

## Turkey: Pocket-money for School - And a Way Out of Poverty



**ERZURUM, Turkey** - In February 2005, Cinar Turk, an illiterate 34-year old mother of three, took a minibus down a winding road from her village of Camliyamac, in a mountainous corner of eastern Anatolia, to a small office building in Uzundere, the nearest town. There, she presented a piece of paper to an official, pronounced her name and received 120 new Turkish lira (roughly 90 dollars) from the state.

The amount was modest but for Turk it meant everything – a critical helping hand to send her two teenage daughters and 9-year-old son to school. “*It’s money we can spend on pencils, shoes and uniforms, so the children don’t feel humiliated at school,*” she says, recalling the transaction. Just back from school, her daughter Sarga, 13, hands neatly resting on her grey pleated skirt, sits proudly by her side.

In an effort to tackle poverty and improve living standards for the next generation, the Turkish government has helped tens of thousands of mothers cover essential child-rearing expenses under the Social Risk Mitigation Project, financed by a World Bank loan.

The handouts known as Conditional Cash Transfers go to the poorest six percent of households, provided parents send their children to school or have them vaccinated when they’re young. As of October 2005, this assistance had reached 1.9 million (roughly nine out of 10) of the poorest children in Turkey.

The Social Risk Mitigation Project’s initial goal was to soften the impact of Turkey’s 2001 economic crisis on poor households with emergency assistance, and improve their capability to cope with similar risks in the future.

In the process, the project has strengthened a network of 931 state-run Social Solidarity Foundations that are now better able to reach out to the poor, identify their needs and improve their prospects. Foundations, which used to distribute food and other benefits on an ad hoc basis, now have access to a computerized system and a clearly defined target group.

### ***Reaching out to the poorest***

The need for social assistance is particularly severe in eastern Anatolia, far from the dynamism of Istanbul, Izmir or Ankara.

In this remote region, where Turkey leads up to the Caucasus, with Armenia and Georgia beyond, Erzurum serves as a magnet for economic migrants but has too few jobs to offer.



The city of 400,000 people boasts a cement and a sugar factory, a large university and a ski resort but as many as 40% of the population are unemployed according to Hanlar Idem, the province’s sub-governor.

Many people, like Cinar Turk’s husband, living in a village in the northern part of the province, have only seasonal jobs on construction sites or in agriculture - jobs that leave them ill-equipped to face harsh winters, let alone invest in their children’s future.

Today the Erzurum Social Solidarity Foundation distributes coal and food to roughly 10,000 families in the area, and Conditional Cash Transfers to 1,939 households. Its headquarters borders a neighborhood of shanties known as *gecekondu*, a term which means “built in one night.”

On the first snowy day of the season, in mid-October, Haluk Ilhan, a social worker with the Foundation, and Arap Peker, a neighborhood official known as the *muhtar*, prepare to make the rounds of a desolate maze of freezing flat-roofed huts, huddling a few minutes by a small coal stove.

“*This is a harsh district,*” warns the muhtar. “Out of 30,000 people, maybe 70% are unemployed. Some have small jobs in the grey economy where they are paid dirt-cheap wages. Others use their bodies, carrying things for others.”

Ilham, the social worker, adds: “*Poverty triggers crime and affects performance in school. Of course it all boils down to a lack of education - and education, in the long run, is the only solution.*”

But what seems like a statement of the obvious, runs in fact against daunting obstacles in this impoverished part of Turkey.



### **Male joblessness, female illiteracy - general hardship**

Makbule Ulucay is a case in point. Perched on her roof with a broom in hand, the 53-year old widow was trying to clear snow before it seeped into her house below. An illiterate Kurdish-speaking migrant, Ulucay has eight children but only one boy goes to school.

One is performing his military service, another cleans dishes and “the rest are girls”, she says. “If I had received help earlier, I would have sent the girls too but they are too old now,” she laments.

Next door is a family crowded into a thread-bare living room where water is dribbling from the ceiling into a blue plastic bucket. The father is unemployed, the mother illiterate. Two out of five children are mentally disabled. One son completed his basic education and would have continued on to a vocational school but his family could not afford the registration fee. Only a 15-year old girl in stained trousers and tousled hair is going to school these days.



The mother received money from the Social Solidarity Foundation twice last year and is waiting impatiently for a new installment. İlhan, the social worker reassures her: payments will be made as soon as school attendance records are updated, he says.

Knock on any door and you will hear the same story of male joblessness, female illiteracy and general hardship.

The neighborhood muhtar complains that literacy classes for women over the age of 15 have not been successful because husbands and fathers bar women from attending. The Conditional Cash Transfers, on the other hand, go directly to mothers who have an interest in breaking the cycle of illiteracy and poverty they themselves have endured.

### **More girls are in school today**

In fact, evidence shows that public campaigns to educate girls are beginning to pay off. According to the local branch of the Ministry of Education, 1,500 more girls enrolled in school in Erzurum in 2005 compared to the previous year.

And in remote villages like Camliyamac, where the local school was recently repainted, the attendance of girls matches that of boys. The village mayor of Camliyamac credits the Turkish government’s public campaign, the influence of TV and increased cultural awareness for changing family behavior in the last 10 years.

Investments in school rehabilitation, under “My Beautiful School Project,” a component of the World Bank’s Social Risk Mitigation Project, are also sending the right message.

Sitting in a house of mud, wood and scrap, Cinar Turk is determined to help her daughters escape her plight. “I will send my daughters to school as long as I can,” she says, raising her voice to a passionate pitch.

“I will force my way till the end. School is an exit, not necessarily for us, but for the girls. It will help them save themselves.”

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Conditional Cash Transfers are a component of the [Social Risk Mitigation Project \(2001-2006\)](#), supported by a \$500 million loan from the World Bank.

*Initially published in December 2005*