



EU Support to Refugees in Türkiye

Priority Area Brief

Livelihoods

June 2026

The Livelihoods priority area remains a critical intervention within the EU’s Support to Refugees in Türkiye. With the total financial envelope now exceeding €956 million, it accounts for 9% of the total budget provided for the country to help it cope with the refugee crisis.



Syrians remain the largest refugee group in Türkiye, with their registered numbers decreasing from the highest figure of approximately 3.7 million in 2021 to 2.3 million as of the beginning of April 2026. The decrease is largely attributable to voluntary returns to Syria, with smaller numbers moving onward to other countries.



Refugee density varies greatly across provinces. The largest density of the Syrian refugees - proportion of them compared to the total provincial population - is in Kilis with 23.1%, Gaziantep with 12.7%, Hatay with 8.1%, Şanlıurfa with 7.8%, followed by Adana (7.1%),

Mersin (6.9%) and Kahramanmaraş (4.7%). Other provinces feature lower densities - around 4% and below. Significant absolute figures are registered in Istanbul, Ankara, Bursa and Konya. Syrian refugee densities have significantly changed since the beginning of 2025, with the sharpest decline of 20% or more in Kilis and Hatay.

Support is offered both to refugees and members of the host communities through incentives and measures that target employment promotion, employability, entrepreneurship, income generation, creation of new enterprises or expansion of existing businesses with the aim of job creation, sustaining them - especially in the 2023 earthquake-affected provinces and most recently - labour force mobility schemes.

Livelihoods projects cover all economic sectors with specific affirmative interventions aiming at income generation in agriculture, development of social entrepreneurship or starting a new business. The EU also supports vocational education and training (VET) combined with entering the labour market. Most of the ongoing EU-funded projects are on track, but results and outcomes vary. Effects of assistance are clearly positive: most supported enterprises experience business growth, which results in the increase in workload in business undertakings that ultimately leads to new job creation and improvement of livelihoods. Voluntary returns and onward movement of Syrian refugees, however, are frequently observed by employers, resulting in staff turnover.



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Main Achievements



Results of support in the Livelihoods priority further improved through 2025. Almost 200,000 refugees and host community members had received employment counselling, more than 110,000 registered for vocational skills training and over 31,000 new or improved jobs were created through employability support since the beginning of EU support for this priority area.

Employment support-wise, 87,881 refugees and host community members had registered with İŞKUR and 18,174 managed to obtain employment, with further placements expected as projects under implementation mature.



Over 22,000 enterprises had received advisory assistance, 7,148 received financial support and/or material assistance - resulting in the creation of 44,789 jobs. Additionally, 4,560 firms were established or expanded with EU support, including through common use facilities. Overall, while the number of supported enterprises has not yet reached the target, they have already created more formal jobs than expected, and further progress is anticipated as ongoing interventions mature. The general trend is expected to improve on both targets as several interventions are still underway. The 2026 SUMAR monitoring mission to ENHANCER and ENHANCER PRO documented that under ENHANCER alone, 1,013 jobs have been created, with cooperatives and SMEs creating more jobs than planned; women represented between 40 and 50 per cent of beneficiaries across all institutional components, with women's participation in new

enterprises registered at twice the original target. Similarly, the Formal Employment Creation project contributed to 9,735 employment contracts against the target of 9,000 (with some jobs supported for retention in the earthquake-affected areas).

Driving Forces and Constraints

Livelihoods projects intend to stimulate only formal employment, and unregistered work is not supported. For years, formalisation of work of refugees had been challenging. Munificent scope of social support towards Basic Needs and Health under commonly known Social Safety Net (SSN) did not encourage formal work, which in turn significantly undermined progress against several Livelihoods outcome indicators until December 2025. With the introduction since January 2026 of individual payment for healthcare services by those uninsured - mostly persons remaining in undeclared work or informal business undertakings - the interest of refugees in registered work or running a licensed business is likely to increase. Those are expected to further improve their formal income generation and entrepreneurship opportunities. Accompanying sanctioning and disciplining of informal work can also reduce informal economy and employment, pushing more refugees to advance formalisation of their livelihoods and increase the efficacy of the EU support.

The number of Syrian-owned enterprises has been on the rise. Cumulatively, more than 16,200 such firms have been registered by the end of 2025. They usually pave the way for the first-time refugee formal job seekers.

An increasing number of work permits (and work permit exemptions) issued for refugees appears to validate the assumptions - their number rose from 108,520 in the year 2023 to 117,334 in 2024 despite the decline in total number of Syrian refugee population in Türkiye. However, more than 9 out of 10 work permits are still granted to men, underscoring the gender gap and women's constrained access to the public space and labour market. In this context, significant shortening of time required for obtaining a work permit shall be noted - EU programmes contributed to that through supporting digitalisation, promoting decent work and helping firms to gain experience in handling often bureaucratic hurdles. Inter-provincial labour force mobility restrictions, however, remain the key factor affecting livelihoods of potential refugee employees, especially in provinces

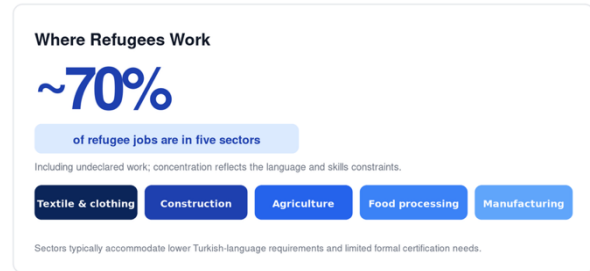
with low demand for low-skilled workforce, and those displaced by the earthquake (2025 SUMAR PEA).

Qualitative findings from the 2025 SUMAR assessment also underline that formal employment for refugees continues to depend heavily on employers' willingness to issue official work permits; participants in Hatay, Gaziantep and Ankara called for simpler, lower-cost permit procedures and for socio-economic support to be retained during the transition into formal work, so that moving into registered employment does not create a coverage gap.

The worsening socio-economic conditions in the country illustrated by high inflation that dropped from 44.38% in 2024 to 30.89% in 2025 and left more than 11% of the population below the poverty line, pushed many households to seek additional sources of income and forced women to find work. More anticipated demand for formal employment is expected to enhance refugees' livelihoods and meet increasing needs for low-skilled labour force.

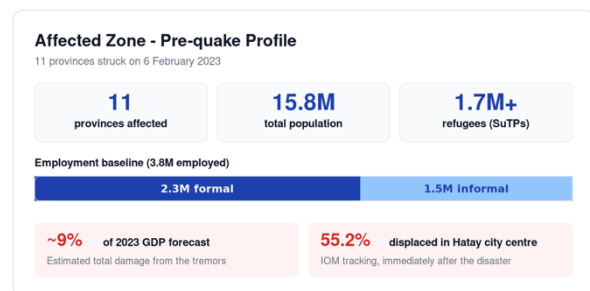


Whereas the language barrier is one of the key constraints for skilled persons to work and get paid better, the language acquisition is insufficient. As of end of 2025 roughly 67,404 adult Syrian refugees completed one or more Turkish language courses. Limited Turkish-language proficiency, alongside other factors such as documentation, mobility and employer preferences, contributes to refugee employment being concentrated in a narrow set of sectors - predominantly textile and clothing, construction, agriculture, food processing and manufacturing. The 2025 SUMAR PEA corroborates this, with refugee participants identifying Turkish-language proficiency and the master craftsman certificate (Ustalık Belgesi) as recurring gatekeepers to both certification and formal work; women and older adults in particular called for more flexible, community-based language options, including provision combined with childcare in livelihood centres.



Impact of the 2023 Earthquake on Support to Livelihoods

The massive earthquakes that struck southern Türkiye on 6 February 2023 affected 11 provinces with their total population of 15.8 million, of which more than 1.7 million comprised refugees under temporary protection. 3.8 million people in the disaster regions were employed, with 2.3 million in formal employment and 1.5 million remaining in unregistered work. Overall, the damage done by the tremors was estimated at around 9% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) forecast for 2023, including cost of insurance companies.¹



The earthquake displaced hundreds of thousands of individuals (e.g., 55.2% in Hatay's city centre only - IOM) and negatively affected the implementation of many EU Livelihoods projects: buildings featuring common use facilities and other structures were temporarily converted into human shelters, many jobs were lost, refugees and Turkish residents left their jobs and migrated to other provinces.

As of March 2023 (almost immediately after the earthquake), the number of paid employees in 11 provinces located in the quake zone decreased by 23.6% compared to the end of 2022. In the four most affected provinces (Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, Adiyaman and Malatya) the decrease in the number of workplaces was over 50% and the total number of employees decreased by 28%. More than 40% of the employees in Hatay left their jobs, migrated, or lost their lives.² Overall, the ILO estimates that the instant

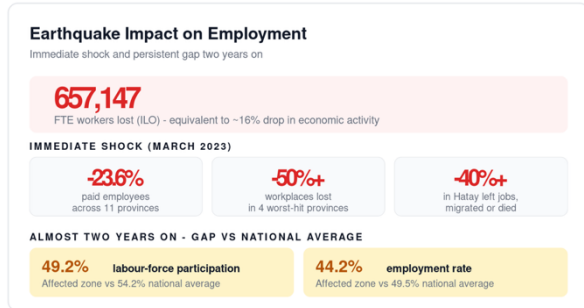
¹ Türkiye Earthquakes Recovery and Reconstruction Assessment, Turkish Presidency of Strategy and Budget, 2023.

² TEPAV, July 2023, Deprem Bölgesinde Sürdürülebilir İş Gücü İstihdamı: EBRD - TEPAV Field Survey and Results April 2023



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effect of the tremor reduced economic activity by 16%, which is comparable to 657,147 full-time equivalent workers. Almost two years after the earthquake, labour force participation in the affected zones stood at 49.2% and the employment rate at 44.2%, both below the national averages of 54.2% and 49.5% respectively.³



The earthquake also disrupted the enhancement of projects in the Livelihoods and other priorities. The tremor shattered many enterprises or forced them to close, destroyed schools and property. Reconstruction efforts began, largely benefitting the construction sector workers. Building companies absorbed large portions of the labour force, frequently draining it from formal and informal employment in other sectors.

Consequently, Livelihoods support lost its impetus in 2023-2025, experienced implementation delays, and was coerced into re-shaping its character from extending proactive measures to tendering rather more responsive ones. In parallel, the 2026 SUMAR monitoring mission observed that EU-funded cooperatives in Hatay served as both sources of income and spaces for psychosocial recovery after the earthquakes, with several benefiting from modern equipment and cold storage that enabled a fivefold increase in sales over two years; findings from the 2025 SUMAR PEA echo this, with women describing their cooperative as a "second home" in the months following the disaster.

While most of the affected population still requires meeting their basic needs, significant numbers lost their jobs and thus the only source of income due to the loss of or damage to business facilities and equipment.

Further Need for Livelihoods Development Support and its Outlook

EU support to Livelihoods started in 2016 with FRIT I to expand under FRIT II in 2020 and several subsequent post-FRIT interventions co-financed by IPA, NDICI instruments, International Financial Institutions for blending operations and other bilateral donors, e.g., Germany or the UK joining in the years 2023-2025.



Livelihoods is a symbiotic extension of assistance towards Basic Needs, strongly supported by the EU which is now slowly phasing out. Equipping people with soft skills, occupational skills, language proficiency, and linking them to the private sector for sustainable employment has been a key part of the EU-funded Livelihoods projects. The number of work permits (and exemptions from work permits) has been steadily increasing from 21,000 in 2017 to over 117,000 in 2024. Based on qualitative data captured from the field, more than 15% of those are attributable to the EU support.



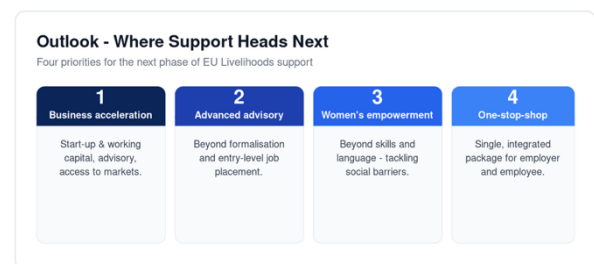
More than 17,200 Syrian-owned companies have been established since 2017 with 1,862 in 2025 alone. Trends fluctuate so as the similar developments are observed in total new business registration numbers in Türkiye. Unfavourable conditions for start-ups in the country due to highly cumbersome administrative requirements, operating cost, depreciation of the Turkish currency, high interest rates and reluctance to formalise their economic undertakings have been observed especially in the last three years. Moving

³ Kahramanmaraş and Hatay Earthquakes Reconstruction and Development Report, Presidency of Strategy and Budget, 2026.



business back to Syria is considered by some. Despite this, significant numbers of SuTPs still intend to stay in Türkiye to study or find work and this applies to the generation, who started primary education in Türkiye in mid- to late 2010s. Also, it shall be noted that most Syrian-owned prosperous enterprises had been instituted with significant savings, equity and value chains already established and brought to Türkiye, as observed in the field. Those help explain why a relatively low number of refugees have applied for start-up investment support: entrepreneurship requires skills and experience that many have yet to build. Furthermore, the size of endowment capital is important: amounts offered so far could benefit rather handicrafts, artisans, small-scale parlours and businesses alike in terms of size rather than innovative ideas, where genuine business acumen and knowledge are essential. By contrast, skilled and well-networked members of Turkish host community demonstrate high demand for such assistance, especially in social entrepreneurship or cooperative movements, and are often open to offer jobs to Syrian refugees.

EU assistance also invested in business and social infrastructure: business incubators, VET centres, and other livelihood facilities for refugees and local communities. These include but are not limited to childcare facilities for better work-life balance of women, workshops, kindergartens, training spaces, marketing, trading and co-worker spaces, incubators. These common spaces helped many and are ready for the intended usage purpose. The 2026 SUMAR monitoring mission to ENHANCER confirmed the robustness of this model: of 25 Local Common Use Facilities supported, 96 per cent remained operational six months after project support ended, and approximately 45 per cent of the 22,785 individuals who used these facilities were SuTPs; the SUMAR SEECO monitoring mission of 2025 similarly documented 94 livelihood facilities supported against an original target of 70, with around 13,000 users engaged, the majority of them women and youth.

Going forward, successfully incubated and educated entrepreneurs will need start-up and working capital, advisory services and access to markets, or any other assistance for business acceleration - and not now, when the current projects are being rolled out but later. The range of the advisory services shall also be more advanced when compared to the current assistance focusing rather on formalisation, occupational training, job placement for low-skilled labour force. Such needs are and, largely, will especially be observed among women, whose empowerment ought to go beyond just skills, language and knowledge delivery whilst breaking social barriers and exclusion.



The fall in registered SuTP numbers illustrates a pattern of return migration. Those who are returning are vastly outside the working age contingent or neither in employment, education or training (NEET). Child labour and NEET status remain interlinked challenges among refugee youth, and EU-funded vocational education and apprenticeship interventions - including VET4JOB and SEUP II - are deliberately designed to address both by drawing adolescents into structured learning and certified work pathways, and away from informal or hazardous work. Those who intend to stay in Türkiye are more likely to take advantage of similar but ampler and more inclusive measures, preferably offered in a single package at a one-stop-shop for both the employer and the employee.

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