



Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN):

**Social assistance for
refugees in Türkiye**

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Background: refugees in Türkiye

Türkiye currently hosts the largest refugee population in the world with 4 million people, some 3.7 million of whom are Syrians who fled from the ongoing conflict that has affected their country for over 10 years. Over 98 per cent of refugees in Türkiye live outside of the camps, under challenging and often precarious circumstances and with scarce resources, despite the commendable humanitarian assistance efforts led by the Government of Türkiye (GoT), which have enabled refugees to access basic needs and services including health, education and other public services.

After years of displacement and compounded by the socio-economic impacts of a deteriorating national economic landscape and of the COVID-19 pandemic, many refugees in Türkiye have depleted resources, with the cost of living and lack of access to a regular income making it difficult for vulnerable families to meet their basic needs. As a result, many refugees increasingly rely on borrowing money and increasing debt, spending savings, and engaging in negative coping mechanisms such as reducing food consumption, living in substandard housing, and in some cases resorting to child labour, street begging or early marriage.

An Emergency Social Safety Net to help meet basic needs

Since 2016, with funding from the European Union and its member states under the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye, vulnerable refugees in Türkiye have received monthly cash assistance to help meet their basic needs under a ground-breaking social assistance programme – the **Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN)**. Each eligible family receives a Kızılaykart (debit card), which is topped up with regular cash assistance every month, along with periodic top ups. The card can be used to withdraw cash at ATMs or to pay at point-of-sale devices in shops across Türkiye, empowering recipients to decide for themselves how to cover essential needs including food, rent, medicine, transport and other bills.

It is worth noting that in addition to a cash based assistance modality, ESSN also contains additional components such as protection or socio-economic empowerment to address sensitive aspects related to the most vulnerable affected populations, as well as complementarity with other Kızılaykart programmes, while avoiding duplication.

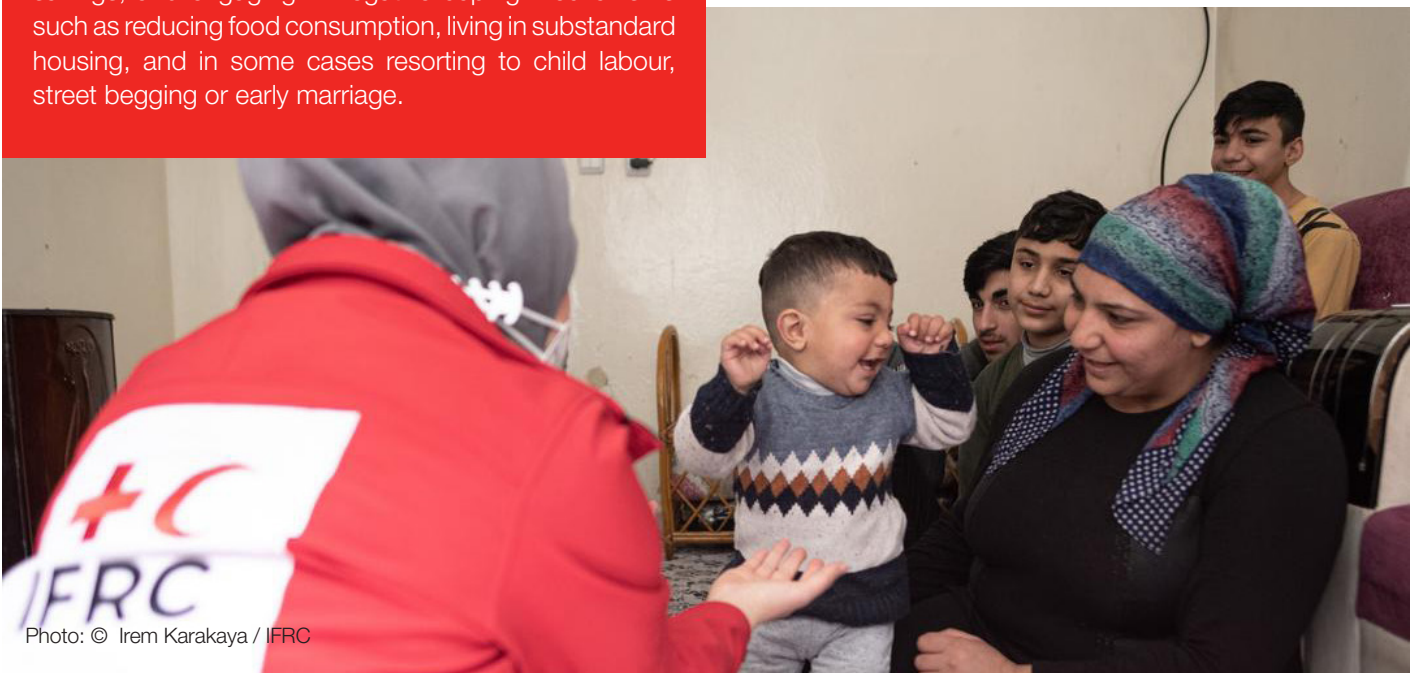


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Photo: © Turkish Red Crescent

The ESSN was designed in conjunction with the GoT; phases I and II¹ of the programme were implemented between 2016 to 2020 through a partnership between Türk Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent/TRC), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the GoT's Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS), with support from Presidency of Migration Management (DMM) and the Directorate General of Population and Citizenship Affairs (DGPC), and financial services provided by the state-owned Halkbank.

Since April 2020, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has replaced WFP as the contract holder with DG ECHO, and partners with TRC to provide joint leadership, working with the other key stakeholders, as custodians of the ESSN and to deliver phase III of the programme. The ESSN is the largest humanitarian cash programme in the world, and as of October 2022 has been assisting over 1.5 million refugees, primarily individuals living under temporary and international protection in Türkiye to meet their basic needs.² It is the largest humanitarian programme in the history of the EU, and the largest programme implemented by the IFRC anywhere across the Red Cross and Red Crescent network. It has also been evaluated as the first programme of its kind in terms of its integration of humanitarian assistance into a national safety net, rapid deployment, and flexible scalability.³

Since its inception, the ESSN has been aligned and consistent with national policies and priorities, and capitalised on national institutions, but it has remained a separate programme.⁴ In terms of the methodology relating to **shock responsive social protection and linkages with humanitarian cash assistance**, the ESSN 'piggybacks' on the national social welfare system, but remains conceptually, administratively and financially distinct from it. Nevertheless, government systems, facilities, structures, databases and staff have played a critical role in the functioning of the programme from its outset. Furthermore, TRC did not only leverage its auxiliary role to the GoT in order to facilitate the inclusion of refugees in the national social welfare system, but also to help enhance the capacity of the government bodies. Apart from TRC's pivotal role in terms of advocacy within the steering committee of the ESSN Programme, the Kızılaykart Platform provides translator and vehicle support to related governmental institutions to improve their capacity in receiving and managing applications, conducting referrals and carrying out many other functions such as household visits. In addition, TRC provides support in terms of social examines, vehicles, staff and general technical support to relevant governmental institutions such as the Ministry of Family and Social Services (more specifically the Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundations – SASFs under MoFSS).

1 ESSN phase I ran from September 2016 to December 2017, and phase II from January 2018 until March 2020.

2 At its peak, c.1.85 million refugees received monthly ESSN assistance in May and June 2021. Syrian refugees have typically constituted roughly 90% of the ESSN's monthly caseload, with the balance made up of Afghan, Iraqi, and other nationalities.

3 Source: 'Vulnerability and Protection of Refugees in Turkey: Findings from the Rollout of the Largest Humanitarian Cash Assistance Program in the World', The World Bank, WFP and Türk Kızılay, 2019

4 'Evaluation of the DG ECHO funded Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) in Turkey, November 2016–February 2018', Oxford Policy Management, April 2018

Building on earlier programmes in place since 2012, and more specifically the first two phases of the ESSN from 2016, the principal and specific objective of the ESSN in phase III is to support refugees to meet their basic needs, and to provide linkages to protection responses while paving the way for sustainable livelihoods opportunities through its Socio-Economic Empowerment component.

The programme has five stated results:

Implementation and coordination of an efficient cash transfer cycle⁵

1

Provision of monthly cash assistance to eligible refugees to help meet their basic needs through TRC's Kızılaykart Platform

2

A referral system for protection needs and any other services

3

Referral pathways for suitable ESSN recipients via an ESSN livelihoods referral mechanism

4

Comprehensive internal and external monitoring, evaluation, assurance, accountability, and learning systems, including third party monitoring and an evaluative learning study⁶

5

⁵ Including identification, applications and verification of eligible refugees; programme information dissemination, advocacy and sensitisation; implementation of a complaint and feedback mechanism; ESSN management and coordination structures; capacity strengthening of TRC staff working on the ESSN; capacity support to the Ministry of Family and Social Services to strengthen the Government's capacity to deliver the ESSN; and considerations on the future of the ESSN's targeting system.

⁶ Results 1, 2 and 5 are explicitly aligned with Components A, B and C – respectively – of DG ECHO's guidance to partners delivering large-scale cash transfers.

Kızılaykart Platform



KIZILAYKART PROGRAMMES

The backbone of the ESSN is TRC's Kızılaykart Cash-Based Assistance Programmes Platform ('Kızılaykart Platform'), which was initially established in 2011 to support Turkish citizens in need. With the onset of the Syria crisis in 2012, the platform has supported the implementation of nine humanitarian programmes to meet the different needs of vulnerable groups, five of which remain in operation as of 2022.⁷ The Kızılaykart Platform is designed to enable simultaneous implementation of multiple cash assistance programmes to support vulnerable refugees in an integrated manner. It enables complementary unconditional and conditional cash assistance programming via a single Kızılaykart (debit card), which holds different wallets. The programmes – including the ESSN – are implemented by TRC in partnership with a range of humanitarian agencies, development actors, government ministries and donors, depending on the programme. The Kızılaykart is provided and serviced by one of Türkiye's central banks, Halkbank.



Registration, application and systems integration

Registered refugee families living in Türkiye under primarily* temporary or international protection who have met the prerequisite conditions such as owning relevant ID or having residence registration or humanitarian residence permit, can apply to receive assistance via the ESSN. The main applicant must be an adult household member above the age of 18. Applicants can submit their completed application forms either at the Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation (SASF) office⁸ in their district or at a TRC Service Centre. After the assessment process is completed by the SASF's Board of Trustees, which usually takes between five to nine weeks, the household is informed of their eligibility or ineligibility by SMS.⁹ The 168 TRC Call Centre remains at disposal as a supportive service for any addition information, requests, feedback or complaints.

All ESSN applications are digitised and consolidated into the Integrated Social Assistance Information System (ISAIS), or Bütünleşik Sosyal Yardım Bilgi Sistemi, an e-government system developed by Türkiye and introduced in 2009 that electronically integrates and facilitates all steps related to the management of social assistance. The GoT adapted ISAIS to handle ESSN application processes, and assess eligibility into the programme, including verification of required documents. As a result, ESSN applicants and beneficiaries are integrated into the same registry system with Turkish applicants and beneficiaries of MoFSS social assistance programmes. This integration makes Türkiye a leading example of 'adaptive social protection' to effectively respond to a surge in social assistance needs caused by the humanitarian emergency which has been created by the Syrian refugee crisis.¹⁰ In turn, the implementation of the ESSN is also ensured through the direct integration between TRC's Göçmen database and the MoFSS's ISAIS system which enables the management, tracking and verification of all key components of the programme.

* The phrase has been added to leave room for other categories, such as individuals under humanitarian residence permit and stateless persons as well, even though their number is considerably lower (almost negligible).

⁷ ESSN phase I ran from September 2016 to December 2017, and phase II from January 2018 until March 2020.

⁸ Social assistance in Türkiye is managed at the national level by the Directorate General for Social Assistance (DGSA) under the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS) and is implemented by some 1,003 locally-based Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundations (SASFs). The SASFs are under the chairmanship of the provincial and sub-provincial governors and provide support to Turkish citizens and refugees.

⁹ The Board of Trustees, which is the decision-making organ of the foundation, usually consists of local public authorities, representatives of NGOs, philanthropic citizens elected by the Provincial Council, and muftis.

Source: ESSN Briefing Package, IFRC, February 2021

¹⁰ Source: 'Vulnerability and Protection of Refugees in Turkey', The World Bank, WFP and Türk Kızılay, 2019 op. cit.

Learning and Research Inform Programme Improvements

The ESSN programme has an ongoing commitment to develop comprehensive sets of lessons learned, good practice and understand key drivers for success and achievement of key milestones. This commitment has enabled the TRC and IFRC to leverage support for necessary programme adaptations that improve the impact of the ESSN in light of internal learning and external factors. . ESSN Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Teams carry out continuous assessment of programs and their progress in order to pinpoint areas for improvement. The teams use a wide variety of tools to evaluate the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and impact of the programmes by accessing both primary and secondary data. Recent studies focus on understanding the impact of the ESSN programme for its recipients and to drive improvements for the programme based on better understanding of external factors such as COVID-19 and socio-economic challenges – these include:

- [Pre-Assistance Baseline \(PAB\), Post-Distribution Monitoring \(PDM\), learning on the effectiveness of the programmes communications channels as well as studies into the evolving opportunities related to supporting Livelihoods and transition strategies](#)
- [Livelihood Transition of the ESSN: Capacity Mapping and Understanding the Potential \(August 2020\)](#)
- [Impact of COVID-19 on Daily Life of Refugees In Türkiye](#)
- [Adapting to New Normal: Remote Focus Group Discussions During COVID-19](#)
- [Cash assistance in times of COVID-19 | Impacts on refugees living in Türkiye - Findings from the Post-distribution Monitoring \(PDM\) Survey \(Round 10\) on Emergency Social Safety Net \(ESSN\) Applicants \(March 2021\)](#)
- [Intersectoral Vulnerability Survey: The Vulnerability Conditions of Refugees Living in Türkiye \(Round 1 - April 2021\)](#)
- [Exploring the Livelihoods of Women Refugees in Türkiye: A Qualitative Study on the Emergency Social Safety Net \(ESSN\) Applicants \(A Remote Focus Group Discussion Report\)](#)

As a result of the above-mentioned studies, the TRC and IFRC are committed to advocating for and introducing a number of core outputs and improvements, these include:

- Adjustment of transfer value (100 TL to 120 to 155 to 230) for ESSN recipients to enable the programme to continue to support needs as socio-economic conditions change over time;
- Adjustment of top-ups both in terms of value and who is targeted to improve the programmes impact and reach;
- Programme targeting and forecast studies that lead to a dependency ratio adjustment
- SASF allowance for both taking action against errors and enabling a SASF increase from 5% to 10% From July 2022, again, recognising socio-economic factors in the external environment.

Who receives assistance?

At the outset of the ESSN in 2016, the decision was taken to adopt demographic targeting criteria to determine eligibility. This was based on identifying household and individual characteristics which served as the best proxies for household poverty, vulnerability and inability to meet basic needs¹¹ and in order to facilitate successful implementation and progressive and timely scaling up of the programme.

Between 2017¹² and 2021 the demographic criteria for eligibility for a household to receive ESSN assistance were at least one of the following:

- Single females
- Households with a single parent, with no other adults and at least one child under 18
- Households with elderly people above 60, with no other adults in the household
- Households with four or more children below the age of 18
- Households with a dependency ratio equal to or above 1.5 (essentially, at least three dependents for every two able-bodied adults)
- Households with at least one individual with a disability rate of 40%

11 Using quantitative data from a 2015 household survey, WFP and TRC developed a model to understand the relationship between household characteristics and household welfare (measured using per capita expenditure). These results were used, in combination with other secondary data, to develop the demographic criteria. For more details on the model, refer to 'Basic Needs Programming in Turkey: Establishing Targeting Criteria and a Minimum Expenditure Basket', WFP, 2016. Source: 'Vulnerability and Protection of Refugees in Turkey', The World Bank, WFP and Türk Kızılay, 2019 op. cit.

12 Before June 2017, the dependency ratio threshold was above 1.5 (not including those with ratio equal to 1.5) and the disability threshold was two members (not one). The targeting criteria were revised to increase the coverage of vulnerable refugee households. Source: 'Vulnerability and Protection of Refugees in Turkey', 2019, op. cit. Source: 'Vulnerability and Protection of Refugees in Turkey', The World Bank, WFP and Türk Kızılay, 2019 op. cit.



Photo: © Nicole Tung / IFRC

Since December 2018, the ESSN has also implemented a complementary mechanism to decrease exclusion errors and reach vulnerable households who may have been excluded by the programme's demographic targeting criteria, known as the 'SASF discretionary allowance'. The scheme enables each SASF office to select, on a discretionary basis, a small number of vulnerable applicants who were not eligible under the established criteria, to be included as ESSN recipients. Each SASF office is entitled to a quota of allowances calculated as 10% of the total applications received by that SASF. Upon reviewing ESSN applications which did not fit the demographic criteria, SASFs may identify vulnerable households who need assistance. These households' vulnerability is then verified through an additional vulnerability assessment survey conducted by SASF social examiners during a household visit. SASFs then submit the application of the ineligible yet vulnerable households to the Board of Trustees for their approval for inclusion in the ESSN.¹³

Cash assistance at scale

In terms of progressive scaling of its coverage, the ESSN programme grew from pilots in two districts in late 2016 to reach 250,000 recipients in February 2017, more than 500,000 recipients by April 2017, and its original target of 1 million by September 2017. The ESSN recipient caseload peaked in May 2021 at just under 1.85 million individuals who were reached with cash assistance, of whom 51 per cent were women.¹⁴



In July 2021, the most vulnerable households within the existing ESSN caseload were transferred to a newly established 'Complementary Emergency Social Safety Net (C-ESSN)' project¹⁵ funded by the European Union's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and implemented directly with TRC and its Kızılaykart Platform in partnership with the MoFSS. As a result, three out of the six existing ESSN eligibility criteria – households with a single parent, with elderly people above 60, and with individuals living with a severe disability – were transferred into the C-ESSN, while the ESSN, based on its research and learning as noted above, criteria have been reduced to one retained criteria with an adjusted dependence ratio.

¹³ Source: ESSN Briefing Package, IFRC, February 2021

¹⁴ Source: 'ESSN Monthly Report May 2021', IFRC and Türk Kızılay

Monthly assistance and top ups

The ESSN regular monthly transfer value was originally calculated in 2016 as a percentage contribution towards meeting the cost of a Minimum Expenditure Basket. The level of ESSN assistance took into account an income-expenditure gap analysis along with comparability with the benefits provided by the national system and GoT preferences, with the level of coverage based primarily on resource availability.

ESSN recipients currently receive a regular monthly cash transfer of 230 TRY per individual from June 2022 (about €14), which is re-charged via electronic transfer and available on their Halkbank card. In addition to these regular monthly transfers per person, quarterly top-ups are provided to households according to a scale that is designed to address inequity between smaller and larger refugee households in meeting their basic needs.¹⁶ Households with one to three members receive 600 TRY, four to eight members 300 TRY, and nine or more members 100 TRY respectively. Even though at first glance it might seem counterintuitive to provide a lower top-up to a larger household, a simple analysis of costs implies that when more family members live in the same household many of the costs (electricity, heating, water etc) are shared between more individuals and are therefore lower per person, as opposed to a smaller household where they turn out to be higher. An additional severe disability top-up was also provided

on a monthly basis to households with individuals living with severe disabilities – within the ESSN programme from its introduction in August 2018 until July 2021¹⁷, and since then via the C-ESSN programme after the severe disability-related criteria was transitioned across from the ESSN to the C-ESSN. To receive the severe disability top-up, households with individuals with severe disabilities must obtain a disability health report (DHR) from an authorised healthcare service provider indicating a disability rate of 50 per cent or above and stating that the individual is dependent.

Following the initial onset of COVID-19 and in order to help mitigate its socio-economic impacts, in June-July 2020 the ESSN was able to reallocate existing resources and implement a vertical expansion by providing additional cash assistance to the 1.7 million refugees within the programme's caseload at that time.¹⁸ These top-ups, amounting to an additional TRY 1,000 per household in total, were provided in two monthly tranches of TRY 500, supplementing the normal ESSN payment cycle.¹⁹ In addition, the recent economic top up was paid as TRY 1,400 per household in May 2022 in order to increase the resilience of the target group against the economic hardships. The transfer value was agreed with and followed the directive of the GoT, including to ensure strategic and technical alignment with additional social assistance provided to Turkish citizens in this period.



Photo: © Andrew McConnell / IFRC

- 16 These periodic top-ups were introduced in August 2017, and increased in value as of August 2019. Sources: 'The Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN): Helping Refugees in Turkey', WFP, 2019; www.ifrc.org/emergency-social-safety-net-essn
- 17 With a value of TRY 600 per eligible individual when provided within the ESSN
- 18 Vertical expansion means increasing the value/generosity of humanitarian cash transfers (in effect topping up) to enable recipients, in this case ESSN recipients, to better deal with the consequences of an anticipated/unanticipated shock. Horizontal expansion means rapidly and temporarily enrolling new recipients into existing humanitarian cash transfer programmes, so they can better manage the impact of a shock. Source: 'COVID-19 and the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) and Conditional Cash Transfers for Education (CCTE) programmes', Simon Little, Calum McLean, and Elayn Sammon | Social Protection Approaches to COVID-19: Expert Advice (SPACE), March 2021
- 19 Source: ESSN Briefing Package, IFRC, February 2021

Who does what

The EU, via its Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), funds humanitarian projects in Türkiye to help vulnerable refugees and their host communities receive the support they need, in close coordination with the Turkish authorities. In 2016 the EU created the Facility for Refugees to assist Türkiye in its efforts to support refugees. Under the Facility, the EU has invested €2.4 billion in humanitarian assistance in Türkiye, including ongoing funding as the donor for the ESSN.

The GoT is a central partner in the ESSN through key line ministries and directorates. The Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS) is responsible for accepting applications for ESSN assistance, and ensuring household verification visits are conducted through its network of SASFs, and for the overall management of the application database. The Ministry of Interior's Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) is responsible for the legal registration of refugees, which is a key prerequisite for access to services and available assistance for refugees. The Provincial Directorate of Migration Management (PDMM), found in every province in Türkiye, receives and processes temporary protection applications and conducts refugee status determination. The Directorate General of Population and Citizenship Affairs (DGPC) is responsible for overseeing civil registry, citizenship affairs and population statistics. Both the PDMM and DGPC are responsible for address registration, which is also a prerequisite for ESSN eligibility.

ECHO and the MoFSS co-chair the ESSN Steering Committee, which provides oversight and strategic direction to the programme, and facilitates alignment between its key partners and stakeholders. The management and implementation of the ESSN is led by a Management Coordination Centre (MCC), consisting of TRC and IFRC teams as well as key government stakeholders, working from shared premises in Ankara.

TRC has a distinct and lead role in the implementation of the ESSN programme and in its overall coordination. This includes responsibility for communication with key stakeholders, institutions and organisations; receiving applications, providing relevant information when necessary and supporting card distribution activities for the ESSN at TRC Service Centres, and attending household verification visits in support of the SASFs; conducting data verification processes; coordinating with the financial service provider and supporting the timely transfer of funds each payment cycle; carrying out outreach and

referral as well as monitoring & evaluation activities; operating the 168 Kızılay call centres and managing communication channels, such as the Kızılaykart website and social media pages; identifying and referring not only protection cases, but also making referrals to basic needs and livelihoods/socio economic empowerment (SEE) and ensuring accountability to ESSN recipients, donors, and programme partners.

The IFRC provides technical, coordination, administrative and donor reporting support to TRC via its country delegation and secretariat. Within the ESSN, the IFRC's specific roles and responsibilities are to manage the contract with DG ECHO, ensure compliance, accountability and transparency to key stakeholders, provide programme-related technical support and oversight, support capacity strengthening of TRC teams and staff, and work jointly with TRC teams on key ESSN areas including funds transfer, verification and reconciliation processes, information management and data analysis, and internal and external monitoring, evaluation and learning.

ESSN workstreams

TRC and IFRC teams work together under the framework of different dedicated workstreams, each of which is responsible for one component of the ESSN. These workstreams are: Registration and Application; Monitoring and Evaluation; Community Engagement and Accountability; External Communication; Reporting; Outreach and Referral; Data Verification and Analysis; Transfer Management; Reconciliation, Financial Reporting, Coordination and Programme Planning.

The above mentioned teams are supported by structures such as the Risk & Compliance Unit, Human Resources Unit and Procurement Unit.

The workstreams are guided by jointly developed action plans, and their progress is measured via Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which are reported internally, externally and to donors, through various reports and static and dynamic dashboards. Each workstream has a focal point from both TRC and IFRC, and meets on a regular basis (mostly bi-weekly) to discuss progress and activities. All workstreams meet together at the monthly MCC meetings to share updates on the progress and outcomes of their work.²⁰

Supporting Documents and Resources

ESSN:

- Cash Hub, Cash in Türkiye: <https://platform.kizilaykart.org/en/suy.html>
- European Commission (2020) The Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN): Offering a lifeline to vulnerable refugees in Türkiye. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/emergency-social-safety-net-essn-offering-lifeline-vulnerable-refugees-turkey_en
- European Commission (2020) Türkiye Factsheet. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/europe/turkey_en
- IFRC, Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN): <https://www.ifrc.org/emergency-social-safety-net-essn>
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- Kizilaykart Platform: <https://platform.kizilaykart.org/en/suy.html>
- World Food Programme (2019). The Emergency Safety Net (ESSN): Helping Refugees in Türkiye. <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104792/download/>

Vulnerability Factors for Refugees:

- IFRC & Türk Kızılay (2021) Intersectoral Vulnerability Study; The Vulnerability Conditions of Refugees Living in Türkiye. Full study: <https://cash-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/06/IVS-report-210616.pdf> & infographics summary: <https://cash-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/06/infographics-4pages-210616.pdf>
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Evaluations:

- Oxford Policy Management (2018). Evaluation of the DG ECHO funded Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) in Türkiye, November 2016–February 2018. <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000100401/download/>

Social Protection:

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