Youth labour market overview

Turkey is undergoing a demographic transition. Its population comprises 74 million people and is expected to keep growing until 2050 and begin ageing in 2025i. The share of children and youth under 25 years old reaches 45 per centii, and the 15-29 age group represents around 25 per cent of the total population – about 18 million peopleiii.

Turkey’s overall good economic growth in the past decade has not been matched by a comparable growth in job creation. In 2012, the unemployment rate was 9.2 per cent for the total population while it reached 16.3 per cent for young men aged 15-24 and 19.9 per cent for young womeniii. In urban areas youth unemployment is even higher, with one out of four young Turkish who without work.

The labour force participation, which stands at 50 per cent in the overall population, falls to 38.2 per cent among youth. In 2008, while 3.8 million Turkish youth were full-time students, 3.6 million were working, around one million were actively searching for a job and the remainder were neither attending school, nor searching for a job or workingiv. Youth not in employment, education or training (NEETs) represent 39 per cent of the 15-24 generation, which is more than double the OECD average. Young women account for the great majority of these NEETs: 53 per cent of them belong to this group, in comparison to 24 per cent of young menv.

The structural adjustment of the Turkish economy from agriculture to industry and services has created needs for skills that are not supplied on the labour market, be it from graduates of vocational schools or from universities. An important employment challenge in Turkey is therefore related to skills shortages and skills mismatches. Unemployment rates tend to rise with education levels, from 9 per cent for those who did not finish high school, to 18 per cent for high school graduates, and 19.4 per cent for tertiary education graduatesvi. On the one hand, the Turkish labour market thus calls for an increase in the number of youth that go beyond primary education, in particular young women. On the other hand, it requires remodelling high school and college education as well as increasing life-long training and skills development schemes.

In spite of women’s improved levels of general education and more open attitudes towards working women, female labour force participation and employment rates have been declining over the past decades. In as much as agriculture is the largest sector for female employment, this trend can be partly attributed to rising urbanization and falling agricultural employment. Other main factors include the system of welfare benefits, which encourages women to stay at home, and in urban areas, women’s lower education levels.

The issue of limited access to jobs for the Turkish youth is compounded by challenges related to the poor quality of the jobs they can
get. More than half of the working youth in Turkey are employed in the informal sector and an increasing proportion of them are engaged in temporary jobs. These working conditions imply low wages and limit training, career opportunities as well as social security coverage. It also makes youth more vulnerable to any changes in the economic environment. This was illustrated in 2009 when the youth unemployment rate, in the wake of the global economic crisis, peaked at 25.3 per cent against 9.3 per cent for the whole labour force that year.

**Main features of youth migration**

Turkey is traditionally known as a major migrant sending country, including labour migrants, political refugees and ethnic Kurds. The stock of Turkish emigrants worldwide is estimated at 4.3 million, with most of them living in Germany, France and the Netherlands. Since the 1980s, immigration flows to Turkey have greatly increased and Turkey has become a net immigration country since 2010. The stock of immigrants in Turkey is about 1.4 million and covers a wide range of nationalities, including a recent trend of qualified middle and upper middle class migrants of Turkish origin.

Turkish emigration flows have long been characterized by age and gender selectivity: mostly young men emigrated, leaving the country on a temporary or permanent basis to find work abroad because of poor socio-economic or living conditions in their home country. As family reunification and political asylum increased, the profile of the Turkish migrant lost these clear-cut characteristics.

In the last couple of decades, an increasing number of young qualified Turkish, in particular students, go abroad for postgraduate studies. The preferred destination countries for these highly skilled Turkish migrants are the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia.

Turkey’s geographic position attracts irregular immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, in transit towards the European Union for the most part. These irregular migrants are often young men who, when they can work, are confined to the informal economy.

Internal migration is also a major migratory pattern for Turkey. Movements are mainly from remote eastern villages to urban centres in western provinces. Internal migration dynamics predominantly affect young women and men who are involved either as direct decision-makers or as migrating family members. The 15-29 age group accounts for 55 per cent of internal migrants.

Rural-to-urban migration in particular is a young-age phenomenon, which impacts young men and women and young families with their children. Istanbul is the destination city for 30.3 per cent of the population migrating from Turkish villages. Although youth unemployment is higher in urban areas, the hope of finding a job is still the main driver of rural-to-urban migration. Other main reasons include improving living standards and finding better cultural and physical infrastructure in the cities. Environmental deterioration (drought, floods, salinization of agricultural land, etc.) and decreases in agricultural output are also determinants of rural-to-urban migration. Education purposes can also push them to go and settle in bigger cities.

Urban-to-urban migration accounts for 70 per cent of all internal migration. Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir are the top destination cities, with Istanbul alone receiving 17 per cent of all internal migrants. Given that urban-to-urban migration flows are predominant and that education levels are higher in cities, the educational level of internal Turkish migrants is higher than the average level of education across Turkey. Only 7 per cent of internal migrant youth are illiterate and young migrants from rural to urban areas comprise the less-skilled component of labour force participation.
As regards internal migrant women, their education levels are higher than those of the non-migrant female population. Their employment rate is also slightly higher than that of non-migrant women. However, rural young women who have been unpaid family workers in agriculture generally stop participating in the labour market when they move to urban areas.

Urban labour markets cannot absorb these internal migration flows and internal migrants cannot easily gain access to formal employment once settled in their destination cities. As a consequence, all internal migrants are somewhat involved in the informal sector and face economic and social integration problems. New cultures of poverty and new survival strategies have emerged among those migrants who live on the margins of urban life.

Policies, programmes and institutional framework

Gaps in policies impacting youth employment

The employment status and quality of young people’s jobs influence their migration intentions. Their employment status can also be the result of migration movements, as illustrated above by the characteristics of the rural-urban migration dynamics. The specificities and challenges of the Turkish youth labour market need to be fully recognized at the highest political level in order to address this problem. Improving policy coherence among governmental institutions and coordination between central and local institutions as regards youth employment policies would also positively impact youth employment outcomes.

The Turkish Employment Agency (ISKUR), whose institutional capacity is limited in view of the size of the Turkish labour market, does not specifically target young people in its activities and training programmes. The design of active labour-market policies (ALMPs) for youth also face the three-fold problem of the low labour force participation rates (and related limited outreach to discouraged workers), the high level of informality of the labour market, and the still too low education levels. Many young unemployed would have to go through basic skills training before being able to benefit from any ALMP measure that would build their capacities to the level requested to respond to the needs of the contemporary labour market in Turkey. This is particularly the case for the low-skilled young men from poorer regions who usually move to western Turkey during the construction and tourism season, and for rural-urban migrant women who are at risk of non-participation in the labour market.

There is also wide consensus around the idea that the Turkish education structure fuels and perpetuates labour market segmentation. Early school leaving and high NEET rate have to be tackled to improve youth labour market outcomes. A vocational education and training (VET) system connected to the labour market needs is also necessary for the long-term improvement of the youth labour market. Private sector institutions have started to offer such vocational education and lifelong training.

An interesting step linking youth labour migration and employment policies was taken with the adoption of the National Youth Employment Action Plan in November 2011. The Action Plan was prepared within the scope of the UN Joint Programme “Growth with Decent Work for All: National Youth Employment Programme and Pilot Implementation in Antalya” sponsored by the Millennium Development Goals Fund (MDG-F). The Action Plan and its Policy Recommendations pay particular attention to youth, gender issues and youth labour migration.
An improved migration policy framework

Given the contemporary migratory movements affecting Turkey, the country has acknowledged the need to revise its legislative and administrative structure in this area. In the framework of the EU accession process, Turkey is also eager to align its migration policies with the acquis communautaire in this respect. However, there is no specific focus on young migrants.

The Directorate General on Migration Management (DGMM) was established under the Ministry of Interior in order to guide the institutional reform process and to draft a comprehensive piece of legislation on migration. The Law on Foreigners and International Protection was adopted in April 2013. With three parts on “foreigners,” “international protection” and “migration management”, the law marks a significant transformation in the field of migration and asylum in Turkey. It will not only restructure the existing legal and institutional framework but will also establish the new migration management system in Turkey. The DGMM is now in charge of developing proactive migration policies and promoting holistic approaches to migration management. It will develop and implement projects related to migration governance as well as conduct an assessment of the physical infrastructure relating to Turkey’s asylum, emigration, and immigration system in order to harmonize provisions and mandates which are presently scattered across different institutions.

As regards labour migration, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security remains the governmental entity responsible for the employment of foreign workers on the domestic labour market, but the law provides the legitimate basis for more effective inter-institutional coordination related to labour migration management.

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3 Turkish Statistics Institute (TURKSTAT), 2012.
5 Eurostat, 2012.
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