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# DEFEN-CE:

## Social Dialogue in Defence of Vulnerable Groups in Post-COVID-19 Labour Markets

### Report on Turkey

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## **Introduction**

This report is part of an EU-wide project on the social dialogue regarding labour relations during the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically the report aims to answer the following questions:

1. What public policy and social dialogue measures targeting the selected vulnerable groups were implemented for employment and social protection during the COVID-19 pandemic 2020-2022?
2. To what extent and how did social dialogue play a role in the implementation of social and employment rights of selected vulnerable groups in the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022?
3. What lessons and opportunities does the COVID-19 pandemic yield for strengthening social dialogue in the studied countries?

In the report, secondary and primary data sources are combined. Labour market and industrial relations analysis largely rely on existing literature. Social policies during the Covid-19 pandemic are based on the Turkish DEFEN-CE Database, which combines multiple sources such as international reports, official documents, reports from trade unions and employers' organizations, and academic literature. To understand the role of social partners in the defense of vulnerable groups, the report uses 9 semi-structured interviews. 3 Trade Union and 3 Employer Associations from different confederations representing workers and employers across different sectors and sizes are selected to provide a broad range of opinions. Additionally, two NGOs that were quite active during the pandemic and the Turkish Medical Association as one of the most vocal groups and the representative of healthcare sector workers were chosen for interviews. No government officials, either at the local or national level, were willing or able to participate in the interviews. All interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis based on a DEFEN-CE coding scheme.

Our findings reveal that the most crucial policy towards vulnerable groups in the labour market was short-term working arrangements. In terms of social assistance, there were some attempts, but these were limited and did not protect the most vulnerable social groups such as informal workers, women, and youth. Turkish industrial system is largely dominated by the state, and social partners underlined the almost unilateral role of the central government and

the President in decision-making. We also found that there is a divide between the opinions of trade unions and employer organizations regarding the effectiveness of social dialogue in initiating and implementing social policies to protect vulnerable groups. Nonetheless, all emphasize the need for strengthening dialogue mechanisms and coordination among social partners not only for the Covid-19 pandemic but also for future crises.

The report is structured as follows. First, we provide contextual information on the Turkish labour market and industrial relations to clarify the structural conditions before the Covid-19 pandemic. The second part of the report is dedicated to explaining measures taken during the pandemic to understand their impact on vulnerable groups. In the third section, which is the core of the report, we identify vulnerable groups and look deeper into the policies implemented to protect vulnerable groups. Then, social dialogue mechanisms utilized during the pandemic and the evaluation of these by the social partners are discussed in this section. The fourth part of the report concludes and briefly features the lessons that are learned.

## **1. Contextual Information**

Turkish labour market had been going through major issues prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, including persistent gender gap in activity, high rates of youth unemployment, decreasing but still considerable share of informal employment and massive refugee inflows. As can be seen from Table 1 in the Appendix, labour force participation increased by almost 10% between 2008 and 2022, however, female activity and employment opportunities remain relatively low over the same period. This means women in Turkey have greater labour market disadvantages, and partly these disadvantages can be traced back to the transformation of the agricultural sector. The decline in agricultural employment left many unpaid family workers, who were mainly women, jobless in cities due to low education (Mammen and Paxson, 2000). Additionally, public childcare facilities in Turkey are very limited and private ones are not affordable (Ikaria, 2012). The lack of childcare puts a strong strain on female activity and employment.

In addition to women, younger workers in Turkey face more difficult labour market conditions including higher rates of unemployment. In 2022, total unemployment was 10.6% whereas among youth the same ratio was nearly double. Moreover, gender gaps are visible among the younger cohorts suggesting that the younger female labour market participants

experience higher risks both due to their gender and age (Duman and Duman, 2021). Another widely disadvantaged segment in Turkish labour markets is the informal sector employees. The economic composition in Turkey is quite distinctive from the rest of Europe in terms of a high degree of dualization attributable to formal and informal sectors. Despite the substantial reduction in the sector since the 2000s, informal employment remains to be nearly 29% in 2022. Given that informal workers do not have social protection and typically suffer from low pay (Duman, 2020), the size of the sector increases the labour market vulnerabilities in Turkey. Moreover, informality is still much more common among female and younger workers. The main reason for a higher share of women in the informal sector continues to be unpaid family employment. For younger workers, the barriers to entering the labour market and the greater risk of unemployment are among the key factors (Tansel and Kan, 2011).

Turkey has experienced an immense flow of migration from Syria with the onset of the civil war in 2012. In 2022, more than 3.7 million Syrian refugees were registered in Turkey, and it has been estimated that there are more than 320,000 irregular migrants from other nationalities (UNHCR, nod). According to Turkish law, non-European refugees are only offered temporary protection and homage without necessarily recognizing migrant status. Thus, most of the refugees lack citizenship and work permits. Currently, less than 10% of them are given citizenship and compete for jobs in the formal sector. It has been found that Syrian refugees are mostly employed informally and receive lower wages than their Turkish counterparts (Turhan, 2017). Besides the legal constraints on work permits, skill mismatches are another reason for refugees to be at a disadvantage. The high number of Syrian workers, especially in low-paid jobs, fuelled tensions over time, which have worsened after the Turkish economy began to experience a downturn.

The industrial relations system in Turkey is largely dominated by the state and social dialogue mechanisms are ineffective. Even though tripartite councils are mandated to meet regularly, in practice these have not been functional for decades (Celik, 2018). New tripartite bodies and social dialogue mechanisms were introduced after the EU accession process in the 1990s, but these have been quite ineffective given the heavy state control. Specifically, after the state of emergency declaration in 2016, the quality of tripartite social dialogue has worsened significantly (Bireme, 2022). Many characteristics of the system were inherited from the military era and conserved the restrictions on union freedoms and collective rights. These laws remained unchanged for nearly 30 years until they were replaced in 2012. While

new labour laws eased the establishment of unions and recognition of collective bargaining, they also granted the government more authority to suppress industrial action. According to the new law, the requirements for union membership were made less stringent, and the industry branch threshold for collective bargaining competence was lowered from 10% to 3% (Çelik, 2018). As can be seen from Table 2 in the Appendix, these lead to a slight increase in union density and collective bargaining. However, the rates are still quite low in comparison to many other European countries. It should be noted that the new law also aims to curb industrial action. For example, strikes are only permitted in cases of disputes during collective bargaining, and workers participating in strikes for other reasons may face penal sanctions. Moreover, the state can postpone strikes for 60 days, after which compulsory arbitration is imposed.

In Turkey, unionism primarily occurs at the industrial level, while collective bargaining takes place at the enterprise level. Existing organizations mostly represent core employees, excluding informal workers and, to some extent, workers in small and medium-sized enterprises (Duman, 2014). There are three large confederations -Türk-İs (The Confederation of Turkish Workers' Unions, established in 1952), Hak-is (The Confederation of Real Workers' Unions, 1976) and DİSK (The Confederation of Progressive Workers' Unions, 1967)- representing workers in the private and public sector. Civil servants are also primarily organized in three confederations, Memoir-Sen (The Confederation of Civil Servant Unions, established in 1995), Kamu-Sen (The Confederation of Turkish Public Unions, 1992) and KESK (The Confederation of Public Labour Unions, 1995). The interviews include representatives from Türk-İş, Hak-İş, DİSK and KESK. The weakness of unionism is partly due to the perpetuation of the historical fragmentation of the country's labour movement. There has been a long-standing rivalry between TÜRK-İŞ, DİSK and HAK-İŞ, and over the years, the split has been deepened in the Turkish trade union movement. Hak-İş and Memur-Sen share a common ideological ground with the current government, which can be one of the reasons explaining the rapid increase in membership numbers (Birelma, 2022).

With regards to employer organizations, they are separated according to the size of the firm and organizational goals. The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) primarily represents small and medium-sized enterprises. Furthermore, self-employed businesses are organized in the Confederation of Turkish Tradesmen and Craftsmen (TESK) as well as a few other confederations such as the Confederation of All

Employer Associations (TISKO). The members of the Turkish Industrialist and Businessmen Association (TÜSİAD) are large and urban capital owners. There are also various other specific employer associations defending the interests of particular sectors. Usually, these organizations are members of the Confederation of Turkish Employers' Associations (TİSK), which acts on behalf of Turkish employers as a whole. TÜSİAD and TOBB typically deal with fiscal and other macroeconomic issues, whereas TİSK is the main employer organization with a focus on labour relations and employment issues. We interviewed representatives from TİSK, TESK and TISKO to account for the opinions of employers of varied sizes and from different sectors.

## **2. Covid-19 and its Impact on Labour market and Social Policy**

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was officially announced in Turkey on March 11, 2020. Following the announcement, Turkey closed its borders with neighbouring countries, halted international flights, and restricted the movement of people of certain ages. The government encouraged people to maintain social distance, and wearing a mask in public spaces became mandatory. Education at all levels was transferred online, and mainly office work was turned into teleworking. Businesses that require face-to-face physical contact (mainly service businesses) have largely been suspended for some time. As the outbreak continued in April and May, the government took further measures, including lockdowns and curfews. As can be seen from Table 3 in the Appendix, the containment, and health index, which combines restrictions on mobility with measures such as testing policy and contact tracing as well as investments in vaccines goes up significantly until the end of the second quarter of 2021, which corresponds to the back to normal period in Turkey. The stringency index indicating the strictness of 'lockdown style' policies and public information campaigns followed the same pattern.

The Turkish government announced a large fiscal aid program to compensate for the economic impact of COVID-19. With Decree 7244, financial assistance to employers was provided to support minimum wages to reduce labour costs. Termination of employment contracts was also prohibited for three months, but in exchange, employers were given the right to send employees on unpaid leave. In such cases, workers who cannot benefit from unemployment assistance or short-term working arrangements were eligible to receive 39 TL per day (Anadolu Agency, 2020). This policy was extended until the first quarter of 2021

from the beginning of the pandemic. Short-time allowances were given to all workers employed by companies that reduced or stopped production. More than four million people have applied for the short-time work benefit, which can be taken as a sign of the severity of Covid-19's impact on employment. However, not all employees were eligible as there were strict requirements regarding contributions to unemployment insurance and period of employment. The Turkish government also provided cash assistance of 1,000 TL to 2.1 million poor households. Additionally, various social aid and solidarity campaigns were raised to raise funds to help people in need.

The majority of the economic policies against the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic consisted of credit expansion, foregone taxes and deferral of debt payments. While many businesses benefited from cheaper credit through public banks and deterred social security and tax obligations, households also received preferential terms in case of borrowing from public banks and tax breaks. IMF estimations show that total economic aid during the pandemic reached nearly 12.8% of the GDP as of 2021 in Turkey (IMF, Nd). However, a large part of the support occurred in the form of credit facilities and deferral of tax payments while short-term working arrangements and other assistance schemes to the working population were minimal. Indeed, Turkey has been one of the countries that mainly relied on financial markets to provide economic help rather than using fiscal resources to provide cash assistance to households (Bayar et al., 2023). From Table 3, it can be observed that the economic support index which considers measures such as income support and debt relief was the most short-lived in Turkey, and the index score went down sharply after the fourth quarter of 2020.

As stringent containment measures ensued the economic toll from the Covid-19 pandemic mounted and ultimately the government was forced to open up the economic activities. Primarily the tourism and hospitality sector lobbied for lifting the restrictions on mobility and they were successful except for a curfew on the elderly. During the first phase of the pandemic, Turkish GDP contracted significantly in the second quarter of 2020 but there was a recovery afterwards and as of the first quarter of 2021, 1.7% annual growth was recorded (IMF, Nd). Despite the speedy healing in the overall economy, labour market effects of Covid-19 have been severe in Turkey. Unemployment started to rise immediately and peaked in May 2020 with workplace closures and containment measures. After the first phase of opening during the summer of 2020, the unemployment rate began to decline gradually but it

deteriorated in the fourth quarter of 2020 when the government reinstated some of the mobility restrictions after the soaring infection and mortality figures. With the final opening after the first quarter of 2021, there had been improvements in the labour market and the unemployment rate slightly went down. Similar trends can be observed about youth unemployment suggesting the negative impact of containment measures.

With regard to the effects of social and labour market policies on vulnerable groups during the Covid-19 pandemic, both were highly ineffectual in reaching out to the most disadvantaged groups. It has been shown that inequality and poverty are likely to deteriorate in Turkey because of confinement policies if adequate social assistance and labour market policies are not offered (Duman, 2020). For example, short-term working conditions, income support for employees and a ban on dismissals only apply to formal sector employees. Given the unregistered nature of their jobs, informal workers are excluded from these policies. Moreover, due to strict eligibility rules, self-employed and unpaid family workers were also not able to benefit from these policies. As stated, credit facilities and tax deferrals were the primary tools of economic support in Turkey, and social assistance and cash transfers were largely limited. Therefore, the most vulnerable segments of Turkish society, such as poor, dependent women and youth, and immigrants were not protected from the negative effects of the pandemic to a considerable extent.

### **3. Social Partners and Social Dialogue in Defence of Vulnerable Groups**

#### **3.1 Vulnerable Groups Identified by Social Partners**

The interview partners identified key vulnerable groups mainly in accordance with their field of expertise. A list of the participant organizations and their identification of vulnerabilities is shown in Table 4 in the Appendix. One common opinion was that Covid-19 intensified already existing vulnerabilities, and all the interviewees therefore emphasized their existing policies regarding vulnerable groups and how they aimed at enhancing them during the pandemic. The elderly and people with chronic diseases emerged as the groups that needed the most immediate protection during the pandemic. Lockdowns, restrictions to mobility (targeting particular groups and inter-city travel) and other isolation measures were found the most effective for these two groups. In addition, improvements in e-trade were also deemed important to complement isolation policies. Undoubtedly, a big part of the measures

implemented in Turkey consisted of mobility restrictions on youth and the elderly. Several trade union representatives also asserted that school closures generated further inequalities as students from disadvantaged families did not have the resources (lack of computers, poor internet connection, lack of personal space) to follow the classes online and participate in digital activities.

Women and youth were among the most vulnerable groups both before and during Covid-19 in the Turkish labour market. Low labour force participation and disproportionate burden of care responsibilities are highlighted by the majority of the social actors as the main reasons for women are a vulnerable group both socially and economically. Covid-19 has aggravated these structural problems, particularly due to school closures and lockdowns. Some women who had to leave the labour force never returned in the post-pandemic era. Similarly, young workers in Turkey were at a disadvantage in terms of employment and finding decent jobs. The pandemic has increased the labour market risks for youth as well and the quality of education was significantly hampered with online schooling. It came up in multiple interviews that increasing issues regarding family life, domestic care work, domestic violence and the ban of elderly and people with chronic illnesses from on-site work have placed an asymmetrical burden on women and young people during the pandemic, which is mentioned by unions, NGOs, and employer organizations. Some union representatives emphasized that a significant portion of their members consists of women and youth, and thus they were already trying to tackle the problems exacerbating their vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, many social partners recognize the need to develop further policies to overcome the structural barriers women and youth are facing in Turkey.

In addition, the problems of irregular workers were frequently emphasized in the interviews. Nonetheless, only trade unions and the medical association regarded frontline workers as vulnerable, and neither the broader nor the sectoral representatives of employer organizations explicitly stated the additional risks workers who had to be physically present might endure. As expressed by several trade unions and NGO representatives, government policies were inefficient and mainly protected the business interests during the pandemic, which left the working class to its own means. In fact, one interviewee defined Covid-19 as a ‘working class pandemic’, highlighting the inadequacy and unevenness of the policies. For example, informal workers were unable to benefit from the policies that were offered because they were not registered and have no legal status according to labour law. Similarly, many

employees in services (accommodation and restaurants) have non-standard forms of employment, which limit their financial resources as well as their ability to receive social assistance. The representative of the medical association summarized the intensifying vulnerabilities of the working class during the pandemic with the following words:

*“There used to be a separation between white-collar and blue-collar workers. Office workers, service sector, manufacturing... But now there is a new group: mottled-collar workers. They do flexible work. Half-time at the office, half-time at home. This immensely weakens work security. (...) This means that in Turkey, millions of people can become unemployed overnight unless their contracts are renewed.”*

Other marginalized groups (homeless and refugees) were referred to by NGOs and they underlined the intersectionality of social and labour market risks. The most comprehensive account was provided by the medical association representative, who also included people with disabilities, people in custody or prison, and the LGBTQIA+ community due to their socio-economic exclusion. Surprisingly refugees were not discussed as one of the vulnerable groups by either the trade unions or employer associations. This could be because they are underrepresented in these unions and associations, and hence there has been no institutional policy or response targeting refugees either before or during the pandemic. It was reported that tensions were intensified between natives and refugees in urban slums after the Covid-19 pandemic and as the Turkish economy deteriorated.

Both trade unions and employer organizations highlighted the need for flexible types of work including telework, digitalization at the workplace, and part-time arrangements to remedy the Covid-19 pandemic related vulnerabilities. While these forms of work all exist in the Turkish labour market to a certain degree, until Covid-19 they were not extensively used. Moreover, it was emphasized that the regulatory framework was not up to date to ensure that employees and employers were sufficiently protected. All social partners agree that having more flexibility with greater security in the labour market would be beneficial for all parties including socially and economically vulnerable groups but also a broader group of workers as well as for the growth of the economy and crisis preparedness.

### 3.2 Social Policies and Methods to Protect Vulnerable Groups

All the interviewees reported that their institutions tried to continue their work during the pandemic and aimed at assisting their members on how to minimize pandemic-related problems. One policy of the government that was mentioned across the board was the short-term working allowance, with the exception of two NGOs that are working with the most socially disadvantaged groups (people living in extreme poverty and homeless). As these are often not part of the formal labour market, they had no eligibility for short-term working allowance. The policy was adopted in March 2020 and lasted until the end of June 2021 when employees received 60% of their daily average gross income. It has been estimated that nearly 4 million employees benefited from short-time work allowance, which is paid out of the Unemployment Insurance Fund, according to Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) figures. While many of the interviewees deemed it important, some were reluctant to call it an effective policy solution, as this allowance merely relocated unemployment benefits and only certain worker groups were eligible to apply.

Another commonly mentioned government policy was the closures and lockdowns. Despite the health of these measures, some interviewees also expressed the uneven consequences of lockdowns for individuals with low income and no institutional support. People who could not afford to stay at home during the pandemic were not properly protected by government policies, which increased their chances of getting sick and spreading the virus in their households as these people continued to work informally. This was also expressed as a general criticism regarding government policies for prioritizing business and employer needs and neglecting the health and economic vulnerabilities of the working class during the pandemic. At that point, it was also observed that unions stepped in as regulatory mechanisms in the absence of effective pandemic policies. One interviewee reported that they were scrutinizing pandemic related health and safety issues arising at the unionized workplaces.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Social Support Grant Program was initiated under 3 phases, which granted households with 1,000 TRY social assistance. Cash transfers were identified as an effective policy for helping the most vulnerable groups, but NGOs criticized it for being insufficient and short-lived. They asked for more regular and generous payments to households that do not have formal employment and regular incomes. Furthermore, all

employer organizations highly praised the subsidies firms got during the pandemic. This was a specifically important policy measure for small and medium-sized firms. There were also delays in credit payments and loans were offered at preferential rates, which again was listed as a positive policy for employers.

Some donation campaigns were organized by the central government, local governments, and various NGOs. There were quite innovative approaches, especially in terms of how some municipalities managed the donations. For example, in Istanbul, the local government matches the people who are willing to pay the utility bills of people who are having financial difficulties. The Trade Unions and the Medical Association insisted that there was a clash between central and local governments, and the former tried to obstruct the latter's ability (if the mayor is from the opposition parties) to collect and redistribute funds. Some interviewees also touched upon the tension arising between associations and the government during Covid-19, when the first group intended to raise awareness and advocate policies clashing with the government's position.

Unions seem to have remained in close contact with their members during the Covid-19 pandemic, not only to keep them informed but also to understand commonly experienced problems. One trade union representative said that this was how they managed to get special permits for some employers to keep their businesses operating during lockdowns. The same interviewee also noted that unions prepared reports on the situation of their members, and these reports were sent to the Turkish Statistical Institute and other government offices. Moreover, it was observed that the unions' role was crucial to ensure workplace health and safety during Covid-19. Another labour union representative explained that they attempted to improve their existing efforts on occupational health safety, particularly for but not limited to vulnerable groups such as female workers. This was achieved through maintaining the tripartite social dialogue structure whereby the participation of business and public representatives was crucial. The same representative also touched upon a workplace health and safety protocol they initiated and signed by some of the employers, without the involvement of the government.

For NGOs, social partnerships were established at the local level, primarily through mayors and less frequently through local governors and social support centers administered by the Ministry of Family and Social Services. Both NGOs asserted that there was cooperation

between the local officials and their organizations both in terms of information sharing and policy implementation. For example, they helped the respective governmental units in identifying homeless people and irregular employees who are not registered to the system, and in directing cash and in-kind benefits to these groups. They also developed some innovative solutions such as providing free internet in poor neighbourhoods and urban slums to enable kids from poor families to attend online classes. These initiatives were not always supported by the local political actors.

With regard to innovative ways to influence policies, almost all interviewees acknowledged the usefulness of digital technologies, social media and other informal channels in expressing their institutional opinions, as well as informing the public and pressuring the central government to take certain actions. They found it much easier to reach their constituencies, each other, as well as the public with these tools. Using these tools of communication emerged in the interviews as an alternative to the insufficient social dialogue mechanisms in Turkey, and the respondents expressed their belief that they could indirectly influence government policies through these channels during the pandemic. One example was the dissemination of regular information about Covid-19 mortality and infection rates by the Medical Association. The figures were posted on social media every day and the large divergence between the official numbers caught the public's attention and pressured the government to disclose the correct infection and mortality rates. Besides, social partners launched social media campaigns to influence policy making, in particular, to expand vaccination, Covid-19 testing and to implement hygiene protocols in workplaces. One labour union representative shared their strategy of using newspaper advertisements to raise awareness. Particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, this union utilized advertisements to communicate the hard work taken up by the frontline workers and their intensifying vulnerabilities due to Covid-19.

### 3.3 Social Dialogue Mechanisms during the Pandemic

The weaknesses in the industrial relations systems of Turkey were also visible in the initiation, discussion, and implementation of Covid-19 policies. The Government under the leadership of the President organized a Coordination Meeting to Combat COVID-19 in March 2020 with the participation of workers and employers' organizations. However, this was a one-off event and as the pandemic advanced most of the trade unions and NGOs were

not included in policy discussions and were not informed about the measures that are planned to be undertaken. In this sense, there is no difference between various waves of Covid-19 and both channels and modes of intervention of social partners.

State-business nexus was commonly mentioned as the main factor shaping any policy interaction in Turkey. As previously discussed, the interviewees tended to agree that government policies during the pandemic favoured business interests. One labour union representative expressed the belief that employer demands were prioritized by the government, and yet, none of the labour unions or associations were consulted in the policy-making process. It was seen that unions and associations tried to maintain collaboration within their reach, even if they were excluded from policy-making processes. As an interviewee put it:

*“(During the pandemic) we did not have the opportunity to get together with policymakers. As you know, policymakers (in Turkey) tend to do as they wish- they did not consult with labour unions or trade associations. Of course, we were in close contact with our members, we reached out to the employers and talked about what to do, and have tried to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 at the workplaces that we are organized in.”*

Nonetheless, it was also observed that the unions which have stronger connections to the government have better access to dialogue channels, and their representatives believe that they could impact policy-making processes both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. One trade union positively assessed the social dialogue experience in Turkey with respect to Covid-19 policymaking, and how they were able to work closely with the executive branch when it comes to the implementation of measures. Trade unions could use union confederations to remain active and collaborate with other collective organizations unions during the pandemic. A trade union representative mentioned that they reported their opinions and demands for keeping particular sectors -such as pharmaceutical production- active during lockdowns to their confederation, which in turn communicated these to the government.

Moreover, interviewees also expressed the importance of collaboration among social partners, even if the central government is not involved. In that sense, small-scale and local social dialogue practices were highlighted as functioning practices for maintaining

collaboration. Interviewees reported that the communication channels with other social partners have been heavily utilized before but more so during the pandemic. One interviewee spoke about the involvement of local governments in social dialogue practices, which also created a channel to pressure the national government later on. One trade union representative explained how they negotiated with the employers to improve the conditions of workers during the pandemic, even though there were no government policies or subsidies to incentivize these measures. Another union representative brought up the local ‘Covid-19 scrutiny committees’ they formed with the local branches of other unions and medical associations. These committees prepared reports on the situation in their localities, which were collected by the central administration and used to create public awareness.

The trade unions and the medical association declared that there were strong relationships with each other, and they joined forces to formulate and demand several protective measures from the government and employers. Another trade union mentioned that bilateral relations (employee-employer) were strengthened in some sectors during the pandemic, which was also echoed by two of the employer organizations. Employer and employee organizations acted jointly to extend the hygiene facilities at the workplaces and announced statements calling on the government to take urgent actions to mitigate the adverse impact of COVID-19 measures on the economy and labour market.

Digitalization was also discussed with respect to its impact on social dialogue. Once the meetings were started to be held online, this opened up new opportunities to collaborate and increased the efficiency of social dialogue. Furthermore, digital tools were also utilized for strengthening communication with union members, as well as to offer training to the members. The interviewees said this would be one thing to improve in the post-pandemic era as well. A labour union representative shared the following view on this topic:

*“We tried to reach workers via social media channels. Social media was not something that unions effectively used until that point. Perhaps Covid had an impact, zoom meetings were held to ensure raising public awareness and providing training for employees. (...) So, what we can say is that due to the increasing digitalization in the pandemic time both the unions and other social partners started using social media effectively and developing their policies accordingly.”*

### 3.4 Evaluation of Social Dialogue

Although there was no unanimous opinion, the majority of the interviewees expressed their scepticism towards the existence of social dialogue in Turkey, particularly regarding the dialogue between the national government and other social partners. Most of the trade unions and the Medical Association claimed that there is no social dialogue in Turkey. These interviewees shared the opinion that the ultimate decision-making always lies with the national government, and meetings and exchanges with social partners do not tend to go beyond mere advisory mechanisms. Some interviewees further complained about not being able to get appointments from relevant ministries during the pandemic. This seemed to have greatly blocked their ability to influence policymaking. For example, the Medical Association was not able to get an appointment from the Ministry of Health to discuss the health precautions to be taken as well as the working conditions of doctors and healthcare employees.

On the contrary, employer organizations reported that social dialogue in Turkey played an important role throughout Covid-19. They were consulted and invited to meetings with the executive branch. Nonetheless, it has been recognized that most of the dialogue between employer organizations and the government is established through personal connections and institutional channels were not activated. Despite the legal framework and institutional setup, the tripartite system has not been utilized for decades. Hence, during the Covid-19 pandemic social dialogue mechanisms were not widely used to design or implement policies. In Turkey, the central government and more recently the President reaches decisions without much consultation with social actors, stakeholders, or any other representative groups. The interviews therefore projected the top-down approach of the Turkish government regarding pandemic management.

Coordination and information sharing among social partners are also at suboptimal levels in Turkey. One interviewee shared an observation that social partners, who are working in similar or relevant fields, are mostly detached from the other actors in the field, which hampers productivity and takes up additional resources. This interviewee saw social dialogue as a vital solution for aligning common goals and collaboration among different actors. For example, it was asserted that numerous agencies are focusing on child poverty in Turkey, but they do not talk to each other and learn from each other's experiences. This not only leads to

a waste of financial and human resources but creates unnecessary competition among social partners. Covid-19 pandemic made it clear that coordination and working together for a shared goal can be very crucial, specifically in times of crisis.

Many of the interviewees stated that the pandemic has revealed the immediate need for better coordination and preplanning for possible crisis scenarios. At this point, the integral role of social dialogue was emphasized once more, as these efforts cannot be spread to the national level without the involvement of all social partners. Deficiencies in the crisis planning domain became much more visible with the prolongation of Covid-19. Even after six months into the pandemic, many households were left without stable incomes, and they had to constantly worry about how to make a living. While a lack of policy at the beginning of an unexpected and global crisis such as the pandemic can be acceptable, not developing and applying measures to protect the most vulnerable groups after some time is another sign of the limitation of social dialogue in Turkey.

Social partners repeatedly underlined the pertinence of social dialogue mechanisms, and how collaboration and consultation would have helped to deal with the problems vulnerable groups in Turkey have been facing. Even though these disadvantages have existed for a long time, they were exacerbated by the pandemic, and nationwide social dialogue could have been the proper way to design and deliver effective policies. Excessive centralization of policymaking in Turkey was argued to generate many problems including bureaucratic hurdles and difficulties in proposing and implementing policy changes. The general impression by most of the social partners was that social dialogue is not yet an inclusionary process in Turkey where all stakeholders and partners are given the opportunity to influence policymaking. Even though there can still be participation at the initiation and implementation stages, these are often determined by personal connections rather than institutional channels. There is still more room for lobbying, however, interviewees, whose institutions do not have close connections to the government officials, expressed their disappointment towards the highly centralized decision-making process, which also strongly prevailed during Covid-19.

## **Conclusion**

Turkey entered the pandemic with an already weak labour market and industrial relations system, which exacerbated a number of the negative effects of Covid-19 on vulnerable groups and hampered the role of social partners in developing and applying suitable policies. Among the social partners, there was an agreement on socially and economically vulnerable groups despite the extent of importance given to each group. Socially, the elderly and people with health problems were identified as the riskiest and containment measures to protect these segments of the population were often perceived positively. However, it was also noted that containment measures had adverse labour market effects, and these were not necessarily remedied by the government.

Women, youth, and irregular workers (both informal and employees with a daily wage) are mentioned as the groups who were most vulnerable before, during and after the Covid-19 in the Turkish labour market. Social policies targeting them were found to be insufficient and many social partners reported that their organizations try to complement these for their members. Furthermore, digital inequalities in online education were also seen as another major issue for youth. Sectoral differences were also mentioned by employer organizations as small firms lacked digital capacities to shift their employees to telework and services were among the most hit hard by the pandemic. The lack of refugees from the discussion of vulnerabilities might indicate an insider-outsider view as refugees who are disproportionately employed in the informal sector are not represented by either the trade unions or employer organizations.

In terms of the effectiveness of social dialogue mechanisms, there is no agreement between the social partners. While some trade unions and all employer organizations affirmed that social dialogue is robust in Turkey and they can influence policy making through information sharing and lobbying, most of the trade unions, all NGOs and the Medical Association strongly opposed this and argued that policy decisions are solely taken by the central government without any consultation. Trade unions and the Medical Association also asserted that digital tools helped them to legitimize their positions as social actors. By being vocal about policy areas and risks that needed to be tackled but mostly overlooked by the central government, social partners were not only affected the policymaking but also promoted their legitimacy among the public. Irrespective of the varied opinions on the

success of social dialogue during the Covid-19 pandemic, all partners highlighted the importance of inclusiveness and the need to institutionalize mechanisms.

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## Appendix

**Table 1.** Labour Market Indicators

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Labour force participation (LFP)</b>	50.6	51.7	52.7	53.8	54.0	55.0	55.1	56.1	57.0	58.0	58.5	58.5	54.9	57.2	59.2
<b>LFP women</b>	26.7	28.4	30.2	31.5	32.3	33.7	33.6	35.0	36.2	37.6	38.3	38.7	35.1	37.3	40.0
<b>Unemployment</b>	11.2	14.3	12.1	10.0	9.4	9.9	10.1	10.5	11.1	11.2	11.2	14.0	13.4	12.2	10.6
<b>Unemployment (Youth)</b>	20.5	25.3	21.7	18.4	17.5	18.7	17.9	18.5	19.6	20.8	20.3	25.4	25.3	22.6	19.4
<b>Informal Employment</b>	43.5	43.8	43.3	42.1	39.0	36.8	35.0	33.6	33.5	34.0	33.4	34.5	30.6	29.0	28.6

Source: OECD (nd) and SGK (nd)

**Table 2.** Industrial Relations Indicators

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>Union density</b>	7.3	7.3	7.3	7.1	6.3	6.3	6.9	8	8.2	8.6	9.2	9.9	11.0	13.0
<b>Collective bargaining coverage</b>	6.9	7	6.9	6.7	6	5.9	6.7	6.9	7	7.5	8.1	8.5	8.7	9

Source: OECD (nd) and Birelma (2022)

**Table 3.** Covid-19 Policy Responses

	<b>2020-I</b>	<b>2020-II</b>	<b>2020-III</b>	<b>2020-IV</b>	<b>2021-I</b>	<b>2021-II</b>	<b>2021-III</b>	<b>2021-IV</b>	<b>2022-I</b>	<b>2022-II</b>	<b>2022-III</b>	<b>2022-IV</b>
<b>Government response</b>	18.2	64.1	62.7	68.9	72.3	74.2	46.7	35.8	30.8	22.5	20.83	20.83
<b>Stringency</b>	20.4	72.0	56.0	65.9	70.8	75.0	47.3	37.6	29.0	14.0	11.11	11.11
<b>Containment and health</b>	20.8	64.0	59.1	66.3	74.0	78.5	50.1	40.9	35.2	25.7	23.81	23.81
<b>Economic support</b>	0.0	65.2	87.5	87.5	60.0	44.2	22.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0	0

Source: Bsg.ox.ac.uk (nd)

**Table 4.** Participant Organizations and their Identification of Vulnerability

<b>Name of Organization</b>	<b>Type of Organization</b>	<b>Type of Vulnerability</b>
Türkiye İşveren Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (TISK) – Turkish Employer Unions Federation	Employers’ organization at the national level representing employers across various sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women</li> <li>• Youth</li> </ul>
Türk Tabipleri Birliği (TTB) – Turkish Medical Association	Professional association and registered trade union for doctors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low wage workers</li> <li>• LGBTQI</li> <li>• Migrants</li> <li>• People with comorbidities</li> </ul>
Türkiye Ticaret, Kooperatif, Eğitim, Büro ve Güzel Sanatlar İşçileri Sendikası (TEZ-KOOP-İŞ) – Turkish Trade, Cooperative, Education, Office, and Fine Arts Workers Union	Trade union at the national level representing trade, cooperative, education, office, and fine arts workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women</li> <li>• Youth</li> <li>• Disabled</li> <li>• Elderly</li> <li>• Retail workers</li> </ul>
Çorbada Tuzun Olsun Derneği (ÇOTUN) – Soup Kitchen Association	Local NGO providing socio-economic assistance to homeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homeless</li> <li>• Women</li> <li>• Elderly</li> <li>• Disabled</li> <li>• Previously incarcerated</li> </ul>
Öz İplik İş Sendikası – Yarn Workers Union	Trade union at the national level representing textile workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women</li> </ul>
Tüm İşveren Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (TİSKO) –All Employer Unions Federation	Employers’ organization at the national level representing employers in hospitality, real estate, fisheries, transportation, and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth</li> <li>• Elderly</li> <li>• Workers with previous diseases</li> <li>• Chronically ill</li> </ul>

trade		
Derin Yoksulluk – Deep Poverty	Local NGO providing socio-economic assistance to people in extreme poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor</li> <li>• Women</li> <li>• Precarious workers</li> <li>• Daily wage earners</li> <li>• Migrants</li> </ul>
Türkiye Esnaf ve Sanatkarlar Konfederasyonu (TESK) - Confederation of Turkish Tradesmen and Craftsmen	Employers' organization at the national level representing small and medium sized enterprises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-employed</li> </ul>
Eğitim ve Bilim Emekçileri Sendikası (Eğitim-Sen) – Education and Science Workers Union	Trade union representing teachers and science workers in the public sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Workers at schools</li> <li>• Youth</li> <li>• Syrian refugee children</li> </ul>

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