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Access to essential services for low-income people

Turkey

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**ESPN Thematic Report on
Access to essential services for
low-income people**

Turkey

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Summary

There is no official definition of “essential services” in Turkey. Policies regarding the provision of these services to poor households are rare and are based on general legislation governing social assistance provisions.

Turkey does not have an integrated social assistance system in place. As for the provision of essential services to poor households, there is a non-systematic and fragmented set of policies that cover some services, but not all.

Electricity and heating coal are provided by the government free to households on social assistance. Water and sanitation are provided by the municipalities, and reduced tariffs are available for households deemed to be poor. There are no policies aimed at poor households in terms of transport, but reduced fares do apply to certain disadvantaged groups, such as the elderly and disabled, irrespective of their income. Although a system is in place allowing access to most government services online, the cost of equipment and of an internet connection emerges as a barrier to access, affecting the poor segments of society. Finally, there is no fee for opening a bank account, and banks have to be able to make available at least one fee-free credit card to their customers who satisfy eligibility conditions for a credit card.

For most social assistance programmes, the threshold for poverty is per capita household income equivalent to one third of the gross minimum wage. The system relies on imperfect income proxies and may also be subject to discretion, due to the absence of reliable income measures (given the high degree of informality, especially among the lower segments of society, it is very difficult to keep track of the income flows of families/households).

Access to essential services and the consequences of this for social inclusion have not been investigated in any depth; it is only via an inductive method that we can list the likely factors that may aggravate social exclusion when poor people have no (or limited) access to social services, as in the case of transport and digital public services.

1 Overview of national/subnational measures aimed at supporting low-income people in accessing essential services

According to Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), everyone should have “the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications”. Moreover, support for accessing such services should be available for those in need.¹ The importance of ensuring access to essential services is also well established globally in the framework of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which was endorsed in 2015 by all UN countries including all EU countries.² This report investigates the extent to which Principle 20 of the EPSR has already been implemented in the six services under scrutiny in Turkey. The group of “those in need” is restricted in the report to people on a low income and low-income households.

1.1 Definition of “essential services”

While both central government and the municipalities provide a number of services that can be considered essential, there is no single official definition of “essential services” at either the national or the subnational level in Turkey. Policies related to the provision of these services rely on general provisions in laws on social assistance and in the law on municipal activities.

For example, a recent directive on the payment of poor households’ electricity bills (Presidential Decree no. 795) cites another Presidential Decree (no. 1), which made broad and indirect reference to the provision of social assistance services when it modified the organisational structure of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services (MoFLSS).

The only other document where price regulations regarding certain essential services are listed is Law no. 4736 of 2002, which aims to regulate discounts offered to the poor using public transport and water services. The law cancels all discounts previously put in place by municipalities and central government, and determines the eligibility rules and discounts.

1.2 Definition of “low-income people” used in the context of access to services

For most social assistance programmes administered by central government, the income threshold below which someone is considered poor is one third of the gross minimum wage. The system relies on imperfect income proxies, and may also be subject to the local office’s discretion, due to the absence of reliable documentation on income (given the high degree of informality, especially in the lower segments of society, it is very difficult to keep track of the income flows of families/households).

Municipalities usually make their own informal assessments.

¹ The EPSR was jointly proclaimed by the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission on 17 November 2017. For more information on the EPSR, see: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en.

² The SDGs and their targets seek to realise the human rights of all, by promoting an integrated notion of sustainable development aimed at creating synergies between economic, environmental and social policies and objectives. For more information on the SDGs, see: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>.

1.3 Measures for facilitating access for low-income people to services

For most services, there are discounts offered to the elderly, disabled, war veterans and members of the police and armed forces wounded in the fight against crime or terror, and immediate household members of those who are killed in the line of duty (martyrs). There is no income criterion for eligibility.

1.3.1 Access to water

Water consumed by households is supplied and charged by municipalities. The pricing system is volumetric and, in most municipalities, progressive. The charge also includes sewage and waste collection charges (see below). Municipalities may apply discounts for different groups. The Greater Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, for example, currently offers discounts to the disabled, the elderly, people below the poverty line, the families of martyrs, and war veterans and wounded members of the national security forces. The discount rates are usually around 50%.³ Furthermore, the municipality recently decided that for each amount of 2,500 litres of water consumed per month by households 500 litres will be free of charge up to the ceiling of 30,000 litres—as access to water is recognised as a “human right”.⁴ A similar practice is currently in force in the Greater Bursa Metropolitan Municipality, where the discount is set at 30%.

Municipality Law no. 5393 provides the legal framework for municipalities that adopt such a policy (see Koçak et al., 2017). Municipalities usually also offer discounts to institutions that run various social services, e.g. hospitals, dormitories, rehabilitation centres.

Despite these policies, each year a significant number of households have their water supply cut off because of debt. In 2017, for example, 30,064 households (out of 6,303,040) had their supply cut off due to a failure to pay their water bills (İSKİ, 2018).

Furthermore, some dwellings do not have access to tap water at all. These include: some households in rural areas (that nonetheless have access to running water – usually a nearby public fountain or their own well), Romani people living in tents (around 5,000–10,000)⁵ and some refugee camps. Currently, 98.6% of the urban population have access to tap water (İSKİ, 2018).

1.3.2 Access to sanitation

The sanitation services are the responsibility of municipalities. Dwellings are connected to the sewerage system, which covers most urban households. The sewerage charge is added to the water bill. Therefore, the discounts mentioned above also apply to the sewerage service. Similarly, the municipalities collect household waste: the charges for the household waste collection service are also reflected in the water bills. Here, too, the discounts apply to the waste collection service.

Informal housing (shanty towns) continues to be a problem in the country – although not as much as in the 1960s and 1970s – especially in the big cities. Since such dwellings are constructed illegally, without the necessary permits, there never used to be sanitation services available in the months (or sometimes years) after the emergence of a shanty town. It is only recently that the municipalities have extended services to these newcomers. Additionally, most households in rural areas and the Romani people living in tents (of whom there are 5,000–10,000) do not have full access to sanitation. Currently, 90.7% of the urban population have access to sanitation (İSKİ, 2018).

³ <https://www.iski.istanbul/web/tr-TR/musteri-hizmetleri/bedelsiz-indirimli-ve-ozel-grup-tarifeleri>.

⁴ <https://www.msn.com/tr-tr/finans/ekonomi/ibbde-insani-su-hakki-donemi/ar-AAHmfUs>.

⁵ Personal communication with Elmas Arus from the Sıfır Ayrımcılık (Zero Discrimination) Association.

1.3.3 Access to energy

The most common assistance with energy in Turkey is the provision of coal to poor households. In 2018, some 2 million households received free coal to meet their heating needs for the winter (MoFLSS, 2019). The poverty status of households eligible for the coal assistance is determined by the local authorities, based on guidelines issued by the MoFLSS and using a central database. While the threshold is set at one third of the gross minimum wage, discretion is often used.

In February 2019, the MoFLSS started to pay the electric bills of households that are on the social assistance rolls (which are largely based on an income threshold of one third of the gross minimum wage). Support ranges from 75 kilowatt-hours (kWh) for households with up to two members to 150 kWh for those with five or more members. It should also be noted that the illegal use of electricity is substantial in Turkey: 11.8% of electricity generated in 2018, according to the Anatolian News Agency. The rate is especially high in the Eastern and South-Eastern Anatolia regions, at around 50% (54.9% in the region covering Diyarbakır, Şanlıurfa, Mardin, Batman, Şırnak and Siirt; and 49.2% in the region covering Van, Muş, Bitlis and Hakkari).

1.3.4 Access to public transport

Law no. 4736 explicitly regulates fare reductions by local and central government for transport services, and allows municipalities to offer discounted fares for students, the relatives of martyrs, those who have been injured or disabled during the fight against crime or terror, the elderly and the disabled. Though poverty is prevalent among the elderly and disabled, none of the fare reductions is actually conditional on the poverty status of an individual.

Hence, poor people may experience difficulty in accessing public transport, which may be a factor in social exclusion, especially in the big cities.

1.3.5 Access to digital public services

A large and growing number of government services are available online: 5,075 different services are accessible through the e-government portal, which was visited by 44.5 million individuals in 2019. To access the service, individuals need a password, available from the post office on payment of 2 Turkish lira (TL) (€0.35); an additional 4 TL (€0.70) is charged each time a request is made at the post office to obtain a new password.

Internet access is required for digital public services, and the cost of this may be a hurdle for low-income households. There is no legislation mandating reduced charges for accessing the internet: reduced rates are available only to the disabled, the first-degree relatives of martyrs and those who have been injured while serving in the military or security services. Some municipalities provide free (though usually slow) internet connections at a limited number of public locations. Internet cafes are among the venues where those with limited means may access digital services.

1.4 Access to financial services (Directive 2014/92/EU)

There is no legislation in place covering access to bank accounts for poor households. That said, following a State Council (Danıştay) decision from 2018, banks may not charge for a bank account, and it is free to open one. There is also a requirement for banks to make available to their customers at least one basic, no-fee credit card. While banks do charge various fees for certain transactions, there are digital banking websites where some of these fees are waived (needless to say, that requires access to digital services – see above).

2 National/subnational policy frameworks and reforms

2.1 National/subnational policy frameworks

Turkey currently lacks an integrated and coherent social policy that covers all in need, and it does not have a minimum income scheme in place. The realm of social assistance in Turkey is dominated by an uncoordinated patchwork of mainly categorical policy measures that grant discretionary, irregular, means-tested cash or in-kind benefits (Yakut-Çakar et al., 2012).

Although social assistance schemes have been improved over the past decade and coverage has been extended, there is no national or subnational policy framework specific to public services.

2.2 Ongoing or announced reforms

As mentioned above, there is no structured framework regarding access to the six services discussed above. The 11th Development Plan, covering the period from 2019 to 2023, and the 2020 Annual Presidential Programme mention a new approach to social assistance called "Social Service Plus", where access to public services will be provided to those receiving monetary and in-kind social assistance. The Pre-Accession Economic Reform Programme 2019–2021 lists examples of these services, such as nursing, rehabilitation and psychological support.

It is also worth mentioning that in November 2016, the Minister of Family and Social Services (whose department later merged with the Ministry of Labour, to become the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services) announced a policy where 300,000 poor households would be provided with free internet access. This reform has not so far materialised.

3 A focus on access to digital public services

There are no official statistics regarding access to digital public services and their use by the poor population. Yet, the statistics for certain categories of the population that have a high prevalence of poverty are indicative of the issue of access for poor households. Access to digital public services is problematic for certain sections of the population, and especially for women. According to Turkstat, in 2019, 88.3% of households and 94.9% of the population had access to the internet. Yet when it came to using the internet, the rate dropped to 75.3%. This figure is especially low among women, at 68.9%.

In South-Eastern Anatolia region, the overall access rate drops to 81.1%. Similar rates are to be found in the western parts of the Black Sea (80.2%) and the Marmara (70.9%) regions, which have areas where population density is low and where the geography likely has an adverse effect on coverage.

The use of internet services is also low among unpaid family workers (49.6%), the self-employed (71.2%), housewives (58%), retired people (51.9%), the disabled (21.3%), those with no schooling (18.7%) and those with only primary schooling (59%). The rate is even lower for female unpaid workers (37%), self-employed women (68.4%) and disabled women (11.1%).

There are two major barriers to poor households accessing the internet. First, devices such as mobile phones, tablets and computers are expensive. Even if the household can afford one, it is unlikely to be able to obtain one for each household member. This might be one of the major causes of gender imbalance in parts of the population where poverty prevalence is high, with women being the least likely to have access to rare items. Second, a mobile internet connection is costly and the household may choose to procure access for only some household members. The fact that there is a considerable gender gap in internet access and use may make women very dependent on men. This, in turn, would create a barrier to the inclusion of women in society.

We are not aware of any study that provides evidence on the consequences of barriers to accessing digital public services. It is clear that in the absence of online access, households will face costs – such as transport and time; and those costs may mean that they end up not using certain services. For example, it is currently possible to make an appointment online to see a doctor. But without internet access, one needs to telephone or go direct to the hospital without an appointment. Those two alternatives would be costlier and may sometimes hinder access to health services. Lack of access to digital public services may also prevent households from obtaining information regarding employment opportunities or different social assistance schemes.

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Annex

Table A1: Essential service – Water

1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:⁶

It is left up to the discretion of municipalities.

2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to water (for hygiene purposes, to cook...) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No	No	Yes-most
Cash benefits	No	No	No
In-kind benefits	No	No	No
Advice/training or information services	No	No	No
Provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply	No	No	Yes-few

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

⁶ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A2: Essential service – Sanitation

- 1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:⁷

It is left up to the discretion of municipalities.

- 2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to sanitation (i.e. systems for taking dirty water and other waste products away from dwellings in order to protect people’s health) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No	No	Yes-most
Cash benefits	No	No	No
In-kind benefits	No	No	No
Advice/training or information services	No	No	No

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

⁷ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A3: Essential service – Energy

- 1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:⁸

Per capita household income below one third of gross minimum wage. In calculating the per capita household income, both children and adult household members are accounted for and no adjustment is made for children.

- 2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to energy (to light dwellings, heat or cool dwellings, use home appliances) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No	No	No
Cash benefits	No	No	No
In-kind benefits	No	No	No
Advice/training or information services	No	No	No
Provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply	Yes		

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

⁸ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A4: Essential service – Public transport

1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:⁹

None.

2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to public transport in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No	No	No
Cash benefits	No	No	No
In-kind benefits	No	No	No
Advice/training or information services	No	No	No

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

⁹ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A5: Essential service – Digital public services

- 1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹⁰
None.
- 2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to digital public services (e.g. digital post, digital fiscal services, digital social security services, digital health care appointments...) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No	No	No
Cash benefits	No	No	No
In-kind benefits	No	No	No
Advice/training or information services	No	No	No
Provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply	No	No	No

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

¹⁰ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table B1: Essential services – Summary table

- 1) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to the different services that exist at national, regional and/or local level in the country.
- 2) Broader policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised in the country.
- 3) Ongoing or announced reforms of the measures and/or related frameworks aimed at (further) enhancing effective access to the service for low-income people in the country.

	1. Measures (NAT, SUBNAT, BOTH, NONE) (*)	2. Policy framework (**)		3. Ongoing or planned reforms (Yes/No)
		National (Yes/No)	Subnational (Yes/No)	
Access to water	SUBNAT	No	No	No
Access to sanitation	SUBNAT	No	No	No
Access to energy	NAT	No	No	No
Access to public transport	NONE	No	No	No
Access to digital public services	NONE	No	No	No
Access to basic financial services (***)	Not applicable	No	No	No

(*) This column summarises the response provided in Tables A1-A5 above. "NAT" means that all the measures that exist in favour of low-income people are national measures; "SUBNAT" means that there are no national measures but some of/all the measures that exist are subnational measures; BOTH means a mix of NAT and SUBNAT; "NONE" means that there are no measures, be it at national or subnational level.

(**) Is there a broader national policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised in the country for some of/all the services under scrutiny ("Yes"/"No")? **Only if** there is no such national framework for one service **and if** the service is organised at subnational level: Is there a broader subnational policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised for this service ("Yes"/"No")?

(***) Open and use payment accounts with basic features (Directive 2014/92/EU).

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