

The Role of Social Assistance in the Self-Sufficiency of the Poor: The Case of Türkiye from the Perspective of Social Assistance Inspection Officers

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Abstract: *Financial empowerment of the poor is a part of overall social development and is key in ensuring equality of opportunity and adding to social justice. One means to achieve such a goal may be social assistance practices. The ultimate goal of social assistance is to help the poor overcome their neediness and become self-sufficient through governmental in-kind and cash support. Thus, the present study attempts to uncover the impacts of social assistance on the poor in becoming self-sufficient in Türkiye from the perspective of social assistance inspection officers. Accordingly, we recruited 30 social assistance inspection officers across Türkiye using snowball sampling in the qualitative phase and 358 using stratified sampling in the quantitative phase. Descriptively presenting the qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews, we collected the quantitative data using the Social Assistance Providers' Perception of Social Assistance Scale. Overall, participating inspection officers' opinions imply that the Turkish social assistance system leads beneficiaries to be alienated from registered employment, that the demand-based social assistance approach fortifies the culture of poverty, that the availability of various types of assistance programs leads to more people engaging in unregistered employment, and that social assistance has an indirect effect on the transmission of poverty across generations.*

Introduction

Social assistance can be counted among explicit means of fighting poverty. Its inherent characteristics in providing financial income to beneficiaries and alleviating social exclusion allow social assistance to be able to combat many aspects of poverty. Moreover, social assistance can mediate the redistribution of resources and employment-increasing policies. The term 'poverty' - a primary target area of struggle for social assistance - was first coined by Seebohm Rowntree in 1901. Offering a poverty threshold in his research in York, England, Rowntree described this threshold as "the situation where families cannot satisfy their minimum needs such as food and clothing to maintain a healthy life" and classified poverty into primary and secondary poverty. Accordingly, while primary poverty refers to the situation where one cannot meet their basic physical needs, secondary poverty is defined as the situation in which one spends or wastes their earnings elsewhere despite generating income to meet their basic needs (Rowntree, 1901 p. 96-97).

Drewnowski (1977: 189) defines poverty as "the state of not being able to generate sufficient income to meet basic needs required by the minimum living standards." The World Bank (1990) describes poverty as 'the inability to reach minimum living standards,' and Lipton (1997) construes it as a condition where per capita consumption remains below a certain level. According to O'Boyle (1999:282), poverty is a situation where one cannot meet the fundamental physical needs to

survive. In addition, Townsend (1979) expresses poverty as the lack of opportunities requiring not only income and consumption but also social harmony. Hence, individuals / families can be considered poor if they lack the resources necessary to adjust to eating habits, living conditions, and behaviors in their community.

Social assistance practices appear in many forms throughout the history of the fight against poverty, particularly volunteering (Dicleli, 1946). Helping the needy is also recognized as a moral responsibility in almost every community. Moreover, the warrantor role of states in the security and welfare of citizens mandates social assistance (Ay & Akan, 2017). It is prudent to assert that social assistance in the modern sense emerged with the Industrial Revolution, a period that highlighted the significance of social assistance against increasing unemployment, excessive migration from rural to urban areas, aging population, and shrinking family structure (Ay & Akan, 2017). Following the Second World War, social assistance in the traditional sense was largely replaced by an understanding of social rights. It was then followed by the understanding of the social state that allocates the sole responsibility for social services and social assistance to the state itself (DDK, 2009, p. 2).

According to Howell (2001), 'social assistance is a benefit in cash or in-kind, financed by the state and usually provided on the basis of a means or income test.' Transfers should then both reduce poverty and be considered a means of improving the financial and social capacities of the needy. Thus, social assistance should also be a means to increase one's social and economic participation and contribute to equality of opportunity. Kesgin (2014, p.11) defines social assistance as in-kind and cash transfers provided by the state to individuals in need. Dilik (1980, p. 55), on the other hand, addresses social assistance concerning the state and the real sector and explains it as a two-meaning term. While the first refers to organizations' social expenditures, the second points out to the state's social security expenditures.

Although the descriptions above evidently do not offer a universally recognized depiction of social assistance, it seems to be usually associated with poverty and need. Thus, in the broadest sense, social assistance is a means to improve socioeconomic status and reduce social exclusion among the poor. It is simply offered within practices aimed at satisfying the fundamental needs of such people in the short term and contributing to their social harmony and welfare in the medium and long run. Besides, the state's engagement in these practices is considered an aspect of the social state understanding.

Social Assistance in Türkiye

Public social assistance in Türkiye is undertaken by exclusive governmental organizations - Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundations (SASF) - in 81 provinces and 1,003 districts through deploying the resources of the Social Assistance and Solidarity Encouragement Fund (SASEF). In this sense, the perceptions of these foundations about the overall social assistance system should be acknowledged in identifying problems and improving the system, given their sound organizational structure and substantial experience. The current social assistance system in Türkiye offers 43 types of assistance, predominantly in in-cash. In legal terms, eligibility to benefit from social assistance depends on pre-determined criteria: being in a state of poverty and need for various reasons/still suffering from poverty despite obtaining benefits pointed out in Law No. 2022, not receiving a salary or generating income from the Social Security Institution (SSI), or being disabled receiving a salary or generating income from the SSI, whose treatment expenses and function-enhancing orthopedic and other auxiliary medical equipment are not covered by the SSI expenditures (Article 17). In the context of social assistance, neediness is defined as one's making a living of their household solely on per capita income less than one-third of the net minimum wage. Applications of those meeting the criteria above are received through the Integrated Social Assistance System (ISAS) and are submitted to the foundation's board of trustees after a comprehensive investigation by social assistance inspection officers. The relevant directive for social assistance indicates that "results of investigations and applications are ratified by the Board of Trustees (Article 20), and those deemed eligible to receive social assistance from the corresponding SASF are called beneficiaries (Article 21).

Their overreaching field experience with social assistance beneficiaries seems to allow SASFs to operate in an organizational structure beyond the classical bureaucratic structure of other governmental institutions. In addition, SASFs can be considered exclusive governmental agencies regarding the functioning of the social assistance system and institutional capacity, which, in turn, underscores the significance of how social assistance inspection officers in SASFs perceive the social assistance system.

Öğülmüş (2011) previously inquired about the perceptions of Turkish public servants (n = 111) and beneficiaries on social assistance through in-depth interviews and concluded that the social assistance system bears many problems but does not cause a poverty subculture. Moreover, Çoban et al. (2011) conducted interviews with 33 SASF employees in 8 provinces regarding the impacts of social assistance in reducing poverty and found some traces of efficiency of social assistance at the household level, but it was not the case at the macro level. In the study by Topuz (2015) with 349 social assistance inspection officers, the findings implied that the excessive number of investigations per day shortens the time allocated to applications, that difficulties in settling diverse issues raised by applicants appear as further problems in investigations, that distribution duration of social assistance should be rights- and contingency-based among the needy, and the prevalent type of assistance requested is in-cash assistance. In a similar approach, Doğru (2016) addressed the social assistance system from the perspectives of beneficiaries and SASF employees in Eskisehir. In-depth interviews with 20 SASF employees demonstrated that social assistance discourages beneficiaries from being employed despite gradually reducing poverty. The literature also hosts some other studies offering similar results regarding the effectiveness of SASFs in social assistance (Apaydın, 2011; Altındağ, 2007; Aca, 2018). Yet, İpek (2016) addressed the issue of localization of social assistance through in-depth interviews with social assistance practitioners and concluded that social assistance is not backed by social work, resulting in restrictions on the impacts of social assistance on economic development and, therefore, relative dependency. It seems that previous research consistently focused on the effectiveness of SASFs in social assistance at the regional level. Moreover, despite a plethora of studies in the literature on social assistance in Türkiye, the scholarly interest seems to have missed evaluating the self-sufficiency of the poor - one of the fundamental justifications of social assistance - from the perspective of social assistance inspection officers. Therefore, we believe addressing the social assistance system from the perspective of practitioners across Türkiye through a mixed-method design would add to the existing scholarly knowledge of social assistance.

Method

This study employs an exploratory sequential design, a mixed-method research design that is often deemed convenient to implement by a single researcher and less complex than parallel mixed designs. In sequential designs, the qualitative research stage is followed by the quantitative data collection and analysis stage. Therefore, research questions are tailored to the previous phase (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2015, p. 183). A sample flow chart of the design is demonstrated in Figure 1 (Creswell & Clark, 2014; p. 77).



Figure 1. A sample flow chart of exploratory sequential design

The ultimate goal of an exploratory sequential design is to discover the problem situation of the subject through qualitative methods since little is known about the target population. Thus, we performed in-depth interviews social assistance inspection officers employed in SASFs to elicit their perceptions and experiences regarding social assistance in Türkiye after obtaining ethical approval from Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University (No: 23 (2020-12 dated 02.05.2020) and relevant permissions from the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS; No: E-94439167-010.99-353158 dated 02.12.2021). Thematic codes were generated from the qualitative data and are presented

descriptively. We then analyzed the in-depth interviews with participants using the MAXQDA program.

We utilized the snowball sampling method in interviews and, accordingly, terminated interviews when the gathered qualitative data was saturated (i.e., when the data became repeated). Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes, and we performed interviews with 30 participants from 8 provinces and 16 districts. Prior to the research, we reviewed the relevant literature and cast previous findings on the problem situation into semi-structured interview questions. The questions were then finalized upon the feedback and remarks from experts employed in the General Directorate of Social Assistance of the MoFSS and academics of social work.

In the quantitative phase of the study, we planned to administer an online survey to social assistance inspection officers. We used proportional stratified sampling to select a sample in a target population of 3,935 social assistance inspection officers with varying numbers between regions. To recruit a sample with maximum representation and minimum sampling errors, the sampling rate of the various groups in the sample must be the same as in the target population, which can be ensured by proportional stratified sampling (Gay, 1987; Monette et al., 1990 as cited in Özen & Gül, 2010, p. 402). Since the size of the target population is known, we adopted the formula $n = N * p * q / (N - 1) + p * q$ to calculate the sample size in the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) Level 1 regions (tolerance in estimation = 0.05, expected rate of occurrences in the population = 0.5, significance = 0.05, and $t = 1.96$). Consequently, the calculation yielded a sample size of 350 inspection officers, and we collected the data from a total of 358 participants.

Table 1. Sampling within NUTS Level 1 Regions

CODE	Region (Provinces)	Number of Inspection Officers	Number of Inspection Officers Included in the Sample
TR1	Istanbul	306	25
TR2	Western Marmara	151	14
TR3	(Tekirdag, Edirne, Kirklareli, Balikesir, Canakkale)	403	32
TR4	Aegean	251	23
TR5	(Izmir, Aydin, Denizli, Manisa, Afyonkarahisar, Kutahya, Usak)	270	25
TR6	Eastern Marmara	513	40
TR7	(Bursa, Eskisehir, Bilecik, Kocaeli, Sakarya, Duzce, Bolu)	257	23
TR8	Western Anatolia	309	30
TR9	(Ankara, Konya, Karaman)	202	20
TRA	Mediterranean	234	25
TRB	(Adana, Antalya, Burdur, Hatay, Isparta, Mersin, Kahramanmaras, Osmaniye)	413	40
TRC	Central Anatolia	626	61
TOTAL		3,935	358

An online survey method brings numerous conveniences to researchers and can be shown as a more potent alternative in data compilation compared to telephone, face-to-face, or mail surveys. It is handy when it is needed to collect data from a large number of people in many different places (Çakıroğlu, 2008). In this study, we used the Social Assistance Providers’ Perception of Social Assistance Scale (SAPPSAS) to collect quantitative data online after seeking its validity and reliability properties (Ortakaya & Karagöl, 2022) and compared the findings with the findings in the qualitative phase.

Findings

Participants’ demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, educational attainment, and seniority) are descriptively presented in Table 2. Accordingly, the majority was males and aged 26-45 years. The dominant portion of participants had an undergraduate and postgraduate education. The majority also had at least four years of seniority, which may be sound evidence that their experience could be relied on in investigating the subject.

Table 2. Participants’ Demographic Characteristics

		Sample in Qualitative Phase (n)	Sample in Quantitative Phase (n)
Gender	Female	12	122
	Male	18	236
Age (years)	25 and younger	0	8
	26-35	16	138
	36-45	11	172
	46-55	2	38
	56 and older	1	2
Educational attainment	High school	0	5
	Associate degree	0	33
	Undergraduate	26	129
	Postgraduate	4	191
Seniority (years)	Less than 1	0	12
	1-3	2	14
	4-10	13	173
	11-20	14	132
	More than 20	1	27

Findings on Social Assistance Beneficiaries

We interpreted the topic of social assistance beneficiaries from the perspective of social assistance inspection officers within five themes having emerged in the interviews: dependence, alienation from employment, unregistered employment, the transmission of poverty across generations, and the variety of social assistance services.

Dependency:

The ultimate goal of social assistance is to gratify one’s state of neediness; thus, the provision of assistance is expected to cease when one’s such state is eliminated. It seems that people receiving assistance can overcome their neediness only by integrating into social life, particularly working life. However, becoming dependent on social assistance is likely to delay or hinder their integration, which further nourishes a culture of receiving social assistance, inability to overcome neediness, and misuse of assistance. In this context, participants frequently emphasized that beneficiaries are becoming dependent on social assistance, which turns social assistance into a permanent service provided only to specific beneficiaries. What is more, they claimed beneficiaries becoming dependent on social assistance are likely not to prefer to be employed and to perceive social assistance as their indispensable right. They also stated that beneficiaries conceive of social assistance as “salary,” that even some beneficiaries ask why they cannot receive a raise in their in-cash social assistance, and that dependency on social assistance makes some beneficiaries insistent on assistance as if the state owed them.

“Simply, some beneficiaries have become dependent on social assistance. They remain indifferent to employment and think whatever is provided as assistance is enough for their livelihood. Conditional cash transfers are in-cash aid provided to beneficiaries every two months. Moreover, some benefit from governmental assistance. They earn almost half the minimum wage (P1).”

Overlapping with the qualitative data, quantitative findings also showed that 0.8% of participants (n = 3) responded “strongly disagree,” 1.7% (n = 6) responded “disagree,” and 1.1% (n = 4) responded “neutral,” 38.5% (n = 138) responded “agree,” and 57.8% (n = 207) responded “strongly agree” to the statement “Financial aids within social assistance help beneficiaries become dependent on social assistance.”

Alienation from Employment:

Participants frequently emphasized social assistance beneficiaries’ state of employment as a prominent indicator of their self-sufficiency. We discovered that social assistance inspection officers usually categorize social assistance beneficiaries in relation to the state of employment or absolute

poverty threshold. They also stated that their verdict about beneficiaries is often shaped by their impressions during home visits rather than beneficiaries' statements in their applications.

Social assistance by the MoFSS also covers employment assistance. Beneficiaries aged 18-55 years who are deemed to be able to be employed can benefit from this specific type of assistance. Accordingly, those hired can benefit from one-time in-cash employment assistance in the amount of one-third of the minimum wage within 60 days from the date of their employment. Moreover, these people continue to receive conditional education and healthcare transfers for a year within their employment, but their other benefits are cut off. Nevertheless, participants asserted that they do not find this specific type of assistance sufficient to encourage engagement in working life; instead, it is essential to ensure beneficiaries' active engagement in working life in order to secure a lasting effect of social assistance in the fight against poverty. They also emphasized that beneficiaries cannot overcome poverty without encouraging them to engage in working life and that dependency only on financial support and day-to-day solutions would maintain their poverty.

In line with our findings in the qualitative phase, quantitative results demonstrated that 1.7% of participants (n = 6) responded "strongly disagree," 6.7% (n = 24) responded "disagree," 3.9% (n = 14) responded "neutral," 34.9% (n = 125) responded "agree," and 52.8% (n = 189) responded "strongly agree" to the statement "Social assistance steer beneficiaries to laziness (alienation from employment)."

Unregistered Employment

Concerning the relationship between social assistance and employment, many of the participants claimed in the interviews that beneficiaries tend to prefer unregistered employment to continue "exploiting" social assistance. This may be attributed to a possible strong belief that they cannot be self-sufficient even if getting a job. Participants also argued that the availability of various types of assistance leads to more people engaging in unregistered employment. It can be anticipated that people may prefer unregistered employment not to be deprived of any of their benefits.

"When some apply for assistance, we offer them employment opportunities. However, most of them cunningly request unregistered employment to continue benefiting from social assistance. We, for example, have been offering electricity bill assistance for the last six months, as well as conditional cash transfers. Some beneficiaries reject registered employment for fear of being deprived of such in-cash assistance. In other words, more and more "free-riders" who tend to be employed unregistered exploit the system as more types of assistance are available. In fact, people engaged in registered employment with minimum income support remain in a more disadvantaged position than those exploiting social assistance (P15)."

The survey data also affirmed our interpretation of interview data; 2.5% of participants (n = 9) responded "strongly disagree," 6.7% (n = 24) responded "disagree," 7% (n = 25) responded "neutral," 37.2% (n = 133) responded "agree," and 46.4% (n = 167) responded "strongly agree" to the statement "Social assistance service contributes to unregistered employment."

Transmission of Poverty Across Generations

The psychological aspect of poverty is as meaningful as its financial aspect; therefore, the transmission of poverty across generations is usually discussed from a psychological perspective. In this concern, poverty is recognized as a type of social exclusion, leading to the intergenerational transmission of poverty among those with weakened ties with the community. In the in-depth interviews, participants came to this situation as a process initiated by insufficient follow-ups of social assistance, disengagement of beneficiaries in employment, exposure to social exclusion due to insufficient educational opportunities, and adverse psychological experiences. Some participants claimed that the social assistance mechanism remains insufficient to permanently combat poverty and even mediate the transmission of poverty across generations. They stated that some beneficiaries directly apply for social assistance at a young age without attempting to get involved in working life since it has become a "tradition" in their families.

"For example, particularly in Romani neighborhoods, children witness that their grandfathers used to receive assistance, and the case is also the same for their fathers. Then, they devise a perception that they "have to" receive social assistance. Early marriage is already a hallmark

of these neighborhoods. These children get married once turning 18 and come to our foundation to apply for social assistance. Since I have 20 years of seniority in this foundation and know three generations of them, I ask them how they dare apply for social assistance at 18 instead of getting a proper job. They often try to justify their applications with the claim that they are newly married and that “everybody does it!” Well, I cannot condemn them because that’s what they see and learn in their families (P8).”

In the quantitative phase, we also inquired about the views that social assistance often fails to improve beneficiaries’ state of neediness, which, in turn, leads poverty to be transmitted across generations, and that the demand-based delivery of assistance makes children of beneficiaries prone to be dependent on social assistance. Accordingly, 2.5% of participants (n = 9) responded “strongly disagree,” 13.1% (n = 47) responded “disagree,” 9.5% (n = 34) responded “neutral,” 41.9% (n = 150) responded “agree,” and 33% (n = 118) responded “strongly agree” to the statement “I think the current social assistance system has an impact on intergenerational transmission of poverty.”

Variety of Social Assistance Services

While the number of types of social assistance was only 4 in 2002, the current system offers 43 types of assistance under six main categories considering needs emerging over time: family assistance, education assistance, employment assistance, healthcare assistance, special purpose assistance, and elderly and disability assistance (2023 Yılı Faaliyet Raporu, p. 137). Yet, the availability of many types of assistance seemed to polarize participants’ views in the interviews. While the majority asserted that offering different types of assistance leads to problems, the remaining found this situation highly effective in achieving the goal of social assistance. The leading problem aired in the interviews was that the availability of considerable types of social assistance steers beneficiaries to unregistered employment, as discussed above. Based on their observations and experiences, they noted that people are willing to be employed informally or are totally alienated from employment to “enjoy” different types of social assistance.

Overlapping the dominant view in the interviews concerning this theme, 1.7% of participants (n = 6) responded “strongly disagree,” 16.8% (n = 60) responded “disagree,” 6.1% (n = 22) responded “neutral,” 44.1% (n = 158) responded “agree,” and 31.3% (n = 112) responded “strongly agree” to the statement “The availability of a wide variety of social assistance services drives beneficiaries to unregistered employment.”

Another issue related to the availability of a wide variety of assistance services was raised as the requirement of different legislative processes for each type of assistance. Participants complained that this issue creates operational confusion and difficulties in delivering social assistance. In this sense, some participants stated that it would be more functional to deliver a single type of central assistance instead of offering a wide variety of social assistance. It was also noted that a regular assistance mechanism can be implemented this way.

Findings on Access to Public Services

Fighting poverty appears in different forms in countries, and increasing and evolving poverty exacerbates the burdens on public administrations in fighting poverty. In parallel, social assistance is assuming more roles in fighting poverty, which raises questions about the sustainability of social assistance (Güneş, 2012, p.149). In this respect, we also sought participants’ opinions regarding what services, in addition to financial support, should be introduced in the fight against poverty in the context of a sustainable social assistance system. Participants expressed their opinions on both processes in the current system and how they should be tailored.

Access to Employment

Participating inspection officers reported offering employment opportunities to beneficiaries both through the Turkish Employment Agency (İSKUR) and their private sector network. They were of the opinion that enabling people to be hired may be the most effective policy in helping them become self-sufficient. However, most of the participants did not believe in a relationship between employment and social assistance.

In addition to integration-related problems in job orientation, the participants experienced situations where beneficiaries sometimes waived a potential hiring process. The issues raised,

however, may be attributed to region-specific market conditions. For example, the sterility of the job market in some regions challenges SASFs to make employment referrals. Participants' opinions on access to employment differed in the quantitative results, similar to the findings in the qualitative phase. The findings showed that 9.2% of participants (n = 33) responded "strongly disagree," 38.8% (n = 139) responded "disagree," 8.4% (n = 30) responded "neutral," 28.8% (n = 103) responded "agree," and 14.8% (n = 53) responded "strongly agree" to the statement "I think social assistance beneficiaries have difficulties in accessing employment." It should be noted that these results bear a margin of error of around 5%, as indicated in the method section.

Access to Education Services

Participants indicated that although beneficiaries have no obstacle in accessing education services, the inability to access such services may stem from difficulties due to their special conditions. They also noted that children should have free access to other skills education besides basic education.

"After all, education assistance certainly remedies some of the educational needs of beneficiaries. Yet, as I stated before, accessing education remains insufficient in modern times. One must have other distinguishing qualifications, like a good command of a foreign language (P16)."

The quantitative results demonstrated that 14.5% of participants (n = 52) responded "strongly disagree," 48.6% (n = 174) responded "disagree," 7.8% (n = 28) responded "neutral," 20.7% (n = 74) responded "agree," and 8.4% (n = 30) responded "strongly agree" to the statement "I think social assistance beneficiaries have difficulties accessing education services."

Access to Healthcare Services

Access to healthcare services in Türkiye has been dramatically improved since 2003 thanks to the Health Transformation Program (HDP). Effective social policies have initiated general health insurance (GHI) practices to increase health insurance coverage nationwide. Moreover, the management of healthcare institutions and hospitals has been transferred to the Ministry of Health, and countrywide access to healthcare services has been ensured thanks to family medicine practices (Sağlıkta Dönüşüm Programı [SDP], 2003-2011).

Although all participating inspection officers affirmed in the interviews that social assistance beneficiaries do not have difficulties accessing healthcare services, the findings in the quantitative phase revealed that some participants thought the opposite. Accordingly, 23.5% of participants (n = 84) responded "strongly disagree," 58.7% (n = 210) responded "disagree," 3.9% (n = 14) responded "neutral," 7.5% (n = 27) responded "agree," and 6.4% (n = 23) responded "strongly agree" to the statement "I think that social assistance beneficiaries have difficulties accessing healthcare services."

Findings on Institutional Capacity

Board of Trustees

SASFs have the sole authority to grant social assistance. Upon Article 7 of Law No. 3294, the board of trustees, consisting of appointed and elected members, makes the final verdict on whether applicants will be granted social assistance other than regular and governmental assistance (e.g., conditional cash transfers and disability and elderly pensions).

In the interviews, participants' opinions were also polarized regarding the board of trustees being the sole authority in granting social assistance. While most participants urged that exclusive authorization to the board of trustees in granting social assistance can lead to operational problems, a few claimed that the current system offers enough flexibility to allow citizens to access social assistance more conveniently.

"We can reach citizens very quickly thanks to a greater degree of organizational flexibility in our foundation without waiting for approval from the ministry. I think the current system is reasonable and practical (P2)."

On the other hand, some participants contended that the sole authority of the board of trustees makes the social assistance system vulnerable to political interventions and casts a shadow over the equitable distribution of assistance. The findings implied that participants expect the board to take a more unambiguous stance, but the board members remain reluctant to refuse citizens' requests due to an exceeding number of applications.

“Indeed, our board of trustees can grant social assistance to anyone it deems appropriate, which may make the system vulnerable to outside intervention. What I would like to add is that the variety of social assistance should be minimized, that more than one type of assistance can be granted to the same household, and that the board should have the courage to make more radical decisions. When some citizens receive a rejection of their applications, they attempt to meet the district governor about this rejection, and the district governor mostly orders the board to accept their applications. Once they get approval, they insist on benefiting from other types of assistance. Unfortunately, we have had such unpleasant experiences **(P15)**.”

Advocating the effectiveness of the sole authority of the board of trustees in granting social assistance, a participant commented that this authority of the board makes it possible to grant assistance to those suffering exceptional situations despite being procedurally evaluated as people earning above the neediness threshold.

“Imagine a person having to provide the livelihood of 3 household members with only minimum wage. Under normal circumstances, the procedure will not allow us to grant social assistance to this citizen since s/he is deemed to earn above the pre-determined neediness threshold. Yet, once this citizen applies for social assistance with an exceptional condition, we submit their application with the applicant-report exceptional condition to the board. The board regards their condition and most probably decides to grant them social assistance **(P16)**.”

We discovered that 3.1% of participants (n = 11) responded “strongly disagree,” 15.4% (n = 55) responded “disagree,” 9.8% (n = 35) responded “neutral,” 24.3% (n = 87) responded “agree,” and 47.5% (n = 170) responded “strongly agree” to the statement “I think that the exclusive authority of the board of trustees in granting social assistance makes the social assistance system vulnerable to political interventions.”

Functioning in Social Assistance

Duplication of Benefits

The majority of inspection officers claimed that although there is almost no duplication of social assistance provided through SASFs, this problem occurs mostly in assistance granted by local governments. Despite a well-established legal infrastructure predicated on integrating local governments into SASFs regarding social assistance services, the desired level of integration has not yet been achieved. On the other hand, while some participants reported that they often cooperate with local governments and largely prevent duplication in granting social assistance, many argued that it is impossible. The quantitative findings showed that 3.6% of participants (n = 13) responded “strongly disagree,” 7.8% (n = 28) responded “disagree,” 3.6% (n = 13) responded “neutral,” 31% (n = 11) responded “agree,” and 53.9% (n = 193) responded “strongly agree” to the statement, “I think that the availability of social assistance programs in more than one governmental organization leads to duplication of benefits.”

Neediness Threshold

The neediness threshold for eligibility to benefit from social assistance is determined in Article 2 of Law No. 3294. While only those with the inability to generate income were used to be considered needy and could apply for social assistance, the neediness threshold was updated as follows in 2012 to cover employees as well: “per capita income in the household is less than 1/3 of the monthly net minimum wage for people older than 16.” Nevertheless, some participants thought the current neediness threshold is not a sound criterion for determining neediness. They stated that adopting a uniform threshold may remain unfair since every region of Türkiye demonstrates diverse socioeconomic characteristics.

“For example, one may need to pay TRY700-1500 for rent in metropolitan cities but TRY300 in other provinces or districts. Similarly, one needs to spend monthly TRY100 lira for grocery needs, but this amount becomes TRY50 or TRY30 in smaller settlements. So, it doesn’t seem appropriate to determine neediness by adopting the same criteria for every region. Determining neediness should be done considering local/regional conditions, or the calculation of the neediness threshold can be delegated to local bodies. **(P8)**.”

On the other hand, some participants mentioned that some families are apparently needy despite being classified as ineligible to benefit from social assistance according to the mentioned neediness threshold. In the interviews, this situation was also shown to be another disadvantage of people in registered employment compared to unregistered employees. Participants also indicated an opposite case; some families enjoy a high standard of living despite being classified as “poor” according to the current neediness threshold.

“The official neediness threshold sometimes prevents us from delivering assistance to those suffering from neediness. Some citizens truly need help even though their income falls above that threshold (P27).”

“We sometimes observe families with a sufficient standard of living, although they report income falling below the neediness threshold. However, the case where they are deemed eligible to receive social assistance according to paper-based procedures may raise dissatisfaction in the community and contradict moral principles (P28).”

In the quantitative phase, we found that 3.9% of participants (n = 14) responded “strongly disagree,” 10.9% (n = 39) responded “disagree,” 6.7% (n = 24) responded “neutral,” 41.3% (n = 148) responded “agree,” and 37.2% (n = 133) responded “strongly agree” to the statement “I think the neediness threshold should be updated on a regional basis.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The subject of social assistance is not yet addressed through a welfare system approach in Türkiye, leading to a kind of impasse in real-life projections of social assistance. In a sense, Türkiye still remains in limbo between residual and institutional welfare; it has neither adopted a policy aimed at saving the lowest-income segment from poverty nor achieved full institutionalization.

In this study, we address the social assistance system in Türkiye as well as the roles of SASFs in this system. Our analyses of social assistance inspection officers’ views demonstrated that the current social assistance system leads beneficiaries to be alienated from registered employment, that the demand-based social assistance approach fortifies the culture of poverty, that beneficiaries do not experience any significant difficulties in accessing public services, that the availability of various types of assistance leads to more people engaging in unregistered employment, and that institutional capacity of social assistance bears significant gaps.

Their views about social assistance beneficiaries overall imply that beneficiaries develop a dependency on social assistance over time, which further promotes a culture of poverty. Although Law No. 3294 predicates that eligible citizens are granted social assistance until they overcome their neediness, participating inspection officers claimed that beneficiaries perceive social assistance as a permanently acquired right to be presented “forever.” Our findings usually overlap with the findings of previous research on both social assistance workers and beneficiaries (Apaydın, 2011). Despite the contradictory findings of Öğülmüş (2011), our results support the idea that social assistance programs contribute to a cycle of poverty.

Türkiye implemented radical changes in the social assistance system after 2004. The transition to ISAS has introduced a system where relevant public institutions across the country can access all information on social assistance programs and beneficiaries, which is believed to largely prevent duplication in granting assistance. However, the current system still bears many issues to be improved, as mentioned in previous research (Apaydın, 2011; Aca, 2018).

Earlier studies consistently highlighted that social assistance leads people to be alienated from employment (Doğru, 2016). Yet, the literature also hosts some findings contradicting this finding. For example, Aydın (2012) concluded that social assistance only contributes to women’s alienation from employment. In the same sense, Demir (2009) concluded that social assistance does not have an adverse impact on one’s willingness to be employed. Even though our participants presented views consistent with the dominant conclusions in the literature, one should consider the impacts of overall unemployment rates and labor demand-supply mismatch on people’s alienation from employment.

In the interviews, participating inspection officers were of the opinion that the current demand-based social assistance system contributes to the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

This finding then implies the necessity of transition to a rights-based social assistance system, and this idea is championed by previous results (Topuz, 2015; Atatanır, 2016). Current legal regulations predicate some measures to settle such problems in social assistance; nonetheless, they seem to remain ineffective in practice. In this respect, these problems may effectively be settled through a robust, evidence-based, and competent inspection system in SASFs, as suggested in some previous studies (Öğülmüş, 2011).

Participants also aired some inconsistencies between targets and outcomes in social assistance distribution. Although it was highly emphasized in the interviews that the relationship between employment and social assistance is affected by a plethora of factors, ranging from a wide variety of social assistance programs to the current economic situation, our findings also point to a discrepancy between legislation and practice in the social assistance system. The phenomenon of social assistance has not been fully institutionalized in Türkiye, which boosts the diversity of thematic assistance programs and makes beneficiaries dependent on social assistance. Therefore, according to participating inspection officers, the Turkish social assistance system does not serve to enable the poor to be self-sufficient but indirectly affects the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

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