The Livelihoods Innovation through Food Entrepreneurship (LIFE) PROJECT

Key Findings Report

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1 Project Overview

The goal of the Turkey LIFE Project is to support the development, and drive implementation of, mutually beneficial, and sustainable livelihood solutions for Syrian and other refugees and their host communities in Turkey. As such, the Turkey LIFE Project is fully aligned with the 2018-19 Turkey Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) which calls for a livelihood's response focused on promoting self-reliance and reducing aid dependency through vocational and skills training, and self-employment through entrepreneurial activities.

1.1 Project Objectives

1. To ensure sustainable access to livelihood-focused food business development services and foster social cohesion among affected Turkish host communities and Syrian and other refugees in two urban areas

2. To improve livelihoods based in the human and institutional food-based market ecosystem for planning, launching or improving food-based enterprises among Syrian, other refugees and Turks in two urban areas in Turkey.

2 Executive Summary & Key Findings

In ***Istanbul***, the field monitoring team consists of a female facilitator and a female translator. The facilitator interviewed 12 members, eight females and four males.

In ***Mersin***, the field monitoring team consists of a female facilitator and a female translator. The facilitator interviewed nine members, six females and three males.

The below table illustrates the 4 FGDs details

Table 1: FGDs details

Location	Date	Group	Males	Females
Istanbul/ LIFE FEC	09/03/2020	Syrian	3	4
Istanbul/ LIFE FEC	10/03/2020	Turks	1	4
Mersin/ LIFE FEC	12/03/2020	Turks	0	1
Mersin/ LIFE FEC	13/03/2020	Syrian	3	5

2.1 Interest in the Food Sector

Members of the LIFE project in both ***Istanbul*** and ***Mersin*** have mentioned various points regarding how they gained interest in the food sector, majority said they had a passion and they enjoy working in the food sector, others had prior experience and skills in certain type of food such as backing, others explained different reasons as shown below:

- Four reported that the experience they already have in this sector, had helped them proceed their career in the food sector when they fled to Turkey.
- Three members got into the food sector so they can make their own food and make sure they are eating healthy.
- Two members stated that they engaged in this sector because they want to afford a living.
- Two members have previous experience in the food sector as they had productive kitchen back in Syria.
- Two members mentioned that they have taken people's advice who highly recommended the food sector.
- One member mentioned that he gained his interest in the food sector because of one of his family members who works in that sector.
- One member stated that he already has experience in the eastern cuisine, and he wanted to gain experience in the western cuisine.
- One member has majored in gastronomy art in college.

2.2 Most things members enjoyed about the LIFE Project

Majority of the FGDs participants enjoyed meeting new people and establishing friendships, the following majority of participants liked the external events and festivals they participated in, because they had the opportunity to present their products and expand their networks.

Members in ***Istanbul*** stated that the things they liked the most about the LIFE project are:

- The mixed culture environment;
- Working in the kitchen;

- The trainings and the team that conducted the trainings;
- The festivals;
- Engaging with people and expanding their network;
- The group works;
- Obtaining new skills and knowledge;
- Members' recipes were added to the cookbook;

Members in ***Mersin*** stated that the things they liked the most about the LIFE project are:

- The workshops, the trainings, and the activities.
- The exhibition, and the external events.
- The LIFE training team.
- Being able to engage with the fellow members.

2.3 Advise, members would offer, to someone who is just starting out in Food-based sector

Almost all participants cited the importance of dedication and hard work, they explained that working in the food sector need proper planning, setting realistic goals, and exercising patience.
Syrian members would advise the refugees to understand and adapt to the circumstances, culture and challenges in Turkey.

Members in ***Istanbul*** said that the advice they would give to those who are starting out in the food-based sector is:

- To never give up and always keep trying;
- Try to adapt to the new circumstances and challenges;
- Be dedicated and work hard;
- Participate in the workshops at LIFE project; and

Beneficiaries in ***Mersin*** said that their advice would be:

- Never give up;
- Engage in trainings; and
- Obtain a university degree in business studies.

2.4 Confidence in the business skills in the food sector

Table 2 below presents the aspect in which helped members in ***Istanbul*** gain confidence in being involved in the food sector.

Table 2: Confidence assets-Istanbul

Confidence Assets	Voting
Motivation and passion	11
LIFE project	10
Friends, family, and network	9
Feedback from others	7
Previous experience	5
Thinking of the next generation	4
Inspired by working with women	3
Social media	2
Participation in the Cookbook	1

"I believe women has to work for their freedom. I believe I am a hard worker person and have experience. I want my yeast to reach too many people with my special dough that is a tradition coming from my family"

"We should be self-confident to have a better life and to be a role model to our kids".

"The source of my motivation is me; I believe in myself to make my dream come true, my only purpose is to provide more clean and healthier food for our generation"

"Increasing my life standards and having a better recovery about my health"

"In one of the events, some international (American) individuals visited the centre, they liked my meal a lot. This feedback remarkably increased my confidence in myself and my products"

"I already have confidence in myself and my skills. The knowledge I gained from the LIFE project helped me a lot to understand project management, pros and cons and how to develop further myself"

"The most thing I enjoyed and was proud of is my participation in the cookbook, as my recipe was added to the book and this meant a lot to me. Because I was able to transfer the tradition and skills I learned over the past years to others. I was able to transfer the efforts of my grandmother to others"

Table 3 below presents the aspect in which helped members in ***Mersin*** gain confidence in being involved in the food sector.

Table 3: Confidence assets-Mersin

Confidence Assets	Voting
LIFE activities and events	7
LIFE trainers	7
Previous experience	7
Network and connections	4

"The activities and events that I attended helped me gain confidence"

"Mr. Amjad" is what gave me the confident to continue"

"I came across a lot of challenges, I had a traffic accident, I had a lot of time during recovery period. I needed to do something. Hence, I started to engage in the baking and food sector. When I see my health is going better, my motivation improves"

2.5 Interaction with the LIFE Project

All participants engaged in the training program of the LIFE project, also, all of them participated in demo days, internal events, and some of them participated in the external events and festivals.

As for the business development services, not all members asked for an expert advice. Majority of those who engaged in one on one session, required further information about business registration, law, legal accounting, finance and budgeting, and marketing.

All members used the kitchen to cook, test their recipes, and prepare for events.

Table 4 below presents in which of the LIFE project's activities and events the members have participated in since the beginning of the project.

Table 4: Interactions with the LIFE project

Interactions	Istanbul	Mersin
Training program	√	√
Gastrodiplomacy events and workshops	√	√
Business Development Services	√	√
Demo Day at the FEC	√	√
Using the kitchen	√	√
Participation in the cookbook	√	

2.6 Challenges in utilizing the resources the FEC offers

Regarding the training curriculum, overall members were satisfied with the training content, some of them asked to add more practical examples, and few asked to add a lengthy session about law, business registration requirement and legal obligations.

Some Syrian participants in Mersin highlighted the challenge that members were of very various levels, some were beginners while other were at a very advanced stage, while some had some knowledge, so people ended up attending the workshops just because the needed to attend. Also, another reason is that, the marketing topic was allocated two pages only, which is not the least enough. Few others described the translation as poor.

Almost all FGDs participants who benefited from business development services found it very useful.

In both cities, members highlighted facing challenges using the kitchen. Although all LIFE members have used the kitchen in one or more activities, their expectations were higher, they expected full utilization of the kitchen especially the programme is operating in the food sector. In Istanbul, only the Syrian group reporting being unsatisfied with the use of kitchen, whereas in Mersin, almost all participants complaint about not using the kitchen efficiently.

Members collectively highlighted that the management approach of the events announcement and selection is not clear for them. Some reported not being informed about external events, while others reported being informed late. In addition, they reported not having enough details about the event/festival such as the festival theme, type of participants, meals and presentation, special requests, and number of participants.

Many members cited frustrations with the project support beyond the training programme (after graduation). They expected an extended support in findings job opportunities, support in expanding their network including vendors, suppliers, customers, business owners, and investors, they also expected closer collaboration with the LIFE project and the FEC after graduation.

Almost 80% of both group respondents had negative opinion regarding the business pitch competition. Some believed it was not fair, some were not aware of the criteria, and others did not understand what mistake they did.

FGD participants from Istanbul and Mersin identified the below shortcomings in the competition:

A lot mentioned the Jury was not fair for different reasons; some in Istanbul said that members of the Jury are relatives to the management team. Others also in Istanbul said

the evaluation system is not transparent; the final discussion is not being made on public but rather in a private room. And one member in Mersin mentioned that she had two of her competitors in the sweet market as jury members.

Also, the majority of participants referenced there was a lack of follow up with the winners to check if their projects were indeed active after the project period. They further explained that some projects who won were not realistic as they presented projects that required a huge capital amount.

A majority expressed that the grant amount was not sufficient even to attain the business registration documents.

The competition evaluation criteria were not clear, and some Turkish members said it was not translated to the local language.

A lot of the winners did not present innovative ideas and their products were available in the local market.

Members in Istanbul shared that the fixed quota (2 Syrians, 2 Turks) was not fair, the competition should consider who is the best.

Mersin group mentioned there were multiple members who won the competition but did not participate in the training courses.

They also mentioned there was one winner who bought her product from the market and presented it in the competition.

Members were dissatisfied with the fact that in some cohorts, the winners were either all Syrians or all Turks.

And some members mentioned that they didn't get feedback for why they did not win and what fault they have made.

Members in ***Istanbul*** stated that the challengers they have faced in utilizing the resources offered by FEC are:

- Members did not receive help in finding financial support.
- Four members had difficulties using the kitchen; as they had to waste a lot of time in transportation to get to the center, which was very far.
- Five members agreed that the quality of the kitchen equipment is not good.

Members in ***Mersin*** stated that the challenges they have faced in utilizing the resources offered by FEC are:

- Members mentioned that the kitchen was new. However, they did not get the chance to use it.

- Due to the construction work taking place in the main center, members had to move to another building for training. The other center was small and had no shared kitchen.

The Syrian group in Mersin further added additional comments regarding differences in the project activities as well as opportunities between Mersin and Istanbul; they specifically mentioned:

- The development of the cookbook that included recipes only from Istanbul members
- The promotion for Istanbul members' products and achievements
- The media focus on Istanbul branch and members
- And the opportunities Istanbul members are having, such as participation in events, workshops, and festivals.

"On the Mersin center opening day, I did a speech on behalf of the members, but this speech was not streamed on social media at all" said one male participant in Mersin.

"Even our participation in the Orange festival didn't appear on social media" said one female participant in Mersin.

"Mersin branch was barely mentioned on the LIFE website," said one male participant in Mersin.

Their main concern Mersin members voiced is that Istanbul members have more exposure to the external community, and this is helping them better to promote their products and projects. In contrast, such opportunities are much more limited in Mersin, with more focus on allowing the Turkish members to engage in external local events and workshops.

2.7 The general condition of the local economy over the past year

All members described the local economy in Turkey as *challenging*. Turkish participants pointed out specifically the high percentage of unemployment, the continues rise in prices especially food prices, and the difficulties facing food businesses in sustaining their business due to the poor planning and resources.

Syrian groups added to the previous challenges, the fact that Syrians are negatively impacted because more and more Syrian families are seeking asylum to Europe, by this shrinking the Syrian market in Turkey.

Members in ***Istanbul*** reported that the general conditions of the local economy over the past year have been difficult due to the following:

- Income is lower than the families' needs and demands;

- High interest rates;
- High rates of unemployment;
- Prices are increasing; and
- The price of raw material has increased which led to members not being able to sell their products at reasonable prices and make profit.

Members in ***Mersin*** reported that the general conditions of the local economy over the past year have been difficult due to the following:

- Business owners are having difficulties to in selling their products; and they are advising their peers not to start their own business.
- On the other hand; Turkey is going through a process of growing, some industries are getting better and the economy condition is slowly improving.

2.8 Relevance of the LIFE Project materials

All participants agreed that the training materials were relevant, many of them said they learned a lot of new things, and some reported reflecting what they learnt in their work.

Members in ***Istanbul*** agreed that the LIFE project materials were relevant mentioning the below points:

- Members have acquired new skills such as: planning, marketing, financial management, and accounting.
- One member pointed out that the material used at the LIFE project is relevant. However, the curriculum lacked examples and practical knowledge.

Members in ***Mersin*** agreed that the LIFE project materials were relevant mentioning the below points:

- The material used enabled the members to obtain the needed skills.
- The material used taught the members how to proceed with their career in the food sector and how to plan their business future.

2.9 Barriers encountered that have affected the livelihood and resilience of members

Both the Turkish and Syrian groups identified the financial barriers as the main issue impacting their livelihood and resilience.

Members in ***Istanbul*** mentioned the below four barriers in which they have encountered:

- Their financial situation and the limited resources in which they need to proceed with their career.
- They do not have a proper business network to be able to market and sell their products.
- They are not aware of where to purchase the raw material from.
- Syrian did not receive support beyond the incubation program period, while the Turks were invited to participate in events that enabled them to increase their network and scale up their business in some cases.

Members in ***Mersin*** all agreed on one barrier and that is the financial situation.

2.10 The relations between the Turkish and Syrian communities

The Turkish and the Syrian members expressed their opinions in regard to the nature of the relationship between each other. Both the Turks and the Syrians in ***Istanbul*** agreed that the relationship has become worse over the past two years.

Both groups identified politics as the main factor playing part in this relationship, in particular the last election event which had very negative consequences on Syrians. Language is the second top factor, followed by that factor that Syrians are not putting efforts in integrating and adapting into the Turkish culture.

They have also mentioned the following notes regarding their relationship:

- Turkish members in Istanbul reported that they have changed their perspectives towards Syrians within the LIFE project; however, they are still in disagreement with the Syrians within their communities reasoning that to Syrians do not abide by the law;
- Turkish members also mentioned that the language is considered to be a big barrier;
- Syrian members stated that during the LIFE project, some Turkish members did not want to interact with the Syrian members;
- Syrian members said that they do not believe that Turks and Syrians are able to incorporate with each other;
- Syrian members also mentioned that the language and the different cultures are a main barrier; and
- Syrian members said that the LIFE project worked towards improving the relationship between the two communities, but those attempts were unsuccessful because the focus was more on the Turkish members, and the opportunities were given to the Turkish members post the incubation period.

- The Turkish and the Syrian members expressed their opinions in regard to the nature of the relationship between each other.

Both the Turks and the Syrians in ***Mersin*** agreed that the relationship has become worse over the past two years. They have also mentioned the following notes regarding their relationship:

- The Turkish members stated that the LIFE project helped them in understanding the Syrian circumstances better and now they are aware of the challenges Syrians are facing in general and within the LIFE project.
- Syrian members said that within the project, the relationship was not good; as the Turks tried to avoid them;
- Syrian members also mentioned that the language and the different cultures are a main barrier;
- Syrian members stated that during the LIFE project, the Turks took the front table in the contest while the Syrians took the back tables, which led to the Turks being able to sell more than the Syrians.

2.11 Skills acquired throughout the LIFE Project

Table 5 below displays the skills obtained throughout the LIFE project in both Istanbul and Mersin and by both Turkish and Syrian members.

Table 5: Skills obtained

Skills	Istanbul	Mersin
Kitchen management and learning new recipes	√	
Networking skills and relationship building	√	√
Marketing and events experience	√	√
Time management	√	
Teamwork	√	
Budget management and cost & analysis	√	√
Communications skills	√	√
Food safety and presentation	√	√
Increase self confidence	√	
Competition skills	√	
Body language		√
Intellectual development		√
Entrepreneurship		√

- Syrian members in both Istanbul and Mersin confirmed that the skills they have obtained throughout the LIFE project will be utilized and carried out provided they keep practicing those skills.
- Syrian members in both Istanbul and Mersin stated that they are comfortable starting their own business because they are already working in the food sector, so they know what the steps are; however, they reported that they need connections and financial support.
- Turkish members in both Istanbul and Mersin confirmed that the knowledge and skills they obtained throughout the LIFE project made them feel comfortable enough to start their own business; however, they reported that they need financial support.

2.12 Barriers encountered with entering the food-based sector

Table 6 below presents the barriers encountered with entering the food-based sector for both Turkish and Syrian members in both Istanbul and Mersin.

Table 6: Skills obtained

Barriers	Istanbul	Mersin
Financial issues	√	√
Low sales and marketing	√	√
Poor network	√	√
Turkish regulations and tax system	√	√
Lack of reliable sources for purchasing raw material	√	√
Not enough knowledge of the Turkish language	√	
Racism		√
Politics		√

"In order to achieve our plans, we know it requires financial resources , especially for us as small entrepreneurs"

"The main barriers are related to the financial situation in Turkey, as all prices are getting high. And I have limited financial ability to proceed"

"I am dealing only with Syrian vendors, but they are not always a reliable source. My ingredients are very specific. And I face a challenge finding local wholesale vendors"

"We wish that LIFE programme organizes events or shopping stands in the community, and we can participate with our products. This will introduce us to other business owners who might help"

"I believe the main challenge for most of the participants is that they all are having similar project ideas"

2.13 Surprises with the LIFE Project

Table 7 below presents the surprises with the LIFE project for both Turkish and Syrian members in both Istanbul and Mersin.

Table 7: Surprises with the LIFE project

Surprises	Positive/negative	Istanbul	Mersin
Not providing support beyond the program period	☹	√	
Meeting new people	☺		√
Pitch competition was no fair	☹	√	
Build positive relationship with LIFE team	☺	√	
International participation in the demo days	☺	√	
Receiving feedback and support from international experts	☺	√	
Being able to attend events even after the training period	☺		√
Introduced to job offers and other similar training projects	☺		√
Coronavirus	☹		√

2.14 Future plans

Both Turkish and Syrian members in Istanbul and Mersin have positive perspectives for their future in the food-based sector over the next three years. Members' quotes are presented below:

- *'I see myself exporting sweets (ma'amool) to Saudi Arabia.'*
- *'I want to have my own restaurant.'*
- *'I see myself owning a cheese market throughout Turkey.'*
- *'I want to promote my brand throughout Turkey.'*
- *'I see myself owning a pastry shop.'*
- *'I see myself competing with others in the cheese and diary production field.'*
- *'I see myself as an advisor in the food sector who supports start-ups.'*
- *'Work on my production within my garden.'*
- *'I want to start a restaurant that serves healthy breakfast.'*

- *'I want to proceed with online sales and marketing.'*
- *'I am planning to work in food retailers.'*
- *'I wish to own a big restaurant in a good location.'*
- *'I want to own a restaurant and move to Istanbul for better opportunities.'*
- *'I see myself starting a cooking program for the Palestinian cuisine in my home.'*
- *'Graduate from university and continue taking course within the food sector.'*
- *'Make my own products.'*
- *'Work in the accounting in the food sector.'*

3 Sampling Strategy

Members				**Turkish members**	**Syrian members**
	total	**M**	**F**		
Istanbul	12	4	8	5	7
Mersin	9	3	6	1	8
Total respondents	21	7	14	6	15

4 Limitations

In Mersin, the FGD was cancelled on the same day, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, then participants were re-invited, and they were given a very flexible choice for participation. On that day, the Turkish government announced the first case in Turkey, and this caused panic amongst the people. As a result, only one female participant attended the FGD.

The facilitator used the FGD protocol. However, it was an individual interview rather than a discussion, and nominal voting exercise was not done.

In both Syrian FGDs, some members (3-4) joined the discussion late. Some were late for half an hour, and some for an hour. Therefore, the first part of the Syrian FGDs topics considered a smaller number of respondents than the second half of the protocol.

5 Recommendations

- Encourage a culture of systematic information sharing, continuously provide updates to members regarding the programme activities, use of resources, limitations and challenges.
- Increase the practical component of the programme, this might consider including more localized case studies, adding field visits to local established businesses, inviting local business stakeholders to open discussions with members and sharing real life examples and challenges.
- Identify suitable approaches to keep graduates engaged and informed and extend the support beyond the programme period in areas of networking, referrals to job opportunities and investors within the capacity and scope of the program.
- Develop multiple levels for participants to attend the training program. This can consider having homogeneous groups for multiple levels.
- Revise the business pitch competition set up, criteria, and ensure the process is clear for everyone and the selection criteria are provided in the local language.
- External events management could benefit from further organization and proper information sharing. It is recommended to set up a meeting prior to the external events and festivals with all participants to discuss the plan, design, roles and responsibilities, agree on what to offer, and how to present it.