

## Chapter 13

# The Effects of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Social Service-Providing Organizations in the Migration Sector in Turkey and the Digital Measures

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### ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive impact on everyone on the world since early 2020. The situation in Turkey is not different than the rest of the world. In the time of a pandemic, it is important, for everyone's safety, to identify ways to deliver social services without in-person contact; therefore, organizations must adopt models for remote and digitalized social service provision which can minimize risks to the health and safety of both for social service-receivers and providers. In this respect, this chapter has got three foci: the effects of COVID-19 outbreak on the social service-providing non-governmental organizations in the context of migration in Turkey, the needs of the asylum seekers as social service-receivers, and the digital measures of the non-governmental organizations in social service provision as a response to COVID-19 outbreak.*

### INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is reported to be originated in Wuhan, China at the end of the year 2019. It soon spread across the world in a short time and was declared a “Pandemic” by the World Health Organization in March 2020. The COVID-19 Pandemic is still spreading worldwide and continues to have a direct impact on people's health and wellbeing. The Pandemic has undoubtedly had a massive impact on everyone on the planet since the early beginning of 2020. Among the most vulnerable people in the society who are

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affected by the Pandemic have become the refugees and asylum-seekers who are already getting by under harsh conditions with limited access to various services (UNHCR, 2020). Many asylum seekers suffer from the effects of the Pandemic which further deepened their vulnerabilities. An extensive impact has been observed on the social service providing organizations and the lives of those they support because of the necessary restrictions and precautions (Turner, 2020). A devastating impact of the Pandemic has been on the daily lives of asylum seekers as well as the social services provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Turkey. Besides, a variety of NGOs have started to transform some services into remote services through *digital means* with the aim of minimizing this impact. Some of the NGOs have declared that they have initiated response programs and have applied measures to sustain their ongoing systems while some of them have stopped their activities until the end of the Pandemic.

To understand the migration context and the impact of COVID-19 Pandemic, it is thought that background information on current migration system of Turkey should hereby be introduced. Turkey is a country bridging between European countries with comprehensive welfare systems consisting of advanced social work practices and countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria where fundamental rights and freedoms are jeopardized, and armed conflict is ongoing. Due to the geographical location and requirements of the national and international law, Turkey hosts millions of refugees and asylum seekers from many countries.

More than 3,6 million Syrians and about 0,5 million of asylum seekers from other countries of origin are currently residing in Turkey according to the statistical data from the Ministry of Interior Affairs General Directorate of Migration Management (DGMM, 2021). It is thought that these numbers might be much higher since there are many persons of concern who are undocumented, therefore not included in the statistics.

The Syrians in Turkey have been uniquely granted *Temporary Protection Status* within the framework of the Temporary Protection Regulation since October 2014. Temporary Protection Regulation with the Council of Ministers (Decision No: 2014/6883) was published under the umbrella Law on Foreigners and International Protection. According to these law and regulation, Syrians under Temporary Protection can have access to basic services, including health care, education, livelihoods and social assistance. The asylum seekers from other countries are under *International Protection status* and they have similar rights in terms of access to the social services. Majority of the asylum seekers are living in host communities outside of the temporary accommodation centers (also known as refugee camps), especially in the south-east of Turkey and in large city centers.

Although there is a comprehensive legislation in the context of migration in Turkey and Turkey is signatory of Geneva Convention on the Legal Status of Refugees (1951), there is a confusion regarding the use of the certain terms such as “refugee” and “asylum seeker”. These two terms are used differently in the contexts of national law and the international law. Turkey does not give refugee or asylum seeker status but also do not deport the individuals who are from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia and whose goal is to reach Europe due to the non-refoulment principle in the Geneva Convention. Their asylum applications are processed and necessary actions to resettle them to a third country are taken under the coordination of Ministry of Interior Affairs General Directorate of Migration Management. Until the process is over, the asylum seekers are allowed to stay in Turkey under international protection status and temporary protection status if the individual is from Syria, with reference to the Law on Foreigners and International Protection and Temporary Protection Regulation. Turkey legally does not accept these persons as “refugees or asylum seekers”. The individuals who are forced to leave their country and who are seeking asylum from Turkey are categorized under temporary

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