugee integration, but compared to public budget and FRIT funds, they constitute a rather minor fraction of the overall money spent on integration programs.

Based on several accounts and also public declarations of government officials, the total cost of hosting refugees in Türkiye between 2011 and 2022 has been estimated to be about \$US50 billion. This is an "all inclusive" estimate of direct government spending on refugees, excluding any indirect costs and opportunity costs. The FRIT funds aim at providing support for refugees, "...in particular those living outside of camps and in vulnerable situations, while supporting also their host communities in providing access to quality education, health, protection and livelihoods, as well as other local services."² Originally, the total amount was €6 billion, which was made available in two tranches. Compared to public spending, the FRIT funds provided more targeted support in the form of structured programs and they operated through specialized program partners. The main disadvantages of FRIT funds, however, were the lack of flexibility in need-based spending and the high bureaucratic burden. There are plans to allocate an additional €3 billion to support refugee integration in Türkiye.

The Turkish government's expectations about the course of the Syrian crisis also shaped the nature of the policy response. In particular, Türkiye expected that the crisis would be resolved soon and refugee presence in the country would be rather short-lived—despite the existence of academic evidence arguing that return migration is less likely for refugees than economic immigrants (Dustmann and Gorlach 2016). Large temporary accommodation centers were constructed around the largest border-crossings and the aim was to keep refugees in or around the immediate vicinity of those camps. Türkiye was not alone in these misaligned expectations. Other parties and the refugees themselves also were not expecting a prolonged crisis. For example, refugee parents were resisting school instruction in Turkish because they were thinking that this would generate assimilation and was unnecessary. Therefore, humanitarian support was the main focus and integration policies were not considered to be a priority. But after reignition of violence and Russia's involvement in the crisis in late 2014, it was understood that there would be no early resolution to the crisis. Only after that point did refugee integration policies become a topic of policy debate. The reignition of violence generated a second and huge movement of refugees not only toward Türkiye but also toward Europe. The FRIT funds were made available after this wave, which confirmed the official role of Türkiye as shock absorber and buffer region.

Labor market policies

Until the Syrian crisis, Türkiye had not hosted a significant number of immigrants and, therefore, it did not have a well-established set of immigration rules and regulations. The lack of an appropriate set of immigration laws limited Türkiye's ability to immediately respond to the Syrian crisis. As a result,

Türkiye had to design everything from scratch, starting with appropriately defining the legal status of Syrian refugees in the country. Labor market integration policies were no exception. There were no preexisting set of rules that would allow Syrian refugees to formally integrate into Turkish labor markets.

As an emerging economy, Türkiye has a large informal labor market. More than 30 percent of the nonagricultural employment is informal.³ The informal labor market has provided Syrian refugees with immediate access to jobs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that about 95 percent of working-age adult Syrian males have entered the labor market through informal jobs. The majority of females are housewives and only 5 percent of adult females are employed—again informally.

The existence of a large informal labor market has had various consequences. First, it generated easy access to labor income for refugees, which served as an indirect and immediate mechanism for their integration into the labor market. The overlap in economic sectors and activities between northern Syria and southeastern Türkiye increased the transferability of human capital for refugees. They have found informal employment opportunities in textiles, food manufacturing, construction, manufacturing of chemical materials (used in textiles and construction), craftsmanship (shoes, leather, and other trades, and so on), and some services jobs. Second, although informal employment is not desirable for various reasons, it has been beneficial from the viewpoint of the Turkish government because it generated some room to implement a wait-and-see policy before taking any serious action regarding refugee integration. Third, it also benefited local firms because refugees have supplied low-cost labor—mostly for jobs with low skill requirements. Fourth, informal refugee labor is highly mobile across firms, jobs, and regions.

After it was understood that there was no early resolution to the crisis and integration policies were initiated, a new work permit law became effective in April 2016. According to this law, a Syrian refugee could obtain work permit (1) if the refugee has an ID card (that is, if s/he is a “registered” refugee) and has stayed in Türkiye for at least six months before applying for a work permit; (2) if the work is in certain sectors (such as education, health, nursing/care, tourism, entertainment/recreation) and occupations (such as engineers, architects, artists, pilots) specified by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security; (3) upon the request of the employer (or independently, in certain circumstances); (4) if the refugee-worker ratio in the workplace does not exceed 10 percent of the total number of Turkish workers and at most 1 refugee worker for firms employing less than 10 Turkish workers; (5) for a job within the boundaries of the province that the refugee has residency permit; (6) if s/he is not formally employed by another employer; and (7) for a duration of one year, with the possibility of renewal. These restrictive rules, in combination with the lengthy bureaucratic procedures, have resulted in a negligible number of work permits being issued—about 100,000 per year. Thus, a great majority of Syrian refugees continue to work informally.⁴ Anecdotal evidence suggests that constraints to geographic mobility and limitations regarding the ratio of refugees to Turkish nationals in the workplace are the most important restrictions keeping work-permit applications low. Concerns over potential political-economy consequences of increased competition for formal jobs contribute to the lengthiness of the bureaucratic procedures. The design of the social protection arrangements has also provided incentives to remain informal (see the discussion later in the paper).

International organizations, NGOs, and local governments have implemented several other labor market integration policies, such as entrepreneurship, skill acquisition, craftsmanship, and other training programs. Some of them are specifically designed for women and youth. Most of those efforts, however, have remained small and local, and coordination with the central government has not been particularly strong. Thus, these efforts have not significantly improved the overall environment for labor market integration.

The overall picture suggests that the labor market integration policy framework is rather weak and does not offer a systematic solution to the labor market integration issues faced by Syrian refugees. Increased competition in the lower segment of the labor market following the refugee influx may have also reduced labor market opportunities and returns for low-skilled Turkish workers, which may have also generated political concerns (see the discussion later in the paper for more details).

Education and skills policies

Uncertainty about the course of the Syrian conflict, and the expectation that the conflict will end soon, led the authorities to seek temporary solutions and the refugees to be more reluctant to send their children to Turkish schools because they were worried about assimilation. During the initial period, education services were mostly provided at the temporary accommodation centers. However, those services were fragmented, disorganized, and out of the control and coordination of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). They followed the Syrian curriculum and were delivered in Arabic supplemented by intense Turkish language training.

As with labor market policies, the initial period was followed by a period with strong commitment to full integration of refugees into public education system in Türkiye. The project on “Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System” (PIKTES) conducted by MoNE and financed with FRIT funds started operations in October 2016 in 26 provinces across Türkiye with the highest concentration of refugees. The project’s overall target was to improve the access of refugee children to education in Türkiye. Specifically, the project aimed at supporting MoNE in its efforts to integrate Syrian children into the Turkish education system.⁵

Syrian children needed support in two main dimensions. First, they needed urgent assistance to minimize the impact of war and conflict on their future outcomes. The support ranged from removal of language barriers to psychological support/counseling and from academic remediation programs to the interventions aiming to increase the quality of education provided. Second, their parents were, on average, less skilled than Turkish parents, which suggested that parental investment in human capital would highly likely be less intensive for Syrian children relative to Turkish children. If necessary steps were not taken, the education gaps would persist into future generations, which was a significant socioeconomic threat for the society as a whole. Accordingly, the PIKTES project has provided:

- Turkish language training for Syrian children;
- Arabic language training for Syrian children;
- Back-up training for enrolled Syrian students;
- Catch-up training for Syrian children who had been out of school;
- School transportation services for Syrian students;
- Stationery and clothing aid for Syrian students;
- Early childhood education for Syrian children;
- Activities to raise awareness about educational opportunities for Syrian students;
- Teacher training;
- Training for MoNE administrative and other staff; and
- Monitoring and evaluation.

Although the educational integration policies have been effective in increasing school enrolment/attachment and academic achievement of Syrian children, several key issues still need to be addressed.

1. MoNE should construct a long-term and transparent strategy (including budgeting) for the integration of Syrian refugees into the public education system in Türkiye. Without such a strategy, it is not easy to create a sustainable framework for educational integration. External funding needs should also be made clear. This would facilitate the continuation of the existing programs when FRIT funding ends.
2. Physical capacity constraints substantially downgrade the quality of education in provinces/regions with a high concentration of refugees. Because disadvantaged refugees and nationals cohabit in certain regions, allocation of part of the educational resources to Syrian children severely impoverish the nationals in those regions/schools. Additional work, with a broad vision, is needed to assess the impact of Syrian refugees on the quality of the Turkish education system. This may help in answering the sustainability questions and determining the financing needs.

3. MoNE publishes refugee enrolment statistics by grade levels, but these report enrolment rates only at the beginning of each academic year. No statistics for dropout rates are produced. A nonnegligible fraction of refugee students either drop out during the semester and/or do not attend at all. Dropout statistics should also be produced to better monitor and assess the educational outcomes of refugee children. Increased dropout rates of refugee students during the COVID-19 closures highlighted the importance of issue.
4. Systematically performed outreach activities are extremely important to inform Syrian parents about the education options and opportunities available for their children, and to inform them about the educational performance and needs of their kids. Lack of healthy communication between teachers/school administrators and parents of refugee children (mostly due to language barriers) is an important factor reducing the school success/integration of Syrian children.

Social protection policies

Globally, cash transfers are widely utilized as social policy tools aiming to provide guaranteed income to disadvantaged individuals, reduce poverty, and in some cases improve welfare conditional on the actions of recipients. Türkiye has implemented two major conditional cash transfer programs to support refugees: Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) and Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) programs. These two programs lie at the heart of the social protection scheme provided to Syrian refugees in Türkiye.

ESSN is a multipurpose cash transfer scheme providing monthly assistance through debit cards to more than 1.5 million of the most vulnerable refugees in Türkiye. Those receiving assistance decide for themselves how to cover essential needs such as rent, bills, food, and medicine. ESSN is the largest humanitarian aid programme ever funded by the European Union—through the FRIT funds. With top-ups outside the FRIT funds and the complementary program (C-ESSN) introduced to cover those with special needs, the total worth of the ESSN program is currently about €1.5 billion. The program has four main objectives:

- Help vulnerable refugees to meet their basic needs;
- Reduce/stabilize families' use of coping strategies such as sending children to work instead of school;
- Reduce/stabilize household debt and help families regain financial control and independence; and
- Enhance national capacities to respond to crises.

Registered families living in Türkiye under international protection or temporary protection can apply to ESSN. The program selects those most in need, such as large families, the elderly, single females, single-headed households, and people living with disabilities. Those employed with a valid work permit (individuals who are formally employed) or who own registered assets in Türkiye are not eligible to receive assistance. Each eligible family receives a card (the Kızılaycard), which can be used at ATMs or to pay in shops. Every month, it is topped up with Turkish lira equivalent of about €17 for each member of the family. Refugees with severe disability and small families that do not benefit from economies of scale receive additional monthly top-up payments.

Because the ESSN program is not available for formally employed individuals, it provides incentives to stay in the informal labor market and, therefore, negatively affects the labor market integration process for refugees.

Türkiye has had a successful CCTE program implemented since 2003. Millions of families and children have benefited from the national CCTE for 20 years. In 2017, under a partnership between the Ministry of Family and Social Services (former the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Services), the Ministry of National Education, the Turkish Red Crescent, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the national CCTE Programme was extended to cover school-age refugee children residing in Türkiye under temporary/international protection. The program is again supported by FRIT, along with the

governments of Norway and the United States. The eligibility rules and transfer values that are applied to Turkish children in the national CCTE also apply to Syrian and other refugee beneficiaries in the CCTE for Refugees. The families receive cash support every two months through Kizilaycard on the condition that the child has attended school regularly (at least 80 percent of the time) in the preceding two school months.

Students enrolled in Turkish public schools, temporary education centres, and Accelerated Learning Programs are all eligible to benefit from the program. CCTE for Refugees has cash transfer and child protection components. Through its cash transfer component, the program aims to alleviate the financial difficulties that constitute one of the main barriers to the participation of refugee children in education. It is implemented in all provinces. Through its child protection component, protection services are provided by specialized outreach teams to families whose children have stopped receiving the CCTE payments due to lack of sufficient attendance (missing four or more days of school in a month). A risk assessment is carried out by the Turkish Red Crescent outreach case workers and, if needed, children and their families are referred to the relevant services and supported in accessing them. The child protection component of the CCTE program, which is implemented in 15 provinces with the highest number of refugees, helps to mitigate child protection risks, which are closely intertwined with economic vulnerabilities. The program had about 800,000 beneficiaries and a total budget of €250 million (with COVID-19 top-ups) as of the beginning of 2022.⁶

In addition to the ESSN and CCTE programs, the World Food Programme (WFP) implements a social protection program that aims to help refugees meet their basic needs. WFP is supporting more than 54,000 refugees in six camps in Türkiye's southeast,⁷ through a monthly e-voucher payment of TRY 100 (US\$15) per person per month. WFP has also delivered 40,000 pieces of personal protective equipment to health workers providing services to in-camp residents, to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Health policies

All registered Syrians under temporary protection have the right to access free health care services provided by public institutions. Persons who have completed their temporary protection registration are provided a Temporary Protection Identity Card. This document is free of charge and includes a photo and basic identity information. The ID card also contains a Foreigners' ID Number starting with "99."

Refugees can visit primary health care institutions to receive an initial diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation services free of charge. Health stations, health centers, maternal and infant care and family planning centers, and tuberculosis dispensaries are primary health care institutions. There are also "migrant health centers" in some provinces, serving as primary health care providers. All these centers also provide screening and immunization for communicable diseases; specialized services for infants, children and teenagers; and maternal and reproductive health services.

The refugees can also directly approach secondary health institutions, such as state hospitals, or tertiary health institutions, such as university research hospitals and research and education hospitals. With the exception of emergency cases, refugees may not be able to access free services in university research hospitals or education and research hospitals without a prior referral. In addition, referrals to university research hospitals and private health institutions are limited to emergency and intensive care services, as well as burn injuries and cancer treatment.

Refugees may access health care services only in the province where they completed their registration. However, if it is not possible to receive adequate treatment in a particular province, then a refugee may be referred to another province, subject to the health care provider's discretion. In the case of emergency medical conditions, there are no such restrictions.

Refugees also have access to free medication that has been prescribed by doctors and that falls within the limits established in the Health Implementation Directive (SUT). Free medication must be obtained

from pharmacies that have contracts with AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency). In some cases, refugees may be asked to pay a patient share.

To meet the additional capacity needed to provide health care services to refugees, Türkiye has also invested in several projects to extend physical capacity by constructing new hospitals and public health care centers in the provinces hosting large numbers of refugees, such as Gaziantep, Hatay, Istanbul, Kilis, and Sanliurfa.

Evidence on the impact of refugees on socioeconomic outcomes

Waves of forced displacement are as old as humankind. They have been generated by war, violence, famine, epidemic diseases, natural disasters, and other idiosyncratic reasons such as revealed political views, religious beliefs, or ethnic identity. In most of the contemporary episodes, the root cause of forced displacement has been violent conflicts sparked by authoritarian leaders' irresponsiveness to society's demand for basic human rights and better economic conditions. The best examples are the cases of Syria, South Sudan, Venezuela, and Myanmar. Because of availability of rich micro data sets in major refugee-hosting countries such as Türkiye, Jordan, and Lebanon, the number of studies focusing on the case of Syrian refugees in host countries has rapidly increased recently. There is also an emerging literature on the impact of Venezuelan refugees in host countries such as Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador. Verme and Schuettler (2021) present an excellent meta-analysis of existing evidence on those recent waves. The Ukraine crisis has been unfolding and there is not enough convincing evidence yet about the impact of Ukrainian refugees on socioeconomic outcomes in host countries.

Literature on the impact of Syrian refugees on host country outcomes has mostly focused on the effects on labor market outcomes for nationals. One important and common characteristic of many of the main host countries is that they are classified under the broad category of developing economies, so they have large informal labor markets. The earliest papers in this literature (Del Carpio and Wagner 2015; Tumen 2016; Ceritoglu et al. 2017) document that Syrian refugees do not have easy access to work permits, so they enter the Turkish labor markets through informal manual jobs and displace low-skilled nationals informally employed in those jobs. Disadvantaged groups, such as women and youth, are affected the most. Moreover, low-skilled informal refugee employment is complementary to formal Turkish labor employed in more complex tasks; therefore, a moderate increase in the formal employment of nationals is observed following the refugee influx. Aksu, Erzan, and Kirdar (2018) document more notable positive impacts on formal employment. Studies using firm-level micro data (Akgunduz, Hassink, and Van den Berg 2018; Akgunduz and Torun 2020) also confirm the relevance of this complementarity story. Altindag, Bakis, and Roza (2020) document some change in firm activity in Türkiye following the Syrian refugee influx and show that the effects are largely concentrated in the informal economy. In their meta-analysis, Verme and Schuettler (2021) document that most estimates on employment and earnings outcomes are statistically insignificant. When significant estimates are reported, they mostly point out negative employment and wage effects in the short term rather than the longer term and for disadvantaged groups such as females, youth, and informal workers.

Balkan and Tumen (2016) investigate the impact of Syrian refugees on consumer prices in Türkiye and find that consumer inflation declined following the influx, and the decline is more pronounced in sectors with high labor informality. Labor cost advantages offered by the low-cost refugee workforce are also confirmed by Akgunduz et al. (2020). Additionally, using administrative data, they document that firm dynamism increases in response to refugee influx, especially on the lower half of the firm size distribution.

Parallel to the extensive literature on the impact of economic migration on housing markets, a new literature has emerged on the impact of refugees on housing and rental prices in hosting regions. Balkan et al. (2018) show that, as a consequence of Syrian refugee influx, rental prices increase for high-quality units in Türkiye, while there is no change in the rents of low-quality units. They argue that refugees tend to push traditional Turkish residents of low-cost neighborhoods toward higher-cost neighborhoods with

low refugee intensity; hence, total demand for low-cost units does not change a lot, while the demand for higher-cost units increases. Rozo and Sviatschi (2020) document large spikes in housing prices in Jordan in response to increased presence of Syrian refugees.

The impact of refugees on educational outcomes of nationals is another newly developing research area. Tumen (2018) reports that high school enrolment rates of Turkish youth increased in response to refugee inflows in Türkiye through increased competition for jobs with lower skill requirements. Findings reported by Tumen (2021) complement this evidence. Specifically, Tumen (2021) documents that Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores of Turkish adolescents increased following the Syrian refugee influx.

Refugee children are mostly absorbed by public education systems in receiving countries. Tumen (2019) shows that there is a small but statistically significant tendency of “native flight” from public to private schools in Türkiye in response to increased refugee concentration in Turkish public schools. Boucher et al. (2021) argue that initiating inter-ethnic interactions between refugee and Turkish youngsters at the early childhood level is key to speeding up social integration of refugees into host communities. Alan et al. (2021) find that improving the perspective-taking ability of children through specific curriculum interventions develops social cohesion in environments mixing refugee and Turkish children. Tumen, Vlassopoulos, and Wahba (2021) show that providing awareness-raising training to teachers substantially enhances integration of refugee children into host-country education systems.

Refugee inflows may also generate political economy consequences and change voting behavior in host countries. Using data from Austria, Steinmayr (2021) documents that exposure and contact are two distinct mechanisms, and the type and duration of interactions with refugees may have totally different implications for electoral outcomes following an influx of refugees. Altindag and Kaushal (2021) report that voting preferences of nationals in Türkiye did not change in a meaningful way in response to Syrian refugee inflows. Vasilakis (2018) and Karacuka (2021), on the other hand, find notable increases in nationalistic votes in regions with high refugee presence in Greece and Türkiye, respectively. Dustmann, Vasiljeva, and Piil Damm (2019) argue that in Denmark, attitudes toward refugees exhibit significant urban-rural differences and those differences have important implications for electoral outcomes and political behavior.

Apart from those broad topics, there is also rather scattered evidence on more specific topics. Aksoy and Tumen (2021) find that the quality of local governance is an important determinant of policy responses to environmental consequences of refugee migration in Türkiye. Erten and Keskin (2021) document that reduction in female employment and earnings potential for nationals following the Syrian refugee influx generated a decline in domestic violence against them in Türkiye. Özler et al. (2021) provide prima facie evidence that the ESSN program reduced poverty and inequality among refugees. Akbulut-Yüksel et al. (2022) show that Syrian refugee inflows increased crime in regions with high refugee intensity and the increase is associated with congestion in the lower segment of the labor market in Türkiye.

The results overall suggest that the labor market mechanism has been extremely powerful in shaping the general socioeconomic impact of refugees on various outcomes of nationals, and generally on hosting communities, in Türkiye. These forces have been particularly strong with respect to the actors directly competing with refugees in the lower segment of the labor market. These are low-skilled, informally employed, and mostly disadvantaged nationals (women and youth).

Lessons learned

The Turkish experience with Syrian refugees has generated a large volume of academic research (some of which is reviewed in the previous section) and policy work. The main lessons learned can be used in handling other more contemporary refugee waves—such as the large refugee wave generated by the Ukraine crisis.

Lessons learned

Refugee crises are permanent events. Existing academic evidence suggests that return migration is prevalent. More than 50 percent of migrants tend to return to their countries of origin after 15 years (Adda, Dustman, and Gorrach 2022). However, refugee behavior is different than the behavior of economic migrants. In particular, refugees are more likely to invest in their own and their children's human capital and they tend to save less, which jointly suggest that they are more likely to stay in the refugee-hosting country—for a longer time period. One reason might be related to the forces pushing refugees out of their origin countries and the trauma associated with those forces. Therefore, host countries should understand that refugee crises are typically not transitory and, even after the initiation of repatriation programs, many refugees would choose to stay in host countries. Integration policies should take this fact into account.

Act early; hesitation is costly. The root causes of the recent refugee crisis have generally been complex and multidimensional, which suggests that typically early resolutions should not be expected. Accordingly, refugee-hosting countries should consider that at least part of the refugee population will stay permanently (or at least for a long time); therefore, appropriate integration policies should be designed and implemented sooner than later. It took more than four years before Türkiye and the EU countries to acknowledge the fact that the Syrian crisis was not transitory. Serious integration policies supported by EU funds were implemented only by the end of 2016, more than four years after the start of the refugee influx into Türkiye and other neighboring countries. Acting early will allow the governments of refugee-hosting countries to address the needs of refugees in a timely way and minimize any gaps in socioeconomic outcomes of nationals and refugees. Hesitation can cause extremely costly delays.

Prioritize sustainability. Acting early does not mean that integration should be rushed. In fact, sustainable integration policies should be spread over time in a planned manner and quality of integration should be the priority rather than speed. Rushing integration may lead to inferior outcomes, such as a severe mismatch in labor markets, policy mismanagement, and deterioration in attitudes toward refugees, and may also generate political tension. Building a transparent, accountable, and realistic integration policy framework can enhance the sustainability of integration efforts.

Focus on labor market policies. Economic agents respond to economic incentives, and labor markets are among the key sources of economic incentives in the society. The existing evidence suggests that the labor market is the key mechanism driving the impact of refugees on the socioeconomic outcomes in host countries. The effect of refugees on labor market outcomes in host countries also has important impacts on various outcomes such as education, prices, crime, fertility, productivity, international trade, and political preferences. Therefore, labor market policies should be at the center of the refugee integration policy framework. Most importantly, in designing appropriate policies, particular attention should be paid to the segments/margins in the labor markets where nationals and refugees compete. Lack of a systematic labor market integration policy is among the biggest problems facing the overall refugee integration policy framework in Türkiye. Informal labor markets have served as a major buffer against the refugee shock and have absorbed refugee labor. However, as firms increasingly utilized the large volume of low-skilled informal labor made available by refugees, firms have become excessively reliant on refugee labor. The labor market integration policy framework should be significantly enhanced to minimize those multidimensional negative effects. More specifically, a holistic approach to the formulation of labor market integration policy is needed, especially with respect to education and social protection policies.

Focus on vulnerable groups. Vulnerable groups in both refugee and Turkish populations are the ones who are most affected from the destructive effects of refugee crises. For the case of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, low-skilled groups, informally employed individuals, women, and youth have been hit hardest by the repercussions of refugee movements. Existing gaps and inequalities may widen. Therefore, the effects on vulnerable groups should be more closely monitored and policy action should more

effectively target those groups. One major lesson learned is that, for vulnerable groups, programs targeting both refugees and nationals have been much more successful and sustainable relative to the programs targeting only refugees.

Get ready for secondary movements. Following the initial shockwave, refugees tend to cluster around the areas neighboring the source country. For example, the first destination of Syrian refugees was the Turkish provinces immediately around the Syrian border. Similarly, the Ukrainian refugees tend to move toward Poland and Czechia. A second wave of movement within the hosting region typically starts after acknowledging the fact that returning to the origin country is not feasible in the short term. Again, for the case of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, a huge wave of internal movement started after 2015. This may also happen for Ukrainian refugees and they may choose to move *en masse* toward other (more developed) EU countries from Poland, Czechia, and other neighboring countries. This second wave can be at least as disruptive as the initial wave. Integration policies should also account for the possibility of these massive internal movements. Moreover, location preferences of the refugee population are quite sensitive to major shifts in the regional composition of economic activity. For example, the recent devastating earthquakes in Türkiye will likely trigger additional internal movements of both refugees and nationals, which should be closely followed by policy makers.

Expand physical capacity in education, health, and infrastructure. Refugee waves are typically associated with sudden and massive inflows of large populations. They demand basic public services upon entry, especially education and health services. However, depending on the size of the incoming population, lack of sufficient physical capacity may severely limit the provision of those services to both nationals and refugees. This may lead to public unrest, create tension, and generate negative reactions toward refugees in the society. Physical capacity takes time to build; thus, investment in the physical capacity of basic health and education services should start as soon as possible. The quality of those services may also deteriorate as demand substantially increases. Thus, quality improvements should accompany physical capacity expansions. Capacity of basic infrastructure should also be expanded to support the quality of life in local livelihoods (Aksoy and Tumen 2021).

Start educational integration from the early childhood level. Language barriers are among the key factors inhibiting the educational integration of refugee children. Lack of adequate language skills reduces academic success for refugee students and impedes their social integration. The Turkish experience suggests that language interventions are more effective when they are provided early in life—preferably at the early childhood level. Language acquisition is less effective and much costlier at later ages. Therefore, a main lesson learned from the case of Syrian refugees in Türkiye is that educational integration should start from the early childhood level.

Coordinate integration programs. A counterproductive tension can exist between the stakeholders in terms of competition for projects/funds, moving out of institutional mandates, and stepping into the other institutions' areas of responsibility. Unnecessary overlaps in projects and other conflicts of interest can be minimized if coordination is improved. Better coordination would also foster better communication, which could improve the quality and efficiency of services the stakeholders provide locally.

Ongoing challenges

The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected labor market, education, and health outcomes of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. During the initial stages, the Turkish government issued employment protection measures in the form of firing bans. However, those measures were only binding for formally employed workers. Because refugees have been mostly employed informally, they have been among the groups hit hardest by the adverse labor market consequences of the pandemic. Although there is no systematic study documenting the impact of the pandemic on refugee outcomes, anecdotal evidence suggests that refugees suffered from severe income losses and poverty increased among refugee groups. In terms of education outcomes, refugee children have also been among the groups most severely affected from the adverse effects of the

pandemic. Their access to online resources was limited; moreover, loss of parental income also negatively affected their educational outcomes and well-being. School discontinuation, absenteeism, and dropout become much more prevalent among refugee students. Finally, during the pandemic and after the opening, refugee workers were employed under unhygienic conditions in crowded workplaces; therefore, they have been more heavily exposed to COVID-19 risks. Overall, refugees in Türkiye were severely hit by the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and they are still among the most vulnerable ones in case of further waves of infection.

Green transition risks. Refugee inflows generated excessive reliance on low-skilled and informal labor (in a more pronounced way in certain sectors) in Türkiye. This generates extra risks in an environment where green transition has become a policy priority. Increased intensity of low-skilled labor generates delay in modernization, decarbonization, and other necessary technology investments required for green transition. It also increases the gap between the actual set of labor skills and the set of skills required for a smooth transition into green economy. Finally, it increases the socioeconomic risks associated with the transition into a green economy because joblessness and poverty may increase among vulnerable refugee groups under such a scenario.

Risks related to diffusion of automation, digitalization, and artificial intelligence (AI). Diffusion of automation, digital technologies, and AI into production technologies are among the most significant megatrends. Such a diffusion would enhance productivity, increase efficiency in production, and support technological progress. However, it also creates risks for vulnerable groups. After the onset of the pandemic, new forms of employment (such as teleworking) have become the new norm in the labor market. But developments such as automation, AI, and teleworking are more complementary with high-skilled labor, while it may substitute out low-skilled workers and increase inequality in the society. Refugees are also open to such risks. Existence of a large group of low-skilled refugees highlights the importance of carefully crafted policies to handle any potential negative effects of those megatrends.

Earthquake response. The 2023 Kahramanmaraş-Hatay earthquakes might generate significant “aftershocks” in terms of their potential impact on the refugee integration policy framework discussed. The affected provinces are the main areas that have been hosting refugees in Türkiye. The earthquakes will likely trigger a massive wave of internal migration (of both nationals and refugees) from those areas toward the western regions of Türkiye, which may also lead to a change in the regional composition of economic activity across the country. The structure of the local labor markets and the composition of economic activity in the western regions of Türkiye are less compatible with the informal work arrangements that refugees have mostly relied on. Attitudes toward refugees may also deteriorate over time as a consequence of this large wave of internal displacement. These potential changes and reallocations could generate additional challenges in terms of labor market policies, educational integration, the social protection framework, and health services. Following the emergency and humanitarian response phase, refugee integration policies should be reconsidered and redesigned based on the changing needs and priorities in the aftermath of the earthquakes.

Concluding remarks

Overall, Türkiye has done an impressive job in welcoming about 4 million refugees following the onset of the civil war in Syria in mid-2011. The Turkish government, with the support provided by the EU and other stakeholders, has continuously improved the policy framework implemented to accommodate refugees. The quantity and quality of the integration policies and services have visibly improved over time. In addition to successfully providing humanitarian aid and empowering refugees in their new lives in Türkiye, Türkiye has also successfully served as a buffer zone smoothing out the repercussions of the crisis on Europe.

This chapter aims to discuss in detail the Turkish experience with Syrian refugees, and shed light on further policy debate on developing a more comprehensive and effective set of integration policies. There are many lessons learned from the case/experience of Syrian refugees in Türkiye for the Ukraine

crisis and future refugee crises. Building on the lessons learned from past crises to develop more effective mitigation and prevention policies is of utmost importance for the welfare of all individuals around the world. There are major challenges ahead, especially regarding the set of issues surrounding the general policy framework for integrating refugees in Türkiye and elsewhere. The lack of data about refugee characteristics and outcomes is a major limitation for the analysis of many of the topics discussed. Additional investment on data production and more liberal data-sharing policies are needed to enhance the overall policy landscape.

Notes

¹ The terms “Syrians” and “refugees” are used in terms of sociological context and widespread daily use, and independent of the legal context in Türkiye and Turkish law. Türkiye is a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. It retains a geographic limitation to its ratification of the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, which means that only those fleeing as a consequence of “events occurring in Europe” can be given refugee status. Syrian nationals, as well as stateless persons and refugees from Syria, who came to Türkiye due to events in Syria after April 28, 2011 are provided with temporary protection. The Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) under the Ministry of Interior is the sole authority for registration and status decisions of Syrians under Temporary Protection (SuTPs). The applications are received through the Provincial Directorates for Migration Management (PDMMs) in each province. To align with the general terminology used in the literature, the term “refugee” is used throughout this chapter to refer to SuTPs in Türkiye.

² https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-02/frit_factsheet.pdf.

³ The size of the informal labor market is measured by the Turkish Household Labor Force Survey. An informal worker is defined as a worker with no social security coverage in the current job.

⁴ For more detailed statistics on work permits, see <https://www.csgb.gov.tr/istatistikler/calisma-hayati-istatistikleri/resmi-istatistik-programi/yabancilarin-calisma-izinleri/>.

⁵ There were other concurrent projects to support school infrastructure investments, such as the Education Infrastructure for Resilience, funded by the EU.

⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/en/media/14741/file>.

⁷ Camps are mostly dysfunctional today, but there is still a small population of Syrian refugees (about 60,000) with severe vulnerabilities staying in those camps.

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