

# THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SOCIAL POLICIES

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## **Abstract**

The pandemic is spreading very fast, and countries are being caught unprepared. This phenomenon will lead to an increase in some social problems. Turkey has achieved better results than expected especially in the health field because of their health infrastructure and ability to solve a crisis. However, there will be problems in the coming years due to the deficits in the field of social security. Although unemployment insurance and short-time benefit allowances have been changed, the impact of the solution on the problems will not be the same as expected. Therefore, there is a need for regulations that will extend the enjoyment of these rights. Basic income will be an essential social policy tool that needs to be implemented in the coming months and years. Reducing problems and strengthening Turkey's social bond are possible through sustainable social policies based on social dialog, focusing on proactive regulations, and ensuring harmony between short and long-term goals.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, social policies, Turkey

## Introduction

The health-based COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis with economic, social, and political effects. Therefore, it shows its effect on social problems and expenditures the most. As the need to increase social spending increases, the economic crisis is growing to be the main problem. COVID-19 seems to have caught the world system, the countries' health systems, and their current economic structures unprepared. At the micro-level, we observe that the virus does not only threaten our health but also seriously affects social structures and individuals. While the unemployed, the poor, and the homeless experience the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty, wealthy people also encounter similar emotions during the pandemic.

From social policies focusing on the problems of employees in a narrow sense to social policies at a communal level in a broad sense, there is an increase in social problems in every field. With the crisis, the state must intervene in all sectors, especially the health sector. They need to nationalize hospitals and make compelling decisions to direct the production and sales of the private sector's businesses. According to the statements of the Minister of the Interior, it is one of the critical indicators of the process that the enterprises did not agree with the Ministry of Health on the sale of health supplies when there is no intervention (Anadolu Ajansı, 2020a).<sup>1</sup>

The following section will refer to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social policy in Turkey and the rest of the world. Issues on employment and unemployment will not be examined in this section since they are included in another detached section of the report. For this reason, topics such as poverty, income distribution, wage level, social security, employee-employer relations, and temporary asylum seekers will be covered intensively.

### The Effect Of COVID-19 to Social Policy Problems

#### Poverty

In addition to poverty experienced in the world, the pressure on revenues stemming from the contraction in economic activities due to COVID-19 will seriously affect employees who are close to or below the poverty line. The effects of the pandemic on growth show that working poverty worldwide will be more than 8.8 million than what was initially estimated. Much more impoverishment is expected than the 2020 predictions made before the COVID-19

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1 Pointing out that the Ministry of Health could not get a mask due to the stockists, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu explained that they called on the producers to sign a contract with the Ministry of Health, otherwise, their products would be confiscated.

pandemic. Calculations show that between 20.1 million and 35.0 million people will be poor, and the poverty level of employees will increase significantly (ILO, 2020). Undoubtedly, the same trend will be similarly seen in our country.

As shown in Table 1, Turkey, has entered an economic crisis at a time when poverty is increasing resulting from the pandemic. Therefore, the risk of poverty is now more common in Turkey.

Year	Number of People under the Poverty Line	Poverty rate%
2017	10.622.000	12.7
2018	11.091.000	13.9

Source: TÜİK Gelir ve Yaşam Koşulları Araştırması, 2018

Since the effects of the economic crisis are not seen concretely yet, there is only the possibility of making predictions under the present circumstances. These estimates will change depending on the effect and duration of the outbreak. As the pandemic spreads and its duration increases, its effects will also increase. The Minister of Family Labour and Social Services, Zehra Zümrüt Selçuk said, “We provided 55 billion pounds of social assistance to the needy only last year.”

The Minister of Treasury and Finance, Berat Albayrak, made a statement that basic income support will be provided to those whose income is below 5000 TL. He also explained that 2.1 million families have been given a support of 1000 TL. The same support will also be provided to 2.3 million new families. The total figures show that 4.4 million low-income families will be supported. These indicate the extent of the need for help. (Sabah Gazetesi, 2020)

Year	Number of households benefiting from the 1000 TL assistance	Average number of people in the household 3.4 (2018 TURKSTAT)
2020	4.400.000	14.960.000
2021	4.840.000 (In case of 10% increase)	16.456.000

Source: Ministry statements and TURKSTAT data were used.

According to official data before the pandemic, the number of unemployed is at around 4,469,000 in 2019. The unemployment rate is 13.7%, the youth unemployment rate is 25.4%, and the rate of young people who are not involved in education and employment is 26%. The unemployment rate of youth increased by 5.1 points compared to the previous year (TURKSTAT, 2019). Considering the aforementioned rates and their rising trend, it is seen

that unemployment will increase in the coming period, and such will spread poverty. However, the risk of poverty is higher in some segments. Sectors such as the elderly, those with serious health problems, young people under high unemployment pressure, women, self-employed, informal workers, seasonal workers, and migrants are at high risk of poverty. Because of this, there is greater need for special poverty prevention policies for these sectors.

### **Income distribution**

Income distribution is one of the most critical issues for both developed and developing countries. Imbalances in times of crisis threaten social structures seriously. As can be seen from the data in Table 3, the income distribution in Turkey has tended to deteriorate. As such, the prediction that this process will continue with the virus outbreak will not be misleading.

<b>Table 3. Income Distribution</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>Difference in Income Distribution Ratio</b>	<b>Gini Coefficient</b>
2017	7,5	0.405
2018	7.8	0.408
<b>Source:</b> Data from TurkStat		

Since the 2019 income distribution data has not been announced yet. Therefore, it is only possible to make predictions at this stage. Considering that income inequality has increased by 0.3 in the previous year, it is likely that the same will increase this year, similar to how it increased to 8.1 percent in 2019. Unless there is a very positive development, it is likely that this rate will increase to 8.5 percent in 2020. Furthermore, it may rise to 9 percent in 2021.

### **Wage Level**

Interruption of economic activities along with the pandemic will cause the income of a significant part of the workforce to decrease. If we evaluate the groups that need to be protected, the power of these groups to withstand adverse economic conditions devoid of income will weaken unless income transfers continue to survive. The said groups make up the majority of the workforce, such as wage earners, self-employed, and assistant family workers. Falling or cutting off wage income will reduce consumption expenditures (ILO, 2020,s.5) and play a narrowing role in employment.

If the working hours are reduced, people who have not yet provided sufficient conditions to receive this allowance and cannot benefit from this benefit due to working in the informal sector do not have the opportunity to meet their wage income losses. Such is true even if there is an opportunity for employees to receive a short-time work allowance.

It has been reported that precarious workers, including the self-employed, casual workers, and temporary or short-term workers, will be disproportionately damaged by the pandemic because they do not have the right to paid leave or sickness (i.e., incapacity for the job) leave. (ILO,2020,s.6) A significant number of employees may continue their work with wage cuts made and the threat of dismissal. (Feintzeig & Thomas, 2020) Most of the workers affected by the outbreak are at the bottom of the wage spectrum, and their dismissal or reduced hours can lead to financial disaster. (Ross & Bateman, 2020)

The economic crisis negatively affects the overall average of wages and increase the pressure on wages incomes. With the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be an increase in the working poor's problems due to the decrease in labor demand, a rise in unemployment rate, an increase of unpaid time off, and low-rate wage hike practices or no raise at all. Unemployment and underemployment are expected to be very high because the impact of the economic crisis on the world.

COVID-19 points to a significant increase in unemployment and underemployment. According to estimates made by ILO based on different scenarios regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the global GDP, there is an expected 5.3 million increase in global unemployment at the low scenario, a 13 million increase at the middle scenario (7.4 million in high-income countries) and a 24.7 million increase at the high scenario. All forecasts point to a significant increase in global unemployment. As can be seen from these data, unemployment is one of the most critical factors that will adversely affect wage levels. This is because the decrease in labor demand, creates significant adverse effects on wages and working hours, as seen in previous crises. Informal employment also tends to increase during these periods. The total losses in labor income are expected to be between 8.60 and 34.40 billion USD (ILO, 2020). A similar situation is likely to occur in our country. Because of unemployment, short employment and the benefit from the wage guarantee funds tend to increase.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of unemployed applying for the benefit</b>	<b>Number of unemployed actually benefiting</b>
2018	1.635.111	841.847
2019	1.955.041	1.013.056

**Source:** İŞKUR, 2018 Faaliyet Raporu,69 2019 Faaliyet Raporu, 82.

When the data on the unemployment benefit of the last two years are analyzed, one of the important issues found is the increase in the number of people applying for unemployment benefits. Approximately half of the applicants do not benefit from this right.

<b>Table 5. Short-Time Work Allowance</b>	
<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Beneficiaries</b>
2018	1.393
2019	105.396
2020 (Number of applicants in April)	3.000.000 (Aile ve Çalışma,(Ministry of Family and Work), 2020)
<b>Source:</b> İŞKUR, 2018 Faaliyet Raporu, 2019 Faaliyet Raporu, 83	

In 2019, the number of applicants for short-time work allowance increased significantly. Moreover, the number of people benefiting from short-time work, which was around 100,000 last year, exceeded 3,000,000 in the third week of April.

<b>Table 6: Beneficiaries of Fee Guarantee Fund</b>	
<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Beneficiaries</b>
2018	20.586
2019	42.535
<b>Source:</b> İŞKUR, 2018 Faaliyet Raporu, 71. 2019 Faaliyet Raporu, 83	

When the data in Table 6 are examined, it is seen that there is a 100% increase in the number of beneficiaries from 2018 to 2019. It is predicted that this trend will accelerate with the pandemic, and the number of beneficiaries of the Wage Guarantee Fund will increase by 100 percent in 2020.

According to estimates, a 16%–25% decrease is expected in Turkey’s total wage revenues (Taymaz, 2020). This decline will decrease wage levels and will further increase the problems of working poor. As can be understood from the data above, there has been an increase in payments made from unemployment, short-time working, and wage guarantee funds since 2017. This trend will increase very rapidly in 2020, and if the spread rate of the pandemic can be taken under control, it is estimated that the relative increase will be less for 2021. As a result, wage levels will decrease, and imbalances will increase.

### **Social Security**

The conditions of countries that weaken social security in the world, customize the health system, and are based on saving health expenditures require inhuman measures. Moreover, these countries pay the price for privatization and savings on behalf of public health. The presence of General Health Insurance in our country, the number of beds, and the prevalence of intensive care units have relatively prevented the growth of the health problem.

The high social security gap in our country and the need for an increase in social benefits accelerate the growth of the pandemic problem. The Social Security Institution's budget deficit at the end of 2019 was 39.9 billion TL, with the deficit increasing by 154% as compared to the previous year (Habertürk, 2020). These data indicate that the budget deficit of the Social Security Institution will increase in the next year.

Another main problem in the field of Social Security is that those with unpaid leave and those who cannot benefit from unemployment insurance are left without income. To solve this problem, article 4447 was temporarily added to the Unemployment Insurance Law that regulates Unemployment Insurance. After March 15, 2020, there shall be a 39.4 TL per day grant from the unemployment fund for unpaid workers who are dismissed and cannot benefit from unemployment insurance. Furthermore, cash fee support was also provided. When the minimum wage applied in Turkey is taken into consideration, the proposed payment will be insufficient. For this reason, the payment should not be below the minimum wage.

Considering the increase in social security expenditures and the general budget contraction, the sustainability problem of social services and benefits will grow in the coming period.

### **Employee-Employer Relations**

It seems that the COVID-19 outbreak will have far-reaching effects on the labor market. Beyond urgent concerns about the health of workers and their families, the virus and subsequent economic shocks will affect employee-employer relations in three main dimensions:

- 1) The number of jobs will decrease (resulting in both unemployment and underemployment)
- 2) The quality of work will decrease (e.g., access to wages and social protection)
- 3) Impacts on specific groups that are more vulnerable to adverse labor market outcomes will increase (ILO, 2020)

While it is possible that if the epidemic is taken under control in June, the economic effects of the epidemic will be limited and the measures taken will contribute to the solution of the problems. On the other hand, if epidemic process continues until the end of the year or it shifts to 2021, deeper economic problems will be inevitable and worker-employer relations will be deteriorating more over time.

It has been observed that the health and working time regulations do not appear to be effectively protecting people who are not fortunate enough to work from home. These people

are those are working in manufacturing, retail, logistics (including transportation), and health workers struggling against the COVID-19 pandemic. Kriz dönemleri için bu sektördeki çalışanların çalışma süreleri ve ücretleri için özel düzenlemeler gerekmektedir.

Telework, SMEs, and those working in digital departments, those working in the transportation, food, tourism, and hospital industries are generally not in a good situation. They work at low wages, while some of them even have to work seasonally. These workers are less protected, and their jobs appear to be in danger. Considering the problems they experienced and will be experiencing, protective regulations should be included in labor law (ILO, 2020).

### **Effects of Global Outbreak on Individual Worker-Employer Relations**

The adverse effects of the global pandemic in working life are multidimensional. As such, it is not possible to solve these effects in the short term. It is estimated that the pandemic will have long-term effects, and the main problem is that employees remain unemployed and shall remain unemployed in both the short and long term. It is a fact that the some of the employees will be unemployed; as such, they will be needing social security benefits, and some of them will have to work despite the heavy workload and the risk of infection. More notably, it understood from the process that employees working in temporary, daily, and precarious jobs face even more risks.

The rapid introduction of flexible working models has brought new problems and conflict areas to the agenda. These include the daily working times of employees, the start and end hours of work, the calculation of overwork, food and road pay, and occupational health and safety.

The main problem in employee-employer relations will be the termination of employment contracts and unpaid time off. In this regard, with the provision added to Labor Law No. 4857, the employer will not be able to terminate the employment contract for three months, except for the reasons set out in the second paragraph of Article 25, which regulates the employer's right to termination. The president has the right to extend the termination period for six months. In the same arrangement, the employers may allow the worker to leave on unpaid time off. Such is true in cases where the prohibition of termination was applied.

Arrangement of unpaid time off does not include the consent of the worker. This contradicts judicial decisions and has the potential to cause problems in practice. Undoubtedly, we are going through a difficult period.

However, what happened does not seem to be a process which may be overcome in a short span of time. Bu nedenle, temel istihdam ilişkisini etkileyecek durumlarda iş hukukunun temel ilkelerine dayanan yasal düzenlemelerin ve uygulamaların şekillendirilmesine ihtiyaç vardır.

### **Effects of the Pandemic on Industrial Relations**

With a circular issued by the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services, the processes of collective labor agreements, resolution of collective labor disputes, and strikes and lockouts were stopped for three months. The president was given the authority to extend these periods for three months. With this decision, attempts at eliminating problems arising from the failure to continue the legal procedure were made. However, there is an unjust treatment due to the lack of an arrangement for the workers' rights. For example, since there is no regulation for wage hikes, there is a risk for employees to work for a long time without a wage increase.

Considering the economic contraction, when the collective bargaining procedure is released, the parties will come together in a very different economic and market environment. In this environment, it will be difficult to compromise and sign collective bargaining agreements. For this reason, it may be beneficial to give parties the opportunity to extend the negotiations by changing some restrictive provisions in the law.

### **Recommendations**

The COVID-19 pandemic is a problem that does not allow for easy and fast solutions. Moreover, it brings some uncertainties. These are the problems that are noticed as they are experienced. They may seem to be distant, but these can suddenly affect the world. Therefore, being prepared for hazards is the most crucial responsibility of states and societies. The need for policies based on public health emerges during the pandemic we live in, and the importance of social protection and the fight against poverty increases more.

The health aspect of this process may be under control in a relatively shorter time, but its economic and social impacts will surely be longer. Although it is controversial as to which prediction will be more accurate, there are estimates that the outbreak can be brought under control within 6 months to 18 months. Based on these estimates, it will not be misleading to predict that the economic and social impacts of the pandemic can span from two to four years.

The pandemic may be the occasion for a new beginning in social policies. In this environment, the need to instill an understanding of prioritizing social services and social

health is increasing. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on strong, effective, and sustainable proactive measures against the rapidly developing crisis. For these reasons, there is a need to increase employment, social protection, and social dialog to reduce the effects of the crisis.

### **Basic Income**

In the extraordinary period we are in, basic income practice should be handled from two aspects. The first aspect is to take the same rate of action against the present situation, and the second is to be able to design the lasting effects and practices in the post-pandemic period.

It is the purpose of basic income practice to protect people from income cuts during the pandemic and to meet their daily needs, especially their basic needs. It is necessary to continuously urge people to spend money to avoid the risk of slowing down or even stopping the economy. Otherwise, the contraction of demand will lead to the closure of many businesses, and unemployment will increase. Consequently, social relief demand will rise a lot, and perhaps the state will have to spend more on these areas than it usually spends on basic income.

Even if the businesses slow down, their run-out will be prevented because of basic income. Furthermore, after the pandemic, the enterprises will have the opportunity to start where they had left off, thereby preserving some of their operations. The spread rate of the COVID-19 pandemic will be slowed down because people who receive income support will comply with more social isolation. Thus, people who have no choice but to work and those who have to leave their homes every day can now stay in their homes. As such, this pandemic can be overcome easily and quickly. The use of direct cash transfer should be implemented as it is a fast, easy, and flexible alternative (Albertaliberal, 2020).

A basic standard such as half of the minimum wage can be used to determine the basic income amount. It can be made compulsory for those who benefit from this income to participate in training for the adaptation to the labor market and accept the offered jobs. The basic income payment can be cut from the day the actual income starts.

A primary application is implemented with a basic income to be applied during the continuation of the conditions we live in, and long-term necessary income arrangements can be made according to the results.

### **Social Security**

All citizens with universal health insurance in Turkey have been given health insurance. However, the premium payment requirement must be fulfilled to benefit from this right.

General health insurance needs to be financed with taxes so that those with low incomes and those with difficulty paying the premium can benefit from the right to social security. Also, the need for practices based on the protection of public health is increasing. For these reasons, social security regulations should be structured within the framework of new principles.

Considering the importance of a national pharmaceutical industry, short- and long-term strategies should be implemented to support the production of pharmaceuticals and healthcare products. It is necessary to strengthen the health system and to spread social security practices for public health.

### **Economic and Social Council**

The purpose of the Economic and Social Council, which is included in Article 166 of the Constitution and is adopted by Labor Law No. 4641, is expressed in the form of providing a permanent environment that will ensure social reconciliation and cooperation in the formation of economic and social policies. The conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary to convene this council. The meeting of the council should be continued periodically. In this sense, social dialog is a vital governance tool that provides balanced crisis management and accelerates recovery.

### **Tripartite Advisory Board**

Article 114 of the Labor Law No. 4857 provides that to improve working peace and industrial relations and to monitor the legislative studies and practices related to working life, a tripartite advisory board has been set up to ensure effective consultation between the government and employers, public officials, and trade union confederations. This committee should meet immediately.

Periodic meetings should be held to follow both decisions taken and to be taken by this board. It is imperative to make the tripartite social dialog between governments and employee and employer organizations sustainable from the community level to the global level, to allow for the development and implementation of solutions (ILO, 2020).

### **Social Risks Reduction Project**

A Turkey Mitigation Project should be implemented to aid citizens affected by the adverse social and economic aspects of the economic crisis in the country. Projects should be developed to be used in primary health and education services for the poor affected by the crisis. It will be appropriate to start such practices by providing new resources and by obtaining credit, which increases employment opportunities.

### **Tax System**

Taxes on Basic Consumption goods should be reduced gradually. Employees' income tax should be applied as 10-15-20-25-30-35 percent. As a requirement of the constitutional state of social law, tax justice is crucial in this sense.

### **Employer's Right of Termination**

Those who had got sick due to COVID-19 and were not able to come to work should not be fired as long as there is still a pandemic. Employers who comply with these limits should be given monetary support. As such, incentives for hiring terminated workers should be implemented. For pandemics, paid sick leaves and sickness-based termination should be extended.

### **Kısa Çalışma (Short-Time Work)**

According to Annex-2 of the Unemployment Insurance Law No. 4447, the president is authorized to extend the duration of the short-time working allowance. With the approval of the president, the short working period should be increased to six months. The conditions for benefiting from the short working period should be rearranged, and the number of premium days paid in the last three years should be reduced to 300 days for permanent workers and to 150 days for seasonal workers. The premium day requirement, which is sought before short working periods, should be removed entirely for seasonal workers and shall be adjusted to at least two years for other workers.

### **Additional Supports for Workplaces**

Government support is inevitable for firms affected by the decline in demand. However, this support should not be unconditional. While providing financial support, commitments to social cohesion and stability, including sector-wide agreements with workers, employee representatives and unions should be required from employers. Among the measures to be taken to promote telework, subsidies to SMEs should be put on the agenda.

Wage support should be increased, and its duration should be extended considering the competition of organized workplaces with both off the books and non-union workplaces. Taking into account the high unemployment premiums paid by these high-paid workers, being subject to the same conditions as other workers leads to aggrievement and economic losses. In unionized workplaces, the participation of unions should be encouraged in decisions regarding employment.

### **Collective Bargaining Process Ongoing Workplaces**

The collective bargaining process has been stopped, and normal bargaining conditions have disappeared. Therefore, the provision to terminate the collective bargaining in Labor Law No. 6356 should be reorganized. Furthermore, a provision should be made stating: “If the parties agree, the negotiations can be extended up to 60 days at the end of the initial 60 days”. With this arrangement, parties can save time and create an environment to resolve disputes.

The High Board of Arbitration must take an active role in this process. The High Board of Arbitration must meet the expectations of both workers and employers by playing an objective role in resolving the said disputes. The Supreme Board of Arbitrators shall do so with an understanding of inflation and the financial situation of the enterprise/workplace. It shall likewise protect vested rights of people, to prevent future social problems.

### **Refugees**

More than five million Syrian refugees and people coming from other countries crossing over Turkey is not a sustainable burden for the country. The vast majority of this population should be shifted to the settlements to be established in Syria. For this to be possible, international cooperation and solidarity should be increased. Cooperation between the EU and the USA should be forced, and in cases where this is insufficient, de facto settlements should be established in Syria.

### **Conclusion**

The pro-market order shaped by neoliberalism prevents the deep socio-economic problems and risks from being visible, thus promoting the downsizing of the state and the growth of companies. Instead of restructuring public health, the health sector must be directed to more profitable areas. An order in which individualism is a rising value has been dominated with understandings that atomize people and ignore the society. However, what happened gave rise to new needs. There is a need for social solidarity, strengthening social ties, and organizing and accelerating the move toward democracy. Furthermore, by building an organized society and producing basic needs, it is necessary to strengthen social communication.

It is necessary to reject authoritarianism by preserving the right to live. This has come to the agenda due to the practices of countries such as China and Russia. We must implement social policies at the global level, to move away from dirty competitive approaches to be able

to establish a fairer order. This shall also further strengthen beliefs that social health will be protected as we approach social equality.

Since we are reducing our focus and priorities in times of crisis and uncertainty, our perception and understanding are limited. Crisis-induced thinking and questioning may allow for a new perspective and identity to be constructed, and destroy meaning (Erdoğan, 2020). For this reason, building a process with participation is critical.

The structures, where the regulatory and balancing role of the state is strengthened, and democratic institutions and rules are dominant, make the solutions easier and sustainable. Otherwise, applications can solve some problems, but they will lead to more new problems and may raise the issue of sustainability. The expectation that uncertainties will increase in the upcoming period and that confidence and stability will deteriorate seem to threaten both the economy and the social structure. The way to minimize these effects is to identify the risks well and take quick measures.

The financing of social spending has always been a controversy. The suggestions above will increase social spending, but it is recommended that these suggestions be preferred because it will support demand and prevent other social problems. Resources can be created by considering alternatives such as new taxes based on income, savings measures, revision of investment plans, and borrowing. Undoubtedly, claiming otherwise and reducing social spending is also a choice, but this choice also has its costs.

Reducing the losses of the crisis is possible by focusing on production, caring about savings, increasing efficiency, determining policies on time, and improving effectiveness. If these policies are implemented, the claim that the negative indicators in the report will change, and normalization will occur in a shorter time.

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