

Children of Turkish seasonal workers

Müge Artar, Development Workshop Cooperative, Turkey

Part of the thinking behind the Bernard van Leer Foundation's new goals (see pp 3) is to find new niches where children's situations are not receiving the attention they should. Discussions with academics and civil society in Turkey identified children of seasonal migrant agricultural workers as a significant group whose needs are not on the radar. To explore what these children need, it was first necessary to find out how they live. This article shares the results of the research the Foundation commissioned.

Seasonal migration for agricultural labour is increasingly coming under the spotlight in Turkey. The national government's Labour Department has recently set up a panel to look at the working conditions of these labourers, who typically spend up to six months of each year living in temporary tented accommodation and working on farms. Often they are former smallholders who abandoned their rural homes as industrialisation of agriculture made small-scale farming uneconomical, and who find they lack the skills to secure employment in the urban centres to which they migrated.

These seasonal migrant workers tend to lack rights and negotiating power. They also tend to travel with their families, including small children. What is life like for these children in their temporary tented homes? This research set out to answer that question by using 'participant observation' methodology – in other words, the research team lived in the tent camp and had the opportunity to combine their own firsthand observations with data-gathering. The result is a uniquely

textured insight into young children's realities which it is hoped can now feed into the growing national debate about the situation of migrant labourers.

Focusing on children between the ages of 0-6, the study was conducted over seven days in Yassihöyük village, Ankara, Polatlı, at the beginning of October 2009. This article summarises the main findings.

Living conditions in the labourers' camps

Approximately one kilometre north of Yassihöyük, groups of 32 and 35 tents were pitched on each side of the road. The tents were made from thick linen balecloth and iron frames, tied down with soil-filled sacks and sometimes covered with nylon for extra protection against the cold at night. Tents had generally one single room which could be occupied by up to 10-12 people, and each tent harboured at least one married couple with children. They were mostly Kurdish families from Şanlıurfa, with also a couple of Arabic families. Many were related or acquainted.

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Photo: Courtesy Development Workshop researchers



They had limited contact with the village, and villagers tended to prefer these camps to be sited at a distance. The employer provided water by tanker every two or three days. Each tent had its own bath area, also improvised from fabric and tent poles, a couple of metres away from the tent, with a hole dug for a toilet. Electricity was provided by generator for three hours per evening and used for lighting and charging cellphones. Cooking was done inside the tent, in an area separated by a curtain, using both gas cylinders and wood-fired stoves.

The workers had found their seasonal employment via labour intermediaries, who charge

commission to both worker and employer. Some said that they had borrowed money from the intermediary and came to work in return. Often they work in different places from year to year. Some had been doing this work for only one year, some for almost 30. The workers generally set out for the fields at about 6 or 7 am and work for 12 to 14 hours. They are paid according to how much produce they collect, and do not know how much they will be paid until the work is completed.

Most members of the family work in the field, often including children from around as young as eight. Women do the domestic chores – cleaning, child care, breadmaking, dishwashing – after they get back from work, often making bread together. They did not seem to expect help from their husbands, believing it would damage male dignity. Young males said they were bored in the camps, but in any case their work left them little leisure time to do anything other than sleep. It was usually the elders who watched over young children during the daytime.

Conditions for children aged up to six

Young children generally played in groups, often with objects they found – dirt, rocks, pill boxes; tying a rope to a can and pulling it, using an animal bone as a shovel. Girls sometimes had rag dolls made by their mothers or grandmothers. As well as classic games such as Hopscotch and Blind man's buff, some children

introduced games they had picked up at school or kindergarten – often the children of the intermediaries, who appeared better groomed and educated. Generally the children were peevish and intolerant, both boys and girls often resorting to violence. Though they were fluent enough in Kurdish, it was evident that they lag behind their peers in understanding and expressing themselves in Turkish.

Most mothers had limited interactions with their children, and although some included their children in their work activities as a form of play – rolling dough, baking bread or doing laundry – none were observed to initiate interactions with the aim of teaching the child something or building their cognitive skills. Father-child interactions were extremely limited, in line with cultural expectations; children were expected to be silent and not disturb their fathers while they rested after work.

Mothers said they bathe their children every day, though it was observed that they seemed to bathe them while doing the laundry, which happened at most once a week. Clothes tended to be dirty and stained. Almost all mothers said they breastfed their children, then give them the same foods they eat themselves. They were not aware of any need for a special diet for children, and in general they had no source of advice or information on appropriate parenting.

The migrant lifestyle made it difficult to follow up on children's vaccinations.

After food, healthcare was the biggest expenditure: diarrhea, flu and cold were rife due to poor nutrition and hygiene and the combination of extremely hot days and freezing nights. Healthcare can be a major expense as the money earned during this seasonal work has to last for the rest of the year, so dealing with health problems is often postponed unless they are serious.

On the whole, all children were deprived of education. Most parents had no concept of pre-school education, and accessing primary education was difficult due to the migratory lifestyle which typically takes them away between May and October. Most older children had dropped out of school, or were thinking about it, as a result of difficulties in catching up with the work they missed. Most under-10s were lacking in literacy. Some of the more experienced seasonal labourers recalled that they themselves had grown up in these camps in similar conditions, and saw little prospect for their children to have a different future.