



TACTICS TO TRY FOR EMERGENCY FOOD PLANNING: Municipal-Level Strategies for Sustainably Feeding Refugees in Gaziantep, Turkey

The Tactics to Try series of case studies was created to complement the Emergency Food Planning webinar series presented by Food Cities 2022 Learning Partnership. Tactics to Try highlight proven emergency food responses in a format that offers practitioners the most essential points for trying something similar in their own city.

Objective

This Tactics to Try case study takes a long-term and city-level perspective on emergency food planning for refugees that highlights the complex mix of policies and strategies that need to be developed to support sustainable food access. It describes how the municipal government of Gaziantep has leveraged local, national and international resources to feed a very large Syrian refugee population for over a decade. This case study demonstrates how planning at the municipal level is critical to ensure refugees receive both immediate and long-term food aid.

Geography

Gaziantep is the capital of the Gaziantep province, which is home to approximately [2.1 million people](#). Gaziantep is located along the southern border of Turkey about 92 kilometers north of Aleppo, Syria.

Major Participants

The municipal government of Gaziantep, the national government of Turkey, The Gaziantep Metropolitan Food Bank, the Turkish Red Crescent, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the European Union (EU).

How it Works

Local control and coordination

- For the first few years, the majority of Syrian refugees were housed in refugee camps. But, as the Turkish national government moved away from an 'emergency management' mindset and began to plan for refugee support over the mid- and long-term, they supported refugees resettling outside of camps. This change in policy meant that the responsibility for caring for the resettled refugees fell more directly on local government authorities.

Background

The outbreak of civil war in Syria in March 2011 led to millions of Syrians fleeing into neighboring nations. Almost overnight, Gaziantep, like other provinces in Turkey, had to absorb tens of thousands of unexpected refugees. In 2012, 1.7 million people lived in Gaziantep province. Today, the population has swelled to nearly 2.1 million with almost 460,000 registered Syrian refugees (representing 22% of the population). More than 3.7 million Syrian refugees have temporarily resettled throughout Turkey and over [90% live in communities outside of refugee camps](#).

The refugee camps in Turkey are run by Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management (AFAD) and the Turkish Red Crescent with assistance from numerous national and international aid organisations. Only the most vulnerable refugees (<10%) are sheltered in camps.

Many refugees have required food aid, even after they were resettled from camps and integrated into Gaziantep, because of the [high cost of food and financial insecurity](#). Food prices in the province have increased significantly (approximately 30% by some estimates), although this is only due in part to increased demand from refugees. Turkey is also experiencing significant general inflation, caused by multiple economic factors.

Feeding refugees is complex and typically involves both locally and internationally sourced food. Gaziantep is situated in a thriving agricultural region (the so-called 'Fertile Crescent') that supports a robust food system. It is estimated by those we interviewed that about 70% of the food for refugees is sourced locally and only 30% is imported for distribution by international aid organisations (primarily for the camps). This is also supported by [WFP estimates](#).

- In Gaziantep, the refugees not only increased the demand for social services, but the rapid population growth also increased demand for food, water, housing, transportation, solid waste management, etc. The municipality needed to quickly expand the capacity of all its systems to serve more residents, which required the political support and resources of the national government. Their Mayor had previously served as a minister in parliament, which made him very effective at working with the central government.
- In late 2015, the first Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality, Migration Management Office (the Directorate of Migration) was established. It is a permanent government entity dedicated to providing migrants with social services, providing coordination between municipal departments, and with international institutions and NGOs, and establishing and managing 'needs-oriented' projects.
- The Directorate of Migration allows the municipal government to plan and manage refugee activities at the municipal level. Gaziantep was the first municipality in Turkey to establish such a department, which reflected their mindset that the refugee crisis was 'not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be managed.'

A strong, diverse agricultural base

- When refugees first started arriving, Gaziantep relied on AFAD, the Turkish Red Crescent and other NGOs to provide emergency food aid. They utilized all potential sources of food, including restaurants.
- The Turkish government had already developed an emergency food plan, which was created in the 1990's in case of conflict with neighboring countries and upgraded in the early 2000's. The government was able to use this plan to guide their emergency response to mass refugee arrivals.
- Every metropolitan area in Turkey has a large warehouse of food as part of their emergency preparedness. They are actively managed by the Turkish military to ensure old food stock is used and replenished.
- Turkey is one of the world's largest agricultural producers. It produces and exports a wide variety of agricultural products, although once food self-sufficient, it has recently become a net food importer. However, there were no significant local food shortages caused by refugee demand because of the robust agricultural sector and because food exports to Russia were halted due to the Syrian conflict, creating some temporary surplus.

Policies and programs supporting refugee self-sufficiency

- The key tenant of the municipal government's approach to refugee food security was to help refugees secure stable sources of income (including opportunities to open new businesses), which would allow them to purchase sufficient food for their families.
- Because of their proximity, Syrians had already been migrating to Gaziantep before the war seeking economic opportunities in one of the largest cities in Turkey. Turkey established a temporary protection regime for Syrian refugees beginning in 2011, granting them access to basic services such as health care and education.
- In 2016, Turkey passed the Regulation on Work Permits for Foreigners under Temporary Protection. According to this regulation, refugees are entitled to apply for work permits (and also may be eligible for some work permit exemptions) six months after completing temporary protection registration. This gives refugees greater access to the formal labor market, with higher wages and better working conditions.
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Although refugees [typically land in metropolitan regions](#), national governments have traditionally taken the lead in managing refugee support, in part because of national security concerns (national governments also have authority over border protection and set immigration policy). They, in turn, often receive support from large, national and international aid agencies (e.g., UN agencies (UNHCR, WFP, FAO), CARE international, etc.).

Initially, the national government and Turkish nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) provided emergency food and humanitarian aid for the refugees. As the number of Syrian refugees flooding into Turkey (and elsewhere) started to rapidly increase, the crisis received global attention and numerous aid organisations from around the world also moved in to provide support. The [UNHCR's Operational Data Portal](#) currently lists 34 organisations working on food security for Syrian refugees. Their support goes well beyond the direct provision of food—they provide financial, operational and capacity building support for all agencies and organisations directly supporting the refugees in and outside of camps.

- Work permits must be requested by employers, who need to be informed about how the process works. The employers also have to cover the costs associated with the work permit and navigate administrative requirements.
- In 2017, the Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, and other NGOs, were mobilized to help Syrians start their own businesses. The Chamber developed an innovative business support service for refugees, “The Syrian Desk,” which connected refugees with Syrian businesses. It also partnered with the EBRD, the Confederation of Danish Industry and SPARK to build their capacity to support refugee entrepreneurs and refugee-driven enterprises to grow their businesses and support an entrepreneurial culture among the refugee community.

Cash assistance for food purchases

- All refugees (in and outside of camps) requesting any type of support have to be registered with the municipal authority and undergo a needs assessment by government social workers or an aid association (standard forms are used to create a Social Assessment Report).
- Those approved for aid are given electronic or debit cards issued by local banks. The municipal government, NGOs and aid organisations all use the same card system. Each month the cards are loaded automatically with cash and/or points based on the recipient’s needs assessment. The cards can be used to cover essential needs beyond food, including transportation, bills, health care, etc.
- The local banks are paid up front for this service, giving them the opportunity to invest and earn returns on the funds (providing an incentive to participate). The funding comes from the EU, UN agencies, Turkish Red Crescent and the national government. A national cash assistance program called the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) is funded by the EU. The IFRC, Turkish Red Crescent and the EU work in close coordination with the Government of Turkey and its Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services to administer this program.
- The municipal government cards use a point system and may only be used at the Gaziantep Metropolitan Food Bank market.
- The NGO and aid organisation cards are cash based and can be used at any food market or for ATM cash withdrawals.

Results

- In October 2021, over [3,000 Syrians in Gaziantep](#) received in-kind or cash food assistance from international aid organisations.
- Through the [ESSN program](#), 1.5 million refugees living in Turkey receive cash assistance, allowing 77% of families to maintain an adequate and nutritious diet.
- [According to the WFP](#), refugees have been very satisfied with the cash assistance programs and appreciate being able to purchase food at local markets.
- Although the temporary protection status of refugees gives them access to work permits, the [number of permits issued to date](#) represents only a small percentage of refugees (although it continues to increase). The majority of Syrian refugees [work in the informal labor market](#).
- As of December 2019, nearly [14,000 registered businesses in Turkey were owned by Syrians](#), representing 29% of all foreign-owned companies in the country.
- Although social, political and economic tensions surround the Syrian refugee

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situation, Gaziantep has received [global attention](#) as a model of a small city that successfully absorbed a large influx of refugees. The 'Gaziantep Model in Migration Management' has been recognized internationally by organisations such as [United Cities and Local Governments](#) and [OECD](#), as a successful model for other cities hosting refugees.

Implications for Emergency Food Planning

To prepare for a sudden influx of refugees, city leaders need to plan for providing food aid both immediately and for the long-term, which involves a complex mix of policies and strategies. All urban systems, including food, will be stressed. This will require city-level solutions, partnerships and resources. The following elements should be considered as you develop your city's emergency food plan to ensure this happens:

1. Manage the immediate crisis but plan for the long-term at the outset. Most refugees [stay in their host country for more than five years](#) (in some cases longer than 20 years). Review the emergency food plans of national disaster response agencies and the relevant NGOs that will be mobilized to respond to the crisis. Explore convening a task force for better coordination and mapping all potential food sources (food assets). Consider whether the refugees will be allowed to settle outside of refugee camps, allowing them to become self-sufficient and integrated into the local economy (driving economic, not just population growth).
2. Cash assistance programs are gaining in popularity among humanitarian aid organisations because of their numerous benefits. This will increase and change demand at local markets. Do their supply chains have the flexibility and capacity to adapt? Which local banks will participate in such programs and do they have the capacity to set up a system quickly? Are social services and the voluntary sector prepared for the intake and monitoring of refugee needs and supplying adequate food if it is not available at local markets?
3. Assess whether local food production has the capacity and flexibility to meet the demand of a large refugee population. Invest in greater food self-sufficiency and/or diversifying food supply chains, as well as possibly creating an emergency food stockpiling scheme for critical commodities. What is the relative cost of locally produced food, versus imports? This will signal where aid associations will source their food aid. Imported food may erode local agricultural production.
4. Establish a dedicated migration office in city government. This office will play a key role in implementing the emergency food assistance for refugees and coordinating within government and with aid associations. A large refugee crisis generally brings support from numerous aid agencies. Involve aid associations in the planning to help define the short and long-term support they will be able to provide.



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