

POVERTY, PROVISION OF ASSISTANCE AND WORK: THE CASE OF TURKEY

Prof. Dr. Hüseyin Gül

Süleyman Demirel University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences,
Department of Public Administration,
Isparta, TURKEY.
Tel. No.: 0090-246-211-1013
Fax: 0090-246-211-1711
Mobile: 0090-533-638-9225
E-mail: gulhuseyin@yahoo.com

Prof. Dr. Songül Sallan Gül

Süleyman Demirel University, Faculty of Science and Literature,
Department of Sociology,
Isparta, TURKEY.
Tel. No.: 0090-246-211-3858
Fax: 0090-246-211-1711
Mobile: 0090-533-561-4605
E-mail: songulsallangul@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The paper questions whether the receipt of poverty assistance stifles the incentive to participate in the labour market and leads to dependency among aid recipients. For this purpose, several indicators are analyzed including the profiles and attitudes of the poor, the sufficiency and types of poverty assistance, the conditions of the labour market, poverty assistance and work linkages. The data used in the study come from a research funded by the United Nations Development Programme and conducted with the support of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Solidarity in three provinces in Turkey. The findings of the study suggest that the receipt of poverty assistance does not necessarily reduce the incentives to work. The issue is much more complex, and low-wage labour market conditions and the traits of the poor are associated with the receipt of aid and the work attitudes of the poor. The study is expected to contribute to the understanding of the problem of poverty, the work attitudes of the poor and the system of poverty assistance in Turkey as well as the ways of using social assistance more effectively and include or keep the poor in the labour market.

Keywords: poverty, provision of poverty assistance, work, labour market, labour force participation, Turkey.

Introduction

There are several approaches to the explanation of poverty (Jargowsky and Bane, 1990; Morçöl and Gitmez, 1995; Jennings, 1999; Gül and Sallan Gül, 2007). The neo-liberal or conservative approach focuses on the unwillingness of the poor to work and, thus, the poor themselves are regarded as responsible for their plight (Mead, 1989 and 1998; Kaus, 1995; Murray, 1995). On the other hand, the human resources approach sees the roots of the problem in the lack of education and skills of the poor preventing them from finding a decent job in the market and establishing a sustainable life (Gil-

bert, 1995; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Giddens, 1998; Midgley, 1999). A socialist or social democratic approach views poverty as a result of the socio-economic structure of the society and the capitalist system (Plant, 1990; Roche, 1992; Galbraith, 1992 and 1996). Accordingly, social policy research underlines the issues of inequality and wealth rather than poverty (Orton and Rowlingson, 2007). Similarly, building their argument on data from different countries, Buğra and Keyder (2005: 3) point to the need for an 'explicit policy attention beyond standard growth inducing strategies'. Van der Hoeven (2000: 1) adds to that by saying that '[e]fforts to reduce poverty mainly by stimulating growth are not sufficient and need to be complemented by efforts to reduce inequality'.

This paper is an attempt to enhance the understanding of poverty, its causes, and the poverty assistance system in Turkey. In the study, the Handler and Hasenfeld's approach (2007), in which poverty and inequality are seen to be intertwined, is applied. Other related factors causing or increasing inequality and poverty are also taken into consideration. The relationship between labour force participation and the receipt of welfare assistance in three socio-economically developed provinces in Turkey (Kocaeli, Mersin and Denizli) are explored. The data come from a research funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and supported by the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Solidarity (GDSAS).

1. Employment, Labour Market and Poverty in Turkey

Policies related to poverty reduction at the macro level involve economic development, economic stability, social security, tax and wage policies as well as policies to lessen inequalities and exclusion. Stable and sustainable growth in economy and employment are considered as the most effective way of boosting socioeconomic welfare and reducing poverty (WB, 2001: 45; Gardiner and Millar, 2006: 352). Economic crises, natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, etc.), global pressures on wages, widespread informal employment along with low wages,¹ persistent high unemployment and inequalities and the lack of education or work skills among new migrants² all have deteriorated the living conditions of low-income people in Turkey. These forces and factors not only reduce the opportunities for the vulnerable people but also reinforce deprivation and perpetuate poverty. Moreover, they make it difficult to work one's way out of poverty and off public assistance system (Şenses, 2001; Gül and Sallan Gül, 2004; Tunalı, 2004; UNDP, 2004).

According to the Turkish Statistics Institute (TSI), 17% of the total population was in poverty in 2008 and 27% in 2002 in Turkey (TÜİK, 2010). Economic recovery helped the number of the poor decrease. Yet, inequalities in income and opportunities have limited the extent to which the gains of economic growth trickle down to low-income people and deterred them from avoiding poverty. Besides, there is a continuing controversy about the desultory structure of poverty assistance system and the adequacy of the resources and policies to reduce poverty, on the one hand, and about the work attitudes of the beneficiaries, on the other hand. Accordingly, efforts to urge the employable aid beneficiaries into job market have been intensified, and the funds allocated to the needy on the base of work projects have increased in recent years.

The structural characteristics of economic sectors and the conditions of labour market in Turkey also restrict the opportunities for the disadvantaged, particularly those with little or no education and skills, and impede the efforts to reduce poverty. For instance, the prevalence of informal jobs and low wages in several economic sectors has an adverse impact on the living conditions of the disadvantaged. The proportion of informal employment is around 50% of the total employment in Turkey. Yet, this rate reaches 98% among unpaid family workers and workers on daily wage in agriculture (TÜİK, 2006a). Besides, unregistered employment is much higher among women than men in such sectors as family businesses, textile, agriculture, cleaning, etc. The ratio of women working in informal jobs in 2002 was 71.5% compared to 43.5% of men (DPT, 2004b).

Employment is considered to be very important in the context of poverty, because poor people depend on the use of their labour for earning their livelihood (Osmani, 2005). However, working is not always a guarantee for the disadvantaged to avoid poverty and achieve self-reliance due to the lack of decent jobs available to the poor in the market. In fact, working people constitute the majority of the poor in Turkey (Erdoğan, 1997; Gül and Sallan Gül, 2004). The highest poverty rate is observed among the workers on daily wage followed by self-employed and unpaid family workers (DPT, 2004a). In addition, the rate of poverty among workers doing temporary jobs is four times higher than among those doing

¹ The minimum wage was around USD 200 in 1999. Yet, it declined to USD 120 in the aftermath of the crisis of 2001 (Tunalı, 2004). The minimum wage reached USD 200 in 2003 again. Afterwards, it continued to grow and reached USD 300 in 2004, and USD 350 in 2005 (Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı, 2006). It went down to USD 300 in 2006 and seems to have been stabilized at around USD 300.

² It was calculated that the number of people who migrated to Istanbul each year was around 150,000 during the 2000s.

permanent jobs with a regular pay (WB, 2005). Moreover, agricultural workforce and urban workers in informal sectors form the largest group of the poor in Turkey. In the agriculture sector, the poverty rate was 36.4% in 2002, reached 41% in 2004 and fell down to 37.2% in 2005 (TÜİK, 2006b).

2. Poverty Assistance System in Turkey

One of the major types of non-contributory social assistance in Turkey is the poverty assistance delivered by the GDSAS headquartered in Ankara and the social solidarity foundations (SSFs) established as the front-line providers of cash and in-kind poverty assistance in all 81 provinces and 850 districts. Provincial governors and sub-governors preside over the SSFs and chair the board of trustees. Besides, there are other public or civic institutions providing social protection and poverty assistance in Turkey such as the Social Services and Child Protection Institute (SSCPI), the Ministries of Health and National Education, Red Crescent, municipalities and community centres.

There are different in-kind and cash assistances provided to the poor, including health, income, heating, education, rent, employment, food and nutrition assistances (Sallan Gül, 2002; Bilici, 2003). The largest expenditure item of the SSFs was the health-related expenditures until 2005, when the health programme was handed over to the Ministry of Health. After this transfer, the health expenditures by the SSFs have declined enormously. Yet, the amount of resources dedicated to employment and income creating projects (micro credit projects, local enterprises, job training, etc.) has sharply increased since 2003.

3. Research Sample and Data Collection

The field research was conducted on 6–24 February 2006 in the provinces of Kocaeli, Mersin and Denizli, all of which have strong economic capacity to generate employment.¹ The main criteria used in selecting the three provinces included the socioeconomic development level, the structure of local economy, migration rate and the number of the poor receiving poverty assistance. The research data were collected through in-depth interviews with the directors of all the selected SSFs, survey questionnaires and focus group interviews (FGIs). A survey questionnaire on services provided by the SSFs and the number, workload and expertise of the SSFs' staff was conducted only in the central district SSFs of the selected three provinces. Besides, the FGIs with 10 to 12 beneficiaries were carried out only in three central district SSFs in each of the provinces. Moreover, in-depth interviews with 5 or 6 employers and 5 or 6 employees in leading economic sectors as well as the sectors in which the poor and unskilled labour worked were conducted. Finally, secondary data from different sources such as the GDSAS, the Prime Ministerial Higher Inspection Board (the Board), the State Planning Agency (SPA) and the TSI on some variables were also used.

4. Poverty Assistance and Labour Force Participation of the Poor

Characteristics of the SSFs

The findings of the present research pointed to several problems in the SSFs. The number of employees in the SSFs was inadequate, the employees were overloaded, and they received meagre in-service training. Besides, there were no social workers in the visited SSFs. Some specialists had degrees in related fields such as sociology, public administration, public relations or economics, whereas others had degrees in such fields as theology, painting and physics. Moreover, many of the regular SSFs' employees had low levels of educational attainment and worked under contracts or were transferred from other major governmental offices. Thus, there were disparities in wages and work conditions, imbalances and ambiguities in the institutional status of the SSFs' staff and directors, and the majority of them emphasized low levels of the feeling of organizational belonging and satisfaction. Furthermore, none of the interviewed SSFs' directors had any expertise in the fields related to social work, social assistance or management, and some of them had only high school certificates.

¹ In terms of socioeconomic development, the province of Denizli, with a population of 850,029, ranked 12, whereas the province of Kocaeli, with a population of 1,206,085, ranked 4 among the 81 provinces in 2003. The province of Mersin, with a population of 1,651,400, ranked 17 in 2003, while in 1996 it occupied the 10th position (DPT, 2003).

During the FGIs, it was found out that the lack of clear standards and objective criteria in determining the amount and type of poverty assistance created distrust among the claimants and beneficiaries in the SSFs. Too much discretion was left to the staff in deciding who deserved assistance. The most demanded types of assistance by the poor were coal, food, cash, especially the cash received through the conditional cash transfer (the CCT) programme¹. As an income transfer to young needy mothers with children, the CCT programme was described as *'the salary of their children'* and a means to keep their children in school. Cash transfers for children in the CCT programme were provided through the mothers.

Views on poverty assistance and profiles of the poor

The findings of the field research showed that poverty seemed to concentrate in female-headed families with children, in households with dependents as well as among the elderly and people with mental disorders, physical disabilities or illnesses. Yet, the interviewed SSFs' directors pointed out that the proportion of the young unemployed applicants as well as the demand for and the amount of poverty assistance in general drastically increased after the earthquake in 1999 and the economic crisis of 2000–2001. In the view of the SSFs' directors and staff, one of the main reasons for this increase was that a relatively large group of the poor were used to living on assistance or seeing poverty assistance as a contribution to their household income. The non-contributory and non-reciprocal nature of poverty assistance along with the perception of assistance *'as a right'* by the recipients also increased the demand for aid. Thirdly, the amount of poverty assistance increased because the group of the vulnerable people served by the SSFs expanded to include the victims of terrorism, refugees and Turkish immigrants from other countries. Fourthly, the encouragement by local and national politicians for the poor to apply for state aid seemed to play a role in the process of the increase in claims for poverty assistance, a sign of the abuse of poverty assistance by politicians. Finally, the governors, vice governors or sub-governors sometimes turned to the resources allocated for poverty struggle as easy-to-use money in order to finance their various activities.

The amount of poverty assistance, however, was considered by the recipients and the staff of the SSFs as inadequate in general, even though it was seen by many recipients as critical in meeting their urgent needs in their desperate times. The SSFs' directors agreed that poverty assistance was not so *'generous'* to stifle the recipients' willingness to work. They saw it as an emergency aid or sometimes as a temporary complement to household income of the poverty-stricken families. During the FGIs, it was stated that for young women with children poverty assistance meant *'protection by the state in order to live an honourable life, keep their familial and moral integrity and raise their children until they get a degree and a job'*.

Box 1. Excerpt from the statement by a female focus group participant in Kocaeli

'I am 27 years old. I got married at the age of 13. I have four children. My husband left us. My neighbours sometimes give us some food. I lived without water and electricity for a year. I used water from the fountain and candles because I had no money. I also have great difficulty in paying my rents and other costs. I do some simple jobs for the neighbours to earn our livelihood. My son, attending a secondary school, sells bagels in order to contribute to our family income. We have received poverty assistance from the SSF since 2004. I do not trust anybody except myself and the state.'

Among the SSFs' directors and staff, there was a common opinion causing a reaction to and an increase in some negative attitudes among the natives of the provinces towards the recipients of poverty assistance: the majority of poverty assistance was thought to go to *'the easterners'* and *'migrants'*. In some cases, the term *'easterners'* (people of Kurdish origin) was used to refer to the beneficiaries. Such opinions and attitudes were observed towards *'the easterners'* in Mersin and Denizli and towards both *'the easterners'* and *'the Romans'* in Kocaeli (in such statements as *'the money of the state is being spent for those who do not pay their taxes. If they need aid due to their poverty, how come they have 10 or 15 children?'*). The focus group participants who were migrants were mostly from east and

¹ The CCT program in Turkey consists of a regular cash transfer to poor families, mostly mothers, for their children's school expenditures on the condition that they attend school and participate in regular medical consultations.

southeast Turkey. For instance, it was stated that there were over 30 new neighbourhoods established by the migrants in the city of Mersin in recent years. All the visited SSFs' directors stated that transportation aid in the form of cash or bus tickets was easily provided in order to encourage the migrants to return back to their home towns.

Labour market conditions and participation

The economic structure, employment opportunities and labour market conditions of the provinces seemed to have an important impact on labour market participation of the poor. Low level or lack of education, work skills and experience were the major obstacles in finding employment with a decent pay in the market. Even though Kocaeli¹ was the province generating most employment among the selected provinces, it was found that its potential to generate secure job places for the poor and unskilled labour was very low. It seemed to be quite complicated for someone without necessary work skills to find a decent job in Kocaeli. Although some jobs seemed easy to find for the poor and unskilled labour (such as car wash, cleaning, shelf organizing, security, etc.), these jobs were temporary in nature and not seen as preferable due to harsh work conditions, long work hours, low-wages and the lack of insurance coverage.

The findings of the research showed that the poor tended to crowd in construction, transportation and agriculture in Mersin, which has a mild climate, affordable living and seasonal employment opportunities in agricultural sectors and transportation. However, the continuing intense migration of peasants from east and southeast Anatolia seemed to shape labour market conditions in Mersin. Working on low daily wages was prevalent in Mersin. Almost all focus group participants stated that they struggled to find work, worked in field jobs such as fruit and vegetable picking and packing in the summer. In Denizli, textile and agriculture are the pioneer sectors of the local economy.² Around 75% of the employees in the Organized Industrial Zone worked in the textile sector. Textile prevailed in urban areas, whereas agriculture was concentrated in rural areas. Yet, the poor were not able to escape poverty due to low wages, and therefore, they applied for poverty assistance.

The interviews with the employers in the three provinces revealed that there was no awareness of the socioeconomic status of job applicants, because all applicants were considered as needy. The employers pointed out that some strong textile companies in Denizli and big commercial and industrial companies in Kocaeli provided social security to their workers and paid their wages regularly. However, in smaller companies, payments were irregular and work hours were longer. Several employers stated that unregistered employment was an established practice and an unofficial rule, especially in agriculture, construction and textile sectors. Some male recipients were either asked to sign a resignation letter before starting to work or they were employed for periods shorter than 6 months and laid off and hired again in order for the employers to avoid compensation. Many companies registered their workers in the social security programme but did not pay their premiums or laid off workers in order to avoid leave or retirement compensations. Such practices prevailed in piece-work garment production in Denizli. State regulations, supervisions and penalties to prevent unregistered employment seemed inadequate, adversely influencing competition and registered employment.

Work attitudes of the poor and labour force participation

The results of the research indicated that the SSFs' directors and staff tended to have gender-biased and patriarchal opinions about the labour force participation of the beneficiaries. For instance, in the view of the SSFs' staff, it was the male spouse who was supposed to provide for the family's livelihood. Accordingly, female recipients at any age were often not expected to work. Women were perceived as care-takers and home-makers who sufficed scarce family income to satisfy their basic needs and who kept the family intact. However, the pervasiveness of jobs in textile sector, particularly in piece-work garment production in Denizli, and the prevalence of agriculture in rural Denizli and Mersin seemed to positively affect women's labour market participation.

¹ Kocaeli is one of the most developed provinces in Turkey. It is the second most developed industrial centre, following Istanbul, with approximately 400 first class, 7,000 second and third class unsanitary industrial enterprises, its manufacturing production comprises 13% of the total manufacturing production in Turkey. The province of Kocaeli hosts 18 of the first 100 and 75 of the first 500 biggest industrial enterprises in Turkey (DPT, 2003).

² The share of Denizli in Turkey increased from 1.31% to 3.75% in the total number of enterprises in the manufacturing industry and from 1.25% to 3.02% in the total employment from 1988 to 1997 (DPT, 2003).

Box 2. Excerpt from the statement by a female focus group participant in Mersin

'I am from Erzurum, I am 40 years old. I graduated from elementary school. I have six children. One of my daughters is married. My husband does not take care of us... Irresponsible... One of my daughters works as a dishwasher in a restaurant and earns YTL 10 (around USD 8) daily. The other works in agricultural jobs for YTL 6 to 7.5 (USD 5 or 6). I would do any job even if it was a cleaning job. Yet, it is not easy to find a job anymore.'

The lack of proper jobs in the market rather than the unwillingness of the poor to work seemed to have the major impact on the labour force participation of the poor. The poor constantly looked for employment, but it was difficult for them to find a decent job, and the ones they found were all temporary, hard, low-waged and unregistered. In all three provinces, *a decent work often meant for the recipients a secure job with a minimum wage*. They maintained that *it would have meant to refuse a job offer if they had asked for social security*. *No recipient stated that he/she worked unregistered just to receive assistance when they had a chance to work in a decent job*. *In fact, many focus group participants did not hesitate to mention that they often worked in informal sector jobs while receiving poverty assistance*.

It would be easy to understand why it was difficult to find a decent job in the market, if one considered that an important proportion of male beneficiaries were ex-prisoners, disabled or chronically ill. Similarly, there were some beneficiaries who were caring for a disabled, a bedridden patient or a child at home and thus were not able to work and needed assistance. Some focus group participants claimed that they had worked when they had found a job in previous years, and they were still looking for a job.

Even though Denizli had some employment advantages for women, irregular and low wages, employment without social security registration, unsanitary work conditions, long work hours and patriarchal family relations did not seem to provide a suitable work environment for women. Girls begun working from early ages onwards, but their earnings were taken away by either their fathers or, after marriage, by their husbands. In some cases, marriage did not deter female employees from working, but youthfulness was seen as a necessary condition in textile sector, and thus, it would be difficult to find a job after the age of 40.

The views of employees on labour market conditions, employment and poverty assistance

During the interviews with the employees, a lack of secure and stable jobs, low wages, abundance of unskilled labour and their continuing inflow, high employee turnover, harsh work conditions, prevalence of informal employment and the inefficiency of state regulations were pointed out as the most pressing and prevalent problems. It was pointed out by the interviewed employees that unregistered employment was widespread in the sectors where competition was high and in which unskilled labour crowded.

Construction and agricultural jobs on daily wages, employment in cleaning, textile, marketing, garbage collection, transportation and commerce along with working as street vendor or in bazaars, among others, were found to be abundant in the market, but they provided mainly seasonal, temporary and uninsured job opportunities. The interviewed employees stated that they had no choice but to work in jobs without social security because of the fact that they had to provide for the livelihood of their families. In addition, similar to the claims of the focus group participants, some interviewed employees said that practices such as signing a resignation letter before starting to work or short term employment to avoid compensation were common. *Due to such practices and the characteristics of the labour market, working was not seen as a guarantee for avoiding poverty*. The field observations showed that *even the employed people who were interviewed felt worried about falling into poverty and that many considered themselves as poor and in need of state aid*.

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of the research do not indicate a strong relation between workforce participation and the receipt of poverty assistance. Besides, there is no evidence proving that the beneficiaries quit their jobs to receive poverty assistance. On the contrary, the great majority of the employable benefi-

ciaries strive to make their living by working; but when they lose their low-waged and often unregistered jobs or encounter a crisis, they do temporarily need urgent assistance and apply for social assistance. However, working seems irrational and even impossible for many recipients due to low-wages paid in informal sector jobs without any social insurance. The practices of unregistered employment, the inadequacy of regulations and sanctions to prevent unregistered employment, high migration rates, the lack of jobs with a decent pay, exclusion, partisanship and nepotism all diminish decent employment opportunities for the poor and unskilled workers. The poor constantly move back and forth between informal or unregistered jobs and poverty assistance. Accordingly, *an assertion that the poor leave their decent jobs to benefit from temporary and insufficient poverty assistance does not seem valid.*

The research reveals that children in poverty-stricken families, especially in female-headed families, are more likely than others to inherit poverty from their families and to stay trapped in the cycle of poverty. Thus, female-headed families with children should be paid special attention in poverty reduction and in pro-poor policies. Besides, there is a need for policies to combat stigmatization, prejudice and discrimination and to decrease the exclusion of the poor and 'the easterners' not only in the process of aid delivery but also in social and economic life.

In conclusion, a joint application of social, economic, labour market and workforce policies is crucial in coping with poverty. Strategies to lessen inequalities, exclusion and discrimination on any ground should also be developed to complement the policies of poverty reduction. Moreover, state-subsidized employment and capacity building of the poor, tax exemption for minimum wage and a minimum living reduction for low-wage earners would directly increase the opportunities for the poor to find employment and earnings of low-income people. Furthermore, it could be expected that the introduction of a universal medical insurance and a guaranteed minimum income scheme along with policies to reduce unregistered employment would also help protect the poor, low-waged, minimum-waged and unregistered employees and other disadvantaged groups against poverty. Finally, economic growth and employment expansion currently being experienced in Turkey could be considered to help fight against poverty.

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SKURDAS, PARAMOS TEIKIMAS IR DARBAS: TURKIJSOS ATVEJIS

Prof. dr. Hüseyin Gül

Süleymano Demirelio universitetas

Prof. dr. Songül Sallan Gül

Süleymano Demirelio universitetas

Santrauka

Straipsnyje keliamas klausimas, ar paramos skurdo atveju gavimas slopina paskatas dalyvauti darbo rinkoje ir sukelia pagalbos gavėjų priklausomybę. Šiuo tikslu analizuojami keletas rodiklių, įskaitant skurstančiųjų charakteristikas ir požiūrius, paramos skurdo atveju pakankamumą ir rūšis, darbo rinkos sąlygas, sąsajas tarp paramos skurdo atveju bei darbo. Mokslinei analizei buvo panaudoti duomenys, gauti *Jungtinių Tautų vystymo programos (UNDP)* finansuojamo tyrimo metu. Tyrimą rėmė Socialinės paramos ir solidarumo generalinis direktoratas (GDSAS). Tyrimas buvo atliekamas trijose Turkijos provincijose. Atlikus tyrimą nustatyta, kad skurdo atveju gaunant paramą nebūtinai sumažėja paskatos dirbti. Šis reiškinys yra daug sudėtingesnis ir mažo darbo užmokesčio darbo rinkos sąlygos bei skurstančiųjų savybės labiau susijusios su jų gaunama socialine parama bei jų darbine elgsena. Tikėtina, kad šis tyrimas prisidės prie skurdo problemos suvokimo, skurstančiųjų darbinės elgsenos bei Turkijos socialinės paramos sistemos mokslinio pažinimo, taip pat atskleis, kaip efektyviau naudotis socialinės paramos sistema ir įtraukti skurstančiuosius į darbo rinką arba kaip juos ten išlaikyti.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: skurdas, paramos skurdo atveju teikimas, darbas, darbo rinka, dalyvavimas darbo rinkoje, Turkija.