

Supporting Migrants' Integration into the Labour Market

Mövenpick Hotel Istanbul Golden Horn
Silahtarağa Caddesi, N.87, 34050, Eyüp, Istanbul, Türkiye
18-19 June 2026

Seminar Report

Policy context on the labour market integration of migrants in Türkiye

Prof. Dr. Mehmet Akif Kireççi framed the discussion around how migration is managed in Türkiye, how migrants access the labour market, and how public institutions, international organisations and social partners can cooperate to make integration rights-based and effective.

Harun Aydoğmuş (Ministry of Labour Türkiye) presented the role of the Ministry of Labour, with a particular focus on work permits as the legal basis for foreigners to work and access labour rights. Work permits are central to the formalisation of employment, because they make workers visible to the labour administration and connect them to social security and legal protection. At the same time, he stressed that policy must balance the rights and interests of the domestic workforce with regulated access for foreigners already present in the country or arriving for work.

The presentation clarified the ordinary work-permit procedure, including its increasingly digital nature and the criteria applied to employers and workplaces. These include financial capacity, wage levels and, as a general rule, the requirement that a workplace employs a certain number of Turkish citizens for each foreign worker. He explained that the rule is designed as a workplace-level safeguard and that exceptions exist for specific sectors, occupations and cases, including high-skilled or strategic activities. He also highlighted the importance of wage thresholds to prevent the employment of migrants from being used to prevent unfair competition and exploitation.

Shabarinath Gopinathan Nair (IOM Türkiye) addressed labour market integration, migration governance, and the practical ability of migrants to move from vulnerability into stable employment. He outlined some core principles that must guide all policy conversations to achieve meaningful structural improvement. Migration policy must be fundamentally people-centred, rooted in international law and standards and compliant with both national sovereignty and the rule of law. Furthermore, effective policies must integrate sustainable development goals while remaining explicitly gender-sensitive and child-sensitive. To operationalize these principles, he stressed the necessity of a whole-of-government approach to ensure coordination across different line ministries, paired with a whole-of-society approach that actively includes trade unions, civil society, and international organisations alongside state actors. He concluded by reiterating that labour market integration and social inclusion are mutually linked and equally crucial, requiring sustained funding and robust project design to remain viable.

Challenges and priorities in supporting migrant workers in Türkiye

Eda Akbulut (HAK-İŞ) introduced the discussion as an opportunity to combine institutional, academic and lived-experience perspectives on the challenges faced by migrant workers in Türkiye.

The session focused on protection, access to rights, inclusion and the role of institutions and social partners.

François Renaud (UNHCR) focused on Syrians in Turkey. He emphasised that labour market inclusion is closely linked to protection. When refugees and persons under temporary protection are able to work formally, access services, support their families and participate in society, their vulnerability decreases and social cohesion improves. Conversely, informality and legal uncertainty increase the risk of exploitation, exclusion and dependence. He concluded by calling for broad cooperation among the government, UN agencies, social partners, and civil society. He emphasized the need to combine legal status and protection safeguards with practical measures like language support, skill development, and access to sustainable livelihoods.

Prof. Dr. Yusuf Adıgüzel (Anadolu University) provided a sociological perspective on migration, integration and identity. He argued that migration should be understood not only as movement across borders, but as a long-term process that transforms societies, institutions and migrants themselves. Türkiye's historical experience of migration and refuge was recalled, together with the need to update approaches to belonging in a more global context. He also addressed the stigma attached to the term "migrant", noting that wealthy mobile people are often described positively as investors or professionals, while people moving because of war, poverty or insecurity are frequently perceived as vulnerable or marginal. He stressed that integration requires time, law, public policy and social acceptance. Labour market integration can help respond to demographic and labour shortages, but only if it is regulated and rights-based. Otherwise, migration can become associated with informal work, exploitation and tension. The intervention therefore highlighted the importance of public narratives, social policy, employer behaviour and trade union engagement in preventing migrants from being treated as cheap or disposable labour.

Amir Merdagani, a Syrian worker under temporary protection, brought into the discussion his personal experience. He described the difficulty of building a stable life, accessing work, understanding administrative rules and dealing with uncertainty. His testimony underlined that formal work matters not only for income, but also for dignity, social security and belonging. He pointed to language barriers, lack of information, discrimination and practical constraints around registration or mobility as factors that can keep migrants in informality.

Discussion

The open discussion returned to identity, belonging and legal frameworks. Participants reflected on how Türkiye should approach the situation of people who have lived in the country for many years, including children born in Türkiye. It was underlined that integration cannot rely on legal status alone. It also depends on social perception, debates on citizenship, access to public services and the ability of workers to access decent employment and representation.

Thematic focus: labour market integration of Syrians

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kürşat Tutar (Hacı Bayram Veli University) presented "Work Permits as a Key Instrument for Social Cohesion in Labour Migration". Drawing on research on Syrian workers, work permits and labour market integration in Türkiye, he argued that formal employment is the foundation for social cohesion because it creates access to rights, social security, unionisation and more stable participation in society.

The presentation emphasised that the work-permit system is often surrounded by misinformation. Workers and employers may misunderstand the rules, while undesirable employment practices may be justified through myths about permits or administrative burdens. For researchers and trade unions, the central objective must therefore remain formal employment. Where work remains undeclared, it is significantly harder to promote decent work, organise workers or prevent exploitation.

Syrians in Türkiye are not a homogeneous group. They differ by age, gender, education level, province, sector, household situation and length of stay. Policy responses must therefore be diversified. Some workers need language training, others need vocational certification, information on rights, childcare or employer support. Work permits help reduce informality, but formalisation is held back by employer reluctance, lack of information, mobility restrictions, seasonal work, gender roles and the immediate need for income.

Sectors with high levels of informality include agriculture, textiles, services and domestic work. Seasonal agriculture was identified as especially difficult due to worker mobility, temporary accommodation, unpaid family labour and risks of child labour. Local authorities have created designated areas and basic services in some provinces, but budgets remain limited and further support is needed. The presentation also stressed that social assistance and labour market participation should not be treated as opposites. If assistance is withdrawn without access to skills, childcare, transport, housing, information and formal employment, families may become more vulnerable rather than more integrated.

Policy recommendations included simplifying and communicating permit procedures, expanding vocational training and certification, improving Turkish-language support, supporting employers who formalise employment, strengthening labour inspection, creating local partnerships between municipalities, trade unions, employers and NGOs, and developing targeted approaches for women and young people.

Roundtable: current state of support provided to migrants

Fatma Zengin Gümrak (HAK-İŞ) invited public bodies, civil society organisations and local actors to share initiatives, services and cooperation examples from the migration field. The discussion illustrated that labour market integration depends on a broader ecosystem of humanitarian support, healthcare, child protection, local services, social cohesion and legal information.

Kamil Erdem Güler (Turkish Red Crescent/Kızılay) presented the humanitarian assistance perspective and challenged the assumption that reducing assistance automatically increases labour market participation. He recalled that since 2016 Kızılay has implemented a very large cash assistance programme for migrants, which at its peak supported around 3.3 million people. While the number of beneficiaries has since fallen significantly, this has not translated in a simple or direct way into increased labour market access. The key message was that assistance should be connected to skills, referrals, local labour market analysis and social cohesion measures, rather than simply withdrawn.

Muhammed Zahid Kaya (Ministry of Health) presented Türkiye's migrant health model. He explained that refugees and persons under temporary protection have received diagnosis, treatment, operations and primary healthcare services, including laboratory services, pregnancy follow-up, maternal and child health, vaccination and chronic disease monitoring. EU-supported programmes

such as SIHHAT have enabled the Ministry to employ thousands of people from different nationalities in support of healthcare delivery. The model also addresses language barriers and allows Syrian health professionals, under specific authorisation and training arrangements, to contribute to care for Syrian patients.

Suat Şaşmaz (AFAD) represented the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency in the roundtable. His contribution was situated within the wider institutional response to displacement, temporary accommodation and emergency coordination. The presence of AFAD in the discussion underlined that migration support also requires preparedness, crisis-management capacity and coordination between emergency structures and longer-term integration policies.

Gökçe Çiçek Eryılmaz (Ministry of Family and Social Services) presented social assistance and child-protection activities. She described cash-transfer measures linked to school attendance and child protection, including household visits to understand the reasons for absenteeism and support children's return to education. The approach combines financial support, monitoring, information on rights and obligations, referrals to services and social cohesion measures for vulnerable households, including households with disabilities, single-parent families and children.

Av. Sümeyye Kurşun (ULIFED) spoke from the perspective of civil society organisations active in the migration field. She highlighted the importance of coordination between NGOs, public authorities and international organisations, particularly in relation to legal information, referral pathways, language support, social assistance and community-based outreach. Civil society was described as a frequent first point of contact for migrants and as an actor able to identify needs that may not immediately appear in administrative systems.

Muhammed Beşir (Harmony Project) presented work focused on social cohesion and practical integration. The project seeks to bring communities together, reduce misunderstandings and support migrants in navigating daily life, services and local institutions. The intervention highlighted the importance of moving beyond emergency response towards durable social cohesion, based on dialogue and mutual understanding between host communities and migrants.

Salih Balta (Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality City Council) shared the local-level perspective of a city with extensive experience hosting Syrians. He stressed that municipalities and city councils are on the front line of integration because access to services, social cohesion and employment are experienced locally. His intervention linked labour market integration to housing, education, health, transport and municipal services, showing that local systems need adequate resources and coordination to support both migrants and host communities.

Hatice Ayhan (Hizmet-İş) focused on migrant domestic workers, a group she described as highly invisible and vulnerable. She noted that many domestic workers are women, often working live-in, and that informal agencies or intermediaries can expose them to exploitation, including passport retention, fees and lack of access to rights. She highlighted the need for registration, vocational certification, rights information, legal support and international cooperation. The objective must be decent work and a life worthy of human dignity.

Discussion

The roundtable confirmed that support to migrants is multi-dimensional. Humanitarian assistance, healthcare, education, child protection, local services, civil society outreach, social cohesion and

labour market integration all interact. Participants repeatedly underlined the importance of communication, referral systems, reliable data and partnerships that can move the response from emergency support to sustainable inclusion.

Roundtable Session: How can we strengthen trade union capacity in supporting migrants integration into the labour market?

Anindya Datta (ILO Office in Türkiye) linked the discussion to international labour standards, decent work and the ILO perspective on labour migration. He stressed that migrant workers must be seen first as workers with rights, not only as migrants or beneficiaries of protection. Trade unions play a key role in making rights accessible in practice, preventing exploitation, promoting equal treatment and ensuring that migration does not become a tool for wage dumping or unfair competition. He highlighted the need for organising strategies that reach workers in sectors where migrants are concentrated, including informal and hard-to-reach sectors. This requires trust-building, language-sensitive information, cooperation with communities and attention to gender, age and legal status. Trade union capacity can be strengthened through data, training, referral pathways and cooperation with labour inspectorates, employers, municipalities, NGOs and international organisations.

Turkish trade union representatives shared good practices and challenges from sectors including textiles, municipal and public services, food, health and domestic work. The different contributions from Fulya Pinar Özcan (Öz İplik-İş), Tansu Göksu and Hatice Ayhan (Hizmet-İş), Gülnihal Arslan (Öz Gıda-İş), Erdem Dinç (Öz Sağlık-İş) and Nesibe Koyuncu (HAK-İŞ) focused on workplace outreach, information sessions, cooperation with employers, guidance on registration and work permits, support for women workers and the need to explain social security and labour rights in accessible language. A core message was that migrant workers should not be perceived as a threat to local workers. The real threat is informality and exploitation. When migrant workers remain undeclared and outside union protection, labour standards deteriorate for everyone. Organising migrant workers is therefore part of defending the standards of the whole labour market. Fulya Pinar Özcan also presented in particular the project. Towards Forced Labour Free Clothes: A Multi-Country Civil Society Initiative.

Discussion

The discussion also identified concrete capacity-building needs for unions: multilingual materials, training for union staff, community-based trust-building, cooperation with women's and youth structures, and links between workplace organising, social support and legal counselling. Domestic and care work were repeatedly highlighted as sectors requiring specific strategies. Many migrant workers in these sectors are women working in private homes, isolated from colleagues, inspection and union contact. Participants stressed the need for dedicated outreach tools, legal information, international cooperation and recognition that some of the most vulnerable workers are also the hardest to reach through traditional trade union methods.

Roundtable: How can we strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships in supporting migrants integration into the labour market?

Mercedes Milette (ETUC) framed the discussion around good practices from LABOUR-INT III pilot actions and transnational networks (e.g., [UnionMigrantNet](#) and the European Support Network for

Fair Mobility) highlighting the need to connect local implementation, national actors and European cooperation.

Cecilia Martin (SGI Europe) underlined the importance of the multi-stakeholder approach, emphasising that integration cannot be achieved through job matching alone. Sustained labour market participation depends on a broader ecosystem of services, including access to employment agencies, vocational training, healthcare, housing, transport, childcare, and education. To strengthen these partnerships, she focused on four key recommendations. First, support services must be seamlessly connected rather than fragmented to prevent integration from becoming harder. Second, role clarity among partners is essential to define who handles initial orientation, rights counselling, skills assessment, and employer matching. Third, social partners are essential with trade unions safeguarding against exploitation and employers identifying specific market shortages to provide targeted training. Finally, she called for a transition from temporary, project-based initiatives toward permanent, sustainable support structures to ensure that successful integration models do not disappear once fixed-term funding ends.

Francesco Errico (SMILE Puglia/CGIL) presented [the Italian LABOUR-INT III pilot experience in Puglia](#). He explained that the work focuses on practical pathways for refugees and migrants, combining vocational training (in textile and logistics sectors, identified by the employers as in need of workforce), local cooperation, highlighting the important contribution of trade unions. The Italian experience showed that migrants need more than a training course: they need orientation, language support, knowledge of rights, contact with employers and accompaniment into decent employment, underlining the importance of guaranteeing dignity to the workers.

Vania Nedeltcheva (UnionMigrantNet/INE-GSEE), UnionMigrantNet long-standing partner, presented the network connecting trade union support services for migrants across countries. She underlined that migrant workers need reliable access to information and support before, during and after movement across borders. Skills assessment and recognition were highlighted as major challenges, as migrants and refugees may have experience or qualifications that are difficult to prove in the host country. Networks can connect workers to counselling and institutions able to assess or document skills, while also enabling support between countries of origin, transit, destination and return.

Marko Tanasić (European Support Network for Fair Mobility/ZSSS) presented the European Support Network for Fair Mobility, an initiative seeking to build a pan-European counselling network for migrant and mobile workers, drawing on experiences from different countries. He highlighted complex recruitment and employment chains involving labour shortages, agencies, subcontracting and letterbox companies. Workers may struggle to identify their employer, claim rights or understand which law applies. For posted workers and third-country nationals moving through EU labour markets, this can create vulnerability to wage theft, poor housing, debt, document retention and other abuses. Fair mobility requires permanent support structures and resources, not only temporary project-based cooperation.

Discussion

The open discussion focused on structural coordination, the political context of migration debates, and cross-border trade union solidarity. Participants emphasized the necessity of linking public employment services with trade unions and civil society networks to build clear referral pathways,

combining institutional labour matching with trust-based rights counseling. The conversation highlighted that in polarized political climates, trade unions must maintain an uncompromising focus on equal rights, anti-exploitation, and the intersectional barriers faced by migrant women. Furthermore, cooperation between social partners can foster a constructive approach to labour migration, provided it is supported by practical tools such as localized information centers and digital rights platforms. Interventions underscored the importance of international trade union cooperation within global supply chains and the critical need for targeted organizing strategies to reach invisible or unregulated sectors, such as domestic and textile work.

Conclusions

Eda Akbulut (HAK-İŞ) recalled the main messages of the seminar. Migrants' integration into the labour market has been discussed from the different point of views of trade unions, international organizations, institutions, civil society, migrant workers themselves and other stakeholders. The discussion focused on the challenges, good practices, the role trade unions can play as well as the importance of the multi-stakeholder cooperation, underlining the added value of projects like LABOUR-INT for achieving successful integration. She also highlighted the importance of discussing more in detail the conditions of platform workers, domestic workers and of women across different sectors.

Key Takeaways

- **Formal employment is the cornerstone of successful integration**, providing migrant workers with access to labour rights, social protection, decent work and social inclusion
- **Labour market integration requires more than a job**: combining employment opportunities with language learning, skills recognition, vocational training, healthcare, childcare, housing, legal information and community-based services
- **Multi-stakeholder cooperation is key**: governments, trade unions, employers, municipalities, civil society and international organisations must work together through coordinated and long-term partnerships
- **Trade unions play a crucial role** in protecting migrant workers from exploitation, promoting equal treatment and ensuring decent working conditions
- **One-size-fits-all solutions don't work**: integration policies must reflect the diverse needs of migrants, with targeted support for women, young people and workers in sectors with high levels of informality
- **Access to information and clear procedures matter**: simplifying administrative processes and improving awareness of rights can help reduce informality and facilitate access to decent employment
- **LABOUR-INT III shows the value of transnational cooperation**, showing how the exchange of good practices and strong partnerships can strengthen migrants' labour market integration across Europe