CONCLUDING REMARKS

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Istanbul University
Beyazit Campus

On the occasion of 20 November World Children’s Day, the Symposium on Orphans and Abandoned Children, which was held by the Orphan Foundation on 19-20 November 2022 at Istanbul University Beyazıt campus with the cooperation and support of Istanbul University and Bağcılar Municipality, 17 papers were presented by academics and experts. Among the topics discussed by our participants during the Symposium were orphanhood and protective laws on orphans, the responsibilities of individuals and societies in protecting orphans, and national and international institutions, practices and experiences in protecting orphans.

The following points have been determined as the outcomes of the Symposium:

1. According to UN statistics, there are 140 million orphans worldwide. However, according to NGO researches, it is estimated that there are around 400 million orphans in the world when including countries where the registration system is not developed. Wars and conflicts, natural disasters, poverty and diseases are the leading causes of orphanhood. Since preventing these disasters will mean fewer orphaned children, states and umbrella organisations such as the UN and OIC are expected to take more initiatives.

2. On an international scale: All international organisations active in the field of children’s rights, especially the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), should be more active in addressing orphans and social orphans; for this purpose, priority crisis regions should be identified, and long-term and sustainable action plans should be developed for children who have lost their caregivers in geographies such as Syria, Ukraine, Palestine, Arakan, Kashmir and East Turkestan, who have had traumatic experiences full of violence and fear, and whose lives have been confined to refugee camps.

3. It is thought that around 6-7 million children in the world stay in orphanages. Very few of these children feel psychologically and physically well. This is because children are not treated in accordance with their age, and this situation follows them throughout their lives. Barrack-type organisations are not suitable for children to grow up healthily. Home-type structures where children are not isolated from society and where privacy is protected are more suitable for child care. It is a complementary element of child care that the people selected for taking
care of children in institutions should be mentally healthy and have the necessary knowledge and experience for child care. States should entrust their children, who are their future, to reliable caregivers.

4. **On a national scale:** The most reliable and easy curative measure for children defined as social orphans (refugee children, orphaned children, child labourers, street children, drug-addicted children, children dragged into crime, children with disabilities, children of divorced families, abused children, etc.) is to support their parents in terms of knowledge, skills and responsibility; providing economic, psychological and social support and assistance to such families should be one of the most crucial national policies for the protection of family integrity.

5. In the light of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child's guiding principles (non-discrimination, ensuring the best interests of the child, sustaining the existence and development of the child), it is necessary to raise awareness of children’s rights and responsibilities in early childhood through activities such as drama, sports competitions and social responsibility projects in all schools. It is essential for all disadvantaged children, such as orphans and social orphans, to be educated about their rights and responsibilities with age-appropriate strategies, methods and content and to be made aware that others like them have these rights and responsibilities and that they can claim their rights in case of violation, in order to establish a child rights culture and to build positive social environments.

6. Many orphaned children in Türkiye come from refugee families. A significant number of them are exposed to discrimination and peer bullying as a result of xenophobic narratives fuelled in our country. At this point, formal education institutions where children attend have a great responsibility. Providing value-based education focusing on compassion, kindness, altruism and empathy in the family and educational institutions during early childhood is essential in combating discrimination, racism and hate crimes and building a compassionate society.

7. It should never be forgotten that children who are dragged into crime are a consequence of many social problems. The processes that lead to the emergence of the phenomenon of crime in children should be improved, and the importance of the support and contribution of society to children/young people in penal institutions or released from these institutions should be mentioned at every opportunity and in every channel.

8. Regular psychosocial support for orphans and orphan families is vital as it plays a developmental, supportive and complementary role in their lives. For this support to be provided healthy and trauma-free, the issue should be evaluated from a more professional perspective. The training of professionals in the mental health field should be reinforced, and the salaries of the personnel working in this field should be more encouraging. The necessary institutions should supervise families through home visits to prevent child neglect following the loss of a father or mother. One of the issues that should be emphasised is to identify well the foster families who undertake the responsibility of care, upbringing and education of children in need of protection and in the custody of the state for short or long term, to provide psychosocial support to these families when necessary and to closely monitor the well-being of the children.
9. **On the scale of civil society:** States are now cooperating with non-governmental organisations in all executive organs with a social equivalent. Thus, along with state institutions, civil society organisations are responsible for the care of orphans and their families. One of the essential responsibilities of NGOs is to identify the socio-economic situation of orphan children and their families without discriminating against race, language, religion, gender, political opinion, etc., and then to make the first interventions to improve the current situation of these families and to encourage state institutions to assist these families.

10. Civil society can act more quickly and effectively in some conditions and areas where local governments are insufficient. One of the areas where this power of civil society is most needed is the activities directed towards social orphans. Society requires every contribution of non-governmental organisations to support and strengthen the family unit, which is the source of social orphans. From providing psychological support to families to resolving conflicts between spouses, from meeting the needs of children experiencing economic deprivation to ensuring that public works and investments are carried out as required, and being a pioneer and supervisor in many issues are among the roles that non-governmental organisations can undertake.

11. In cases where the family unanimity has disintegrated, or when the families do not carry out their responsibilities, it is necessary to put forward studies that will enter the inner worlds of children in different age groups under state protection, which will enrich and guide their lives. In this respect, civil society’s interest in long-term and sustainable projects for children under state protection should increase.

12. In-service trainings should be organised for healthcare professionals and teachers to raise awareness about detecting and reporting child neglect and abuse, which is a global public health problem. Courses on the subject should be added to the curriculum in the undergraduate education processes of healthcare professionals and teacher candidates.

13. School social service units should be established by employing social workers, nurses, and psychological counsellors. Structured programmes should be developed by considering the socio-demographic characteristics of the student population of the schools, and risk group students should be identified and monitored through regular home visits.

14. Our country has not yet established a child early diagnosis and warning system. There should be a prevention mechanism in which experts from different disciplines can work together to identify children at risk and follow them up with inter-institutional coordination. This mechanism should be able to make a comprehensive assessment of the child’s situation, mobilise the services determined according to the needs of the child and follow up the whole process. Adequate budget and resources should be allocated for the identification and prevention of risks, relevant legislation should be developed, and it should be ensured that all stakeholders carry out their work in accordance with this legislation.

15. In the work of non-governmental organisations, it is essential not to neglect the social service pillar in addition to social assistance, including in-kind and monetary support.
Contributing to solving the domestic problems of families through psychosocial support and vocational training projects will help parents and, indirectly, children to develop the will to work and produce.

**16. On an individual scale:** When we talk about the current factors contributing to the well-being and social inclusion of orphans, social orphans and their families, it is necessary to begin with individual efforts. Apart from the responsibilities of civil society, and local and central administrators, a regular citizen who does not have a bureaucratic role must review his/her relations with human beings and all creatures and be aware that he/she has certain responsibilities towards orphans and disadvantaged children. Individuals should be concerned about their neighbourhoods and their immediate surroundings, starting with their close family members and neighbours, maintain their relations with a sense of social responsibility, identify families, women and children in their immediate surroundings/neighbourhood whose integrity has been disrupted, who have been left alone/abandoned, and contribute to the work of non-governmental organisations working for this purpose is a requirement of citizenship awareness.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to our esteemed moderators and speakers who devoted their valuable time to the Symposium despite their busy agendas, to our audience who followed the sessions with interest, and to our entire team who have worked on the preparation of the symposium for their valuable contributions and interest.

We present these concluding remarks to the public with the hope that the speeches, findings and solution proposals made during the symposium will contribute to all studies concerning orphan children worldwide.

We will endeavour; God is our guide.

Sincerely,

Orphan Foundation