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NGOs and the sociocultural adaptation of refugees: exploring challenges and impact

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in facilitating the sociocultural adaptation of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Data were collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods, including a questionnaire featuring the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale – Revised, demographic and open-ended questions directed at refugees, and interviews with NGO representatives. The findings highlight both the successes and challenges associated with NGO-led programmes aimed at enhancing refugees' sociocultural adaptation. While these initiatives have fostered environments that promote communication and mutual understanding between refugees and the host community, the study found that NGO programmes were positively associated primarily with language proficiency (LP), with beneficiaries demonstrating higher LP scores compared to non-participants. However, NGO programmes did not significantly influence overall sociocultural adaptation, and socio-demographic factors such as age and employment status were independently associated with LP outcomes. Respondents identified organisational deficiencies, a lack of expertise among training personnel, and the short duration of programmes as key obstacles. Language barriers were particularly challenging, exacerbated by economic pressures that hindered full-time educational engagement. Additionally, perceptions of non-acceptance from the host community, fuelled by political rhetoric and negative media portrayals, further complicated integration efforts. The study underscores the importance of multisectoral collaboration, to ensure more comprehensive integration.

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Introduction

The conflict in Syria, which began in 2011, has displaced millions of civilians seeking refuge from violence and challenging living conditions. Türkiye has become a safe haven for over 3 million Syrian refugees¹ (Presidency of Migration Management 2024), representing about half of those displaced globally (UNHCR 2024). During the early years of the turmoil, the Turkish government adopted an open-door policy and demonstrated a welcoming attitude

towards Syrian refugees, underpinned by a focus on religious solidarity, brotherhood and a shared Ottoman identity (Lazarev and Sharma 2017; Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019). This policy ensured that the humanitarian and temporary protection needs of the refugees were met while upholding the principle of non-refoulement. Initially, both the Turkish and Syrian communities anticipated the armed conflict to conclude expeditiously, facilitating the repatriation of Syrians to their homeland (İçduygu 2015). Accordingly, the Turkish government's measures regarding legal status, economic opportunities and sociocultural adaptation² were designed to be provisional.

However, Syria's security, political and economic conditions have not improved, and the future remains uncertain. As a result, Syrian refugees have been residing in Türkiye for over a decade. Many have established businesses, secured employment across various sectors, and actively sought to integrate into the host society. Furthermore, a considerable number of children have commenced their education in Türkiye, while others, including youth and adults, have pursued higher education in Turkish institutions. Given these developments, the possibility of a mass return to Syria appears increasingly unlikely. Instead, the long-term settlement of Syrians in Türkiye is becoming more plausible, as their socio-economic ties to the country deepen.

Therefore, it is essential to pursue strategies that harmonise Syrian and Turkish communities, fostering an improved quality of life and a heightened respect for human dignity. These efforts should extend beyond short-term measures, addressing the long-term needs and contributions of Syrian refugees within Turkish society. Despite the lack of a unified national social cohesion policy in Türkiye, both governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have actively implemented programmes to address the needs of displaced Syrians and support their integration into Turkish society.

Civil society plays a crucial role in the integration of refugees in Türkiye (Sunata and Tosun 2019). While the concept of civil society is inherently complex, it generally encompasses voluntary associations and relational networks formed around family, faith, interests and ideology (Walzer 1992). Within this sphere, NGOs – considered a category of civil society – span a diverse array of entities, including international NGOs (INGOs), government-organised NGOs (GONGOs), and, as recently proposed by Sunata and Tosun (2019), NGO-refugees (NGO-R). As this study does not seek to examine the implications of these specific classifications in detail, the term 'NGO' will be used broadly to encompass all types.

Since the arrival of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, NGOs have played a crucial role in both distributing humanitarian aid and facilitating access to essential services such as education, employment and healthcare. Over time, their efforts have evolved beyond immediate crisis response to include broader support for state welfare and, more recently, initiatives aimed at fostering social cohesion. This shift highlights their strategic role not only in meeting refugees' basic needs but also in building social connections that strengthen ties between local and refugee communities. Research underscores the impact of these initiatives, identifying NGOs as pivotal actors in promoting social adaptation (Aras and Duman 2019; Mackreath and Sağnıç 2017; Rottmann 2020; Seyidov 2021; Sunata and Tosun 2019; Zihnioğlu and Dalkıran 2022).

Despite the implementation of numerous programmes by NGOs, their impact on the sociocultural adaptation of Syrian refugees in Türkiye remains inconclusive. Therefore, it is crucial to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives in fostering integration. This research aims to address this gap by exploring the role of NGOs in supporting the sociocultural

adaptation of refugees into the host community. It evaluates both the levels of adaptation among refugees and the effectiveness of NGO-led initiatives in promoting integration. Sociocultural adaptation has been measured using the revised version of the Socio-Cultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS-R), recently adapted into Arabic (Keser, Yalçin, and Gökmen 2024), which will be employed for the first time in Türkiye for this purpose. The study is complemented by interviews with NGO representatives aimed at uncovering the underlying factors contributing to the performance of NGOs' programmes. By providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of these programmes and exploring the reasons behind their performance, this study contributes to a broader understanding of refugee integration and underscores the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in this process.

To set the stage for the discussion, the article proceeds with a review of the literature on sociocultural adaptation and the role of NGOs in facilitating this process. This is followed by an outline of the methodology employed in the study and a presentation of its findings, culminating in a discussion and conclusion section.

Sociocultural adaptation of refugees

The cultural shifts that arise from prolonged, direct interactions between host and refugee communities are commonly referred to as 'acculturation' (Redfield et al. 1936). Acculturation encompasses the psychological, behavioural and social changes that occur when individuals from different cultural backgrounds interact. This framework consists of three key components: conditions, orientations and outcomes (Arends-Tóth and Van de Vijver 2006).

Acculturation conditions encompass the contextual factors shaping this process, such as the characteristics of both the host country and the country of origin, the demographics of host and immigrant populations, and key variables like socioeconomic resources and language proficiency. Acculturation orientations, or strategies, describe the approaches individuals or groups adopt to navigate intercultural contact, reflecting the extent to which they engage with the dominant culture while maintaining their original cultural practices (Arends-Tóth and van de Vijver 2006; Celenk and Van de Vijver 2011). Finally, acculturation outcomes denote the results of this process, typically categorised into psychological, socio-cultural and economic adaptation (Aycan and Berry 1996; Searle and Ward 1990).

Sociocultural adaptation reflects individuals' ability to navigate daily challenges in their new environment, particularly within family life, employment and education (Berry 1997). This concept is particularly relevant to refugees, as it captures the social interactions, cultural understanding and behavioural adjustments necessary for effective integration. Sociocultural adaptation serves as both an outcome of acculturation and a dynamic process influenced by cultural knowledge acquisition and social skill development. Successful adaptation depends on acquiring the necessary skills to function within the host community and engaging in meaningful social participation (Ward et al. 1998).

Early studies conceptualised this process as a U-curve (Lysgaard 1955), progressing through the phases of honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment and mastery. However, subsequent research suggests that cultural difficulties peak upon initial contact and gradually decline (Ward et al. 1998). More recent studies propose that adaptation follows a learning curve, characterised by rapid initial improvements that eventually plateau (Ward and Kennedy 1999; Wilson, Ward, and Fischer 2013).

Culture learning theory posits that sociocultural adaptation is facilitated by the development of communication skills and cultural awareness (Masgoret and Ward 2006; Searle and Ward 1990). Key determinants include language proficiency, duration of residence, prior cross-cultural experiences, cultural knowledge and interactions with host nationals (Nakhaie 2020; Ouarasse and Van de Vijver 2005; Ward and Kennedy 1999; Wilson, Ward, and Fischer 2013). Additionally, socioeconomic factors significantly influence adaptation outcomes, with stable employment positively contributing to sociocultural integration (Aycan and Berry 1996). Empirical evidence further suggests that individuals with higher socioeconomic status and educational attainment adapt more effectively (Ataca and Berry 2002).

However, various stressors may hinder adaptation, with perceived discrimination being a major barrier (Ataca and Berry 2002; Wilson et al. 2017). Experiencing discrimination can lead immigrants to disengage from host-community interactions, increasing reliance on co-national networks (Leong and Ward 2000). Yet this reliance does not necessarily promote adaptation (Zlobina et al. 2006). Moreover, legal uncertainties, employment challenges and family-related concerns further complicate the adaptation process (Hassan et al. 2016; Renner et al. 2020; Tinghög et al. 2017).

The impact of gender and age remains inconclusive. It is indicated that lower socioeconomic status exacerbates adaptation difficulties for women and that they adapt more slowly than men in developing identification with the host culture (Ataca and Berry 2002). Others, however, find no significant relationship between gender, age and adaptation (El Khoury 2019; Zlobina et al. 2006). Conversely, some studies indicate that refugee youth who are proficient in the host language demonstrate successful sociocultural adaptation (Buchanan et al. 2018; Sorgen 2015).

Given the complex nature of sociocultural adaptation, various actors play a role in facilitating the process, including governments, local communities, and CSOs. Among these, NGOs have emerged as key facilitators of refugee adaptation by providing essential services, fostering social inclusion, and addressing gaps left by state institutions. In Türkiye, where the majority of Syrian refugees remain under temporary protection, NGOs have the potential to play a crucial role in easing integration challenges through a range of programmes and initiatives. The following section explores NGOs' role in facilitating refugee adaptation in Türkiye, examining both their contributions and the challenges they encounter.

NGOs and sociocultural adaptation of Syrians in Türkiye

NGOs, in collaboration with CSOs and government agencies, play a key role in supporting the sociocultural adaptation of refugees by offering training and skill-building activities that foster integration. However, the effectiveness of these efforts must be considered within the broader legal and social context. A major obstacle is access to citizenship, which hampers professional development, raises costs and limits refugees' prospects for property ownership, travel and long-term planning (Safak, Nisanci, and Olcum 2024). This stems from Türkiye's legal framework, which, despite its commitments under the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, restricts refugee status to individuals from Europe. As a result, most irregular migrants, including Syrians, lack official refugee recognition due to their non-European origins.

It is therefore argued that Syrians in Türkiye remain in a prolonged state of 'reception' rather than progressing to 'integration'. In this context, reception refers to the period between

a refugee's arrival and the state's decision on their asylum application, while integration commences after a positive decision that formally recognises the individual as a legal refugee (Rottmann 2020) and connotes a permanent settlement (Daniş and Nazlı 2019). However, the government consistently emphasises the temporary nature of Syrians' residence in Türkiye.

The legal status of Syrians in Türkiye was formally established through legislation enacted on 22 October 2014. The Temporary Protection (TP) Regulation, issued under Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection, sets out procedures for registration and documentation, granting Syrians the legal right to reside in the country until conditions allow for a safe return to Syria (Temporary Protection Regulation 2014). Although the status is designated as 'temporary', the regulation mandates the Presidency of Migration Management to coordinate with local authorities, government institutions and CSOs to promote the social integration of individuals under temporary protection (Law No. 6458 2013).

NGOs have thus assumed a pivotal role in compensating for the shortcomings of official institutions in promoting the social adaptation of refugees. Türkiye hosts a large and growing number of NGOs, a trend that has accelerated since the enactment of the Associations Law in 2004. As of July 2024, there are 100,760 registered associations and 6094 foundations, alongside numerous informal organisations, including platforms, initiatives and groups. While precise data on NGOs working specifically in the refugee sector is lacking, most operate in areas such as social solidarity and services, education, health, vocational training, sport and religion (International Center for Not-For-Profit Law 2024).

Nevertheless, NGOs face several challenges in implementing their programmes. One of the most pressing issues is the lack of coordination and information-sharing among organisations operating in Türkiye's migration sector, as highlighted by numerous studies (Aras and Duman 2019; Daniş and Nazlı 2019; Seyidov 2021). This fragmentation often leads to the duplication of programmes targeting similar themes and beneficiary groups. A key factor contributing to this problem is the nature of international funding, which fosters competition among CSOs (Rottmann 2020). While INGOs enhance the capacity of local actors through financial support and partnerships, they also contribute to competition and the marketisation of the sector, prompting a shift from volunteer-based initiatives to professionalised operations (Mackreath and Sağnıç 2017).

The concept of sociocultural adaptation is subject to varying interpretations by different actors, resulting in a diverse range of objectives and strategies. While some organisations prioritise the delivery of social activities, others focus on celebrating religious or national holidays or providing educational programmes. Municipalities likewise offer a broad spectrum of services, reflecting differing understandings of refugee needs and divergent expectations of the state. Additionally, the target groups for these services often differ; some organisations concentrate on women or children, while others adopt a more inclusive, community-wide approach (Rottmann 2020).

Another challenge stems from the relationship between CSOs and the state. The government may favour certain NGOs over others due to ideological and organisational ties, leading to the emergence of what has been termed 'pro-governmental organisations' rather than independent NGOs (Daniş and Nazlı 2019). In this context, the Turkish government has been argued to promote 'state-created/favoured CSOs' (Mackreath and Sağnıç 2017). Findings from this study indicate that CSO representatives perceive state cooperation as largely limited to these favoured organisations. Such dynamics

may generate suspicion among refugee communities, particularly when NGOs are seen as extensions of the state, and can contribute to perceptions of unequal fund distribution.

A further significant challenge is the communication barrier arising from language differences (Seyidov 2021, Safak, Nisanci, and Olcum 2024). The majority of Syrian refugees do not speak Turkish, while many NGOs lack Arabic-speaking staff, severely limiting effective communication and service delivery. This language gap not only hampers direct interaction but also constrains NGOs' capacity to understand and respond to refugees' specific needs. As such, the shortage of Arabic-speaking personnel within NGOs and the limited Turkish language proficiency among Syrians pose substantial obstacles to cooperation and integration efforts (Mackreath and Sağrıç 2017).

Recent studies report low levels of sociocultural adaptation among Syrian refugees, driven by perceived low quality of social life, moderate levels of interaction with both host community members and other refugees, uncertainty about the future, and strong intentions to return (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu, Kunuroğlu, and Yağmur 2021). Additional factors – including socio-economic hardship, housing problems and challenges related to citizenship, employment procedures and family separation – further hinder refugees' ability to adapt (Safak, Nisanci, and Olcum 2024).

Moreover, public sentiment in Türkiye is undergoing a notable shift, marked by increasing resentment within the host community and declining support for refugee-hosting policies. The initial framing of Syrians as 'guests' has gradually given way to growing demands for their repatriation (Kaya 2020; Özdemir and Öner-Özkan 2016). The perception that Syrians are not being adequately integrated into Turkish society continues to gain traction (Erdoğan 2023). Research identifies several key factors influencing public attitudes towards refugees in Türkiye, including frequency of contact, perceived threat (Çirakoğlu, Demirutku, and Karakaya 2021), empathy (Aktas, Tepe, and Persson 2021) and uncertainty avoidance (Özdemir, Malatyali, and Sakallı 2023).

The promotion of sociocultural adaptation requires the involvement of multiple actors, including local communities, host state institutions, local and international organisations, and institutions in the country of origin. Civil society holds considerable potential to foster social cohesion and integration (Easton-Calabria and Wood 2021). Although NGOs represent only one of these actors, their role remains particularly significant. Effective integration of refugees into host societies demands coordinated and collaborative efforts, as it cannot be achieved by any single actor in isolation. NGOs play a vital role in supporting migrants to realise their legal rights – particularly in the areas of education, healthcare and employment – by addressing the gap between official policies and the realities experienced on the ground. These discrepancies are often shaped by the limitations and inconsistencies within the legal framework (Sunata and Tosun 2019).

Methodology

In this study, Gaziantep, a Turkish city sharing a long border with Syria, was chosen. One reason for this choice is that it has the second highest registered Syrian population after Istanbul, but with a higher population density.³ Although no official data exist on the exact number of NGOs operating in Gaziantep specifically on refugee-related matters, these organisations offer a range of services, from humanitarian assistance to sociocultural adaptation

programmes. As a result, Gaziantep serves as a crucial case study for evaluating NGO efforts in facilitating the sociocultural adaptation of Syrian refugees.

The main research problem of the study is to explore the role of NGO programmes in supporting the sociocultural adaptation of Syrian refugees into the host community. The sub-research questions are as follows:

- How does participation in NGO programmes and activities impact the overall socio-cultural adaptation of Syrian refugees and its sub-domains?
- To what extent are NGO programme participation and socio-demographic factors independently associated with the overall sociocultural adaptation of Syrian refugees and its sub-domains?

The current study is an exploratory one that employs a mixed-method approach to address the research questions, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. The questionnaire was administered in Arabic, while the interviews were conducted in Arabic and English. The questionnaire included the SCAS-R scale alongside questions on refugees' demographic, social and economic characteristics. Additionally, it featured open-ended questions to capture participants' descriptions of the NGO programmes they attended and their feedback on these experiences. One such question asked: 'Have you benefited from NGO programmes? If so, how? If not, why?' The questionnaire was administered both in person and online to ensure broader participation.

The SCAS-R aims to measure the sociocultural adaptation levels of the participants. The SCAS was originally developed by Ward and Kennedy (1999) and later updated by Wilson (2013) to assess how well individuals adapt to new cultural and social environments. The psychometric development of the SCAS spanned approximately nine years, using data from 16 cross-sectional and four longitudinal samples (Ward and Kennedy 1999). The SCAS-R was adapted into Arabic with a focus on Syrian migrants in Türkiye (Keser, Yalçın, and Gökmen 2024), which has been used for this research.

The SCAS-R uses a 5-point Likert scale consisting of 21 items. It includes five sub-domains: Communication and Relationships (CR), Personal Interests and Community Involvement (PICE), Educational and Professional Performance (EPP), Ecological Adaptation (EA), and Language Proficiency (LP). A higher total score indicates greater sociocultural adaptation (Wilson 2013). The SCAS-R was designed as a self-report tool to assess cultural competencies acquired by sojourners and new immigrants during cross-cultural transitions (Wilson et al. 2017).

In-depth interviews were conducted as a complementary data collection method to further explore the issues identified in the SCAS-R. These interviews involved only NGO representatives, including experts and supervisors, to gain insight into the effectiveness of NGO programmes. The interview process concluded upon reaching data saturation, meaning that additional interviews were unlikely to yield new information. The semi-structured interviews focused on the characteristics, challenges and areas for improvement of these programmes. Each interview lasted approximately 20 min.

Data were collected between March and December 2023. Participants' consent was obtained before the data collection process began. To ensure the selection of relevant participants, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed. Purposive sampling enabled the inclusion of individuals with specific characteristics pertinent to the study's

objectives, while snowball sampling facilitated the identification of hard-to-reach participants through referrals. The quantitative phase included 327 Syrian refugees, while the qualitative phase involved in-depth interviews with 13 NGO experts. Additionally, 90 questionnaire respondents indicated participation in an NGO programme, and 83 of them provided detailed insights on their experiences through open-ended responses. Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23, while qualitative data were systematically examined using the MAXQDA software.

Findings

The study's findings are presented in two sections: quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative section examines statistical patterns in sociocultural adaptation, focusing on the role of NGO programmes and key socio-economic variables. The qualitative section provides deeper insights by exploring refugees' lived experiences and the perspectives of NGO representatives, highlighting both the perceived benefits and challenges of these programmes.

Quantitative analysis

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the questionnaire respondents, highlighting key demographic variables such as gender, age and participation in NGO-led sociocultural adaptation programmes (Table 1).

The proportion of female respondents is estimated to be approximately 37%, while males account for 63% of those who completed the questionnaire. The total number of beneficiaries of any NGO programme is 90, representing approximately 28% of the respondents. The majority of respondents are within the age range of 30 to 39, with only 17 respondents being older than 50.

Respondents scored above the midpoint in sociocultural adaptation and its five dimensions, indicating a generally good level of adaptation. Table 2 presents the mean sociocultural adaptation scores, including sub-dimensions, of Syrian refugees in Gaziantep based on their participation in NGO programmes (Table 2).

To examine whether NGO programmes influence the sociocultural adaptation of Syrian refugees and its sub-dimensions, an independent-samples t-test was performed. The test demonstrated no statistically significant difference in overall sociocultural adaptation levels between Syrian refugees who participated in NGO programmes and those who did not ($t_{(325)} = -0.29, p = .773$), as presented in Table 3. This finding suggests that NGO programmes implemented in Gaziantep did not have a statistically significant impact on the sociocultural adaptation levels of Syrian refugees.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on questionnaire respondents.

Gender	Age							NGO programme participation		Total
	18–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49	50–	Yes	No	
Female	21	24	24	29	11	5	8	33	89	122
Male	33	27	40	46	25	25	9	57	148	205
Total	54	51	64	75	36	30	17	90	237	327

Table 2. Sociocultural adaptation scores of Syrian refugees.

NGO programme participation	CR (L:7,H:35)*	PICE (L:4,H:28)*	EPP (L:4,H:28)*	EA (L:4,H:28)*	LP (L:2,H:10)*	SCA (L:21,H:105)*
Yes (<i>M</i>)	24.31	12.52	14.44	13.78	6.64	71.70
No (<i>M</i>)	24.63	12.08	14.66	13.71	6.11	71.19
Total (<i>M</i>)	24.47	12.3	14.55	13.75	6.38	71.45
St. score (total/# item)	3.5	3.08	3.64	3.44	3.19	3.4

*L refers to the lowest possible score on the scale, while H represents the highest.

Table 3. Socio-cultural adaptation of refugees participating in programmes.

	Mean difference	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
SCA	-0.510	325	-0.289	.773	-0.036
CR	.318	200.051	.557*	.578	.062
PICE	-0.446	185.224	-1.139*	.256	-0.132
EPP	.218	199.910	.597*	.551	.067
EA	-0.065	325	-0.163	.871	-0.020
LP	-0.534	187.373	-1.971	.050	-0.244

*Levene's test is significant ($p < .05$), suggesting a violation of the assumption of equal variances.

However, further analysis revealed that LP was the only variable where NGO programme participation had a statistically significant, albeit small, effect ($t_{(325)} = -1.971, p = .050$, Cohen's $d = -0.244$). Refugees engaged in NGO programmes reported higher LP scores (*Mean (M)* = 6.64, *Standard Deviation (SD)* = 1.94) than non-participants ($M = 6.11, SD = 2.28$). LP was measured through two items – 'I can understand and speak Turkish' and 'I can read and write in Turkish' – reflecting participants' self-assessed Turkish language skills. Although the findings suggest that those who participated in NGO programmes demonstrate higher proficiency in Turkish, this relationship does not imply that LP scores were solely influenced by NGO programmes. To explore this further, LP scores, NGO programme participation and socio-economic variables – such as age, gender, education level, length of residence, employment status⁴ and monthly income – were examined. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 4.

Age ($r = -0.266, p = .01$) and income ($r = -0.164, p = .01$) were negatively correlated with LP, while employment status ($r = .228, p = .01$) and NGO programme participation ($r = .109, p = .050$) showed weak positive correlations. The remaining variables showed no significant correlation with LP. Additionally, a moderate positive correlation was found between income and education level ($r = .460, p = .01$), indicating that respondents' income levels increase with higher education.

A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to examine the effect of participation in NGO programmes on language proficiency, controlling for age, income and employment status. The model was statistically significant, $F(4, 322) = 11.88, p = .001$, explaining approximately 12.9% of the variance in LP (adjusted $R^2 = .118$).

The analysis indicated that age ($F(1, 322) = 12.34, p = .001, \eta^2 = .037$), income ($F(1, 322) = 8.77, p = .003, \eta^2 = .027$) and employment status ($F(1, 322) = 11.21, p = .001, \eta^2 = .034$) had significant effects on LP. However, participation in NGO programmes did not have a statistically significant effect on LP ($F(1, 322) = 3.13, p = .078, \eta^2 = .010$), suggesting that programme participation, while possibly relevant, does not independently predict language proficiency when socio-economic variables are accounted for. These results are presented in Table 5.

Table 4. Correlation table.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Language Proficiency	–						
2. Programme participation	.109*	–					
3. Age	–0.266**	–0.041	–				
4. Gender	–0.013	.008	.083	–			
5. Education level	.070	.138*	.050	.045	–		
6. Income	–0.164**	.044	.139*	.075	.460**	–	
7. Length of residence	.097	–0.042	.135*	.102	–0.042	.068	–
8. Employment status	.228**	.084	–0.266**	.149**	.161**	.088	.008

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level.

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level.

Table 5. Results of ANCOVA on the factors affecting language proficiency.

Variable	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Age	12.34	.001	.037
Income	8.77	.003	.027
Employment status	11.21	.001	.034
Programme participation	3.13	.078	.010

Table 6. Post hoc analysis of language proficiency by age and employment status.

Variable	Groups	N	Mean (LP)	Significant mean differences
Age	18–24	54	7.52	18–24 > 30–34, 35–39, 40–44, 45–49, 50 and older.*
	25–29	51	6.69	
	30–34	64	5.81	
	35–39	75	6.24	
	40–44	36	5.67	
	45–49	30	5.27	
	50 and older	17	5.71	
Employment status	Unemployed	52	5.69	University student > Unemployed* University student > Employed*
	Employed	242	6.16	
	University Student	33	7.88	

*Mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

These findings indicate that socio-demographic characteristics, particularly age and employment status, explain more variance in LP than NGO programme participation. To further explore group-level differences, separate one-way ANOVA tests were conducted for age, income, and employment status. Statistically significant differences in LP were observed for age ($F(7, 320) = 5.81, p = .001$) and employment status ($F(2, 324) = 11.64, p = .001$). Bonferroni post hoc comparisons were applied for these two variables. Income differences were marginally non-significant ($F(6, 320) = 2.12, p = .051$) and were therefore excluded from post hoc analysis. The results are summarised in [Table 6](#).

It was found that respondents aged 18–24 had statistically significantly higher LP scores than most older age groups, except for those aged 25–29, where the difference was not significant. University students also had statistically significantly higher LP scores than both employed and unemployed groups. These findings are mutually reinforcing, as the majority of university students (25 out of 33) belonged to the 18–24 age group. This suggests that higher LP scores are strongly associated with younger age and student status, likely reflecting the advantages of being embedded within educational environments.

The quantitative findings indicate that participation in NGO programmes did not have a statistically significant impact on the overall sociocultural adaptation levels of Syrian refugees

in Gaziantep. However, a modest but significant effect was observed in the domain of LP, suggesting that NGO programmes may contribute to improving Turkish language skills. Nevertheless, other socio-economic factors, such as age and employment status, played a more substantial role in determining LP scores. While income emerged as a statistically significant covariate in the ANCOVA, it did not yield significant group-level differences in post hoc comparisons, further suggesting its limited explanatory power in this context.

These results suggest that sociocultural adaptation is shaped by broader structural conditions beyond NGO programme participation alone. However, statistical relationships alone do not fully capture the lived experiences of refugees or the specific mechanisms through which NGO programmes may – or may not – facilitate adaptation. To gain a deeper understanding, a qualitative analysis was conducted, drawing on the perspectives of NGO beneficiaries and representatives. This analysis explores the perceived impact of NGO programmes, the challenges encountered within them, and the broader difficulties refugees face in their daily lives, complementing the quantitative findings for a more comprehensive understanding of sociocultural adaptation.

Qualitative analysis

A qualitative analysis was conducted based on comments from 83 beneficiaries of NGO programmes and interviews with 13 NGO representatives. All participating NGOs had organised and periodically implemented social adaptation programmes for refugees. The NGO representatives included two programme managers, one senior adviser, one education and protection coordinator, and nine project officers.

Beneficiaries identified a total of 19 NGOs overseeing 63 programmes. Among these, 46 programmes were implemented by five INGOs, while 17 were led by 14 local NGOs. They indicated that the majority of programmes – 30 in total – centred on social activities and adaptation/integration. The second most prevalent theme was protection, with 16 programmes dedicated to safeguarding the basic rights of individuals affected by conflict, ensuring access to essential survival needs, protection from violence, and support for people with disabilities. The third most common type of programme focused on Turkish language acquisition. Other programme topics included employment-related skills, sports activities and personal development courses. The duration of the language courses was the longest, reaching up to six months, while other programmes ranged from a single day to two weeks.

The demographic distribution of the beneficiaries in terms of age and gender is presented in Table 7. A majority (59%) were under the age of 35, with 11 respondents aged 18–24, 21 aged 25–29, and 17 aged 30–34. Meanwhile, nearly 15% were over the age of 45. In terms of gender, women comprised 35% of the respondents, while men accounted for 65% (Table 7).

The transcripts of interviews and participants' remarks were analysed using both deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive analysis was applied to classify data into pre-defined categories, while the inductive approach facilitated the identification of emerging

Table 7. Distribution of respondents by age and gender.

	Age							Gender	
	18–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49	50–	Female	Male
<i>N</i>	11	21	17	11	11	7	5	29	54

codes and themes (Bingham 2023; Saldaña and Omasta 2017). The content was organised into three main categories: (1) the impact of NGO programmes, (2) challenges within NGO programmes, and (3) difficulties refugees face in their daily lives that affect the sociocultural adaptation process.

Codes within these categories were identified inductively. To ensure a rigorous coding process, interviews and participants' comments were independently reviewed and labelled by the researchers. These preliminary codes were then collaboratively analysed and refined into final themes. Subsequently, two subject-matter experts reviewed and validated the identified codes. The following tables, from Tables 8–10, present the codes within each category, with only those exceeding a 5% occurrence rate included in the analysis.

The positive impacts of NGO programmes, highlighting diverse perspectives from beneficiaries and NGO representatives, are presented in Table 8. Beneficiaries primarily emphasised the social dimension of these programmes, whereas NGO representatives tended to focus on employment-related and legal aspects. This discrepancy can be attributed to several factors, including differing priorities, institutional objectives and lived experiences. While refugees often engage with NGO programmes to address immediate social and cultural adaptation challenges, NGO representatives frame programme outcomes based on measurable indicators aligned with donor expectations and institutional mandates.

For beneficiaries, participation in NGO initiatives serves as a means of navigating daily challenges, particularly in overcoming social isolation, cultural unfamiliarity and language barriers. As a result, they perceive these programmes as opportunities to establish social connections and familiarise themselves with the host community. In contrast, NGO representatives are inclined to highlight employment-related and legal aspects because these align with the strategic goals of their organisations and the funding requirements of donors, which often prioritise economic empowerment, legal assistance and formal education.

Table 8. Positive impacts of NGO programmes.

Codes	Beneficiaries (%)	NGOs (%)	SUM (%)
Supportive social environment	31.82	9.09	40.91
Knowledge of culture and traditions	19.7	3.03	22.73
Employment and skill development	4.55	12.12	16.67
Legal rights	1.52	10.61	12.12
Language acquisition	1.52	6.06	7.58

Table 9. Problems encountered in NGO programmes.

Codes	Beneficiaries (%)	NGOs (%)	SUM (%)
Inadequate organisational planning	55.56	11.11	66.67
Language barrier	5.56	5.56	11.11
Lack of interest among beneficiaries	–	11.11	11.11

Table 10. Challenges in sociocultural adaptation.

Codes	Beneficiaries (%)	NGOs (%)	SUM (%)
Sense of non-acceptance	21.1	5.3	26.3
Legal issues	10.5	7.9	18.4
Hate speech in media	5.3	13.2	18.4
Cultural challenges	5.3	7.9	13.2
Economic problems	2.6	10.5	13.2
Political exploitation	5.3	2.6	7.9

Beneficiaries reported that social adaptation programmes create a positive interactive environment that improves communication between host community and refugees. Interviews with NGO representatives also revealed that these programmes foster mutual interaction, enabling the two communities to gain a deeper understanding of each other's cultures. One respondent from an NGO observed: 'There was a noticeable improvement in terms of acceptance of others and engagement in activities and meetings. This helped to build trust, cooperation, social integration, and resilience among them' (NGO13).

NGOs assert that their programmes play a pivotal role in equipping beneficiaries with essential skills and fostering employment opportunities. One supervisor highlighted that 'tailored vocational training and academic support bridge critical gaps in skills and qualifications, enabling refugees to contribute meaningfully within their host communities' (NGO12). Additionally, multiple beneficiaries corroborated this perspective, acknowledging that participation in these programmes enhanced their prospects for securing employment (B4, B74).

Moreover, a shared insight from the interviews is that these programmes have heightened beneficiaries' awareness of their rights, empowering them to pursue a better life in Türkiye (B34, B49, B52, B71). According to one NGO supervisor, legal understanding is essential for any refugee, as it allows them to navigate the legal landscape of the host country:

Lack of familiarity with the laws of the host country poses significant challenges, including the inability of some refugees to obtain necessary documentation or face restrictions on movement and residence. Additionally, some refugees are unaware of economic and labour laws, which impedes their integration into the workforce. (NGO12)

Despite these positive outcomes, the respondents also identified several critical issues that hinder the success of these initiatives, as reflected in [Table 9](#). The most commonly cited challenge by beneficiaries was inadequate planning and organisational issues, including insufficient expertise among trainers, language barriers and the short duration of programmes (B5, B16, B20, B22, B25, B30, B35, B38, B42, B64). One beneficiary summed up this situation by stating: 'They are all implemented without planning and without experience and are of no benefit at all' (B16). In line with this, NGO representatives emphasised that effective programme implementation requires better organisational coordination among private, governmental and international sectors (NGO1, NGO5, NGO11, NGO13). Poorly executed programmes not only reduce participants' engagement but also contribute to perceptions of ineffectiveness.

Language barriers, in particular, were highlighted as a significant challenge. A representative of an NGO elaborated on this issue: 'Many refugees are hoping to return to their homeland or migrate elsewhere, reducing their motivation to learn the language. Existing language education programmes, while numerous, often lack quality and fail to adequately meet the needs of refugees' (NGO12).

The inadequate knowledge of the host community's language entails reluctance to participate in programmes and lowers the beneficiaries' interests in such activities (NGO1, NGO7). This sentiment was echoed by several beneficiaries who felt that inadequate language training hindered their ability to fully integrate into the host community and access essential services (B18, B21, B38).

A particularly revealing statement from one beneficiary highlighted the core challenge: It is not possible to learn the language without full-time study, and it is not possible to devote full time due to the lack of income during this stage (B21). This statement captures the multifaceted nature of the language barrier issue faced by refugees. It underscores the inherent conflict between the need for full-time language education and the economic realities that prevent refugees from dedicating themselves to such intensive learning. The necessity to earn a livelihood takes precedence over language education, creating a significant barrier to achieving fluency in the host country's language. This economic pressure forces many refugees to prioritise immediate survival over long-term integration goals.

These challenges substantially hinder refugees' active participation in NGO programmes (NGO3, NGO5). Many express scepticism about the effectiveness of these initiatives in fostering meaningful change. Additionally, the participation of women and children remains particularly restricted due to sociocultural norms and practical barriers within refugee communities (NGO5, NGO6). Economic hardships – including high inflation, the prevalence of informal labour, and financial instability – exacerbate these difficulties, limiting refugees' ability to engage effectively with these programmes (NGO1, NGO5, NGO8, NGO12).

Beyond the structural and organisational challenges within NGO programmes, broader societal, political and economic factors further complicate refugees' adaptation, as outlined in Table 10. One of the primary challenges is the sense of non-acceptance, with 21.1% of beneficiaries reporting feelings of being unwelcome in the host community. This perception often stems from social and cultural differences, limited opportunities for meaningful interaction, and experiences of discrimination. The sense of exclusion can become more pronounced during election periods when refugees sometimes become central to political discussions, often framed as a burden or threat to society. This framing is sometimes reinforced by media portrayals, which can deepen misunderstandings and further distance refugees from the host community.

The media, particularly during election periods, often portrays refugees as a societal burden, reinforcing negative stereotypes and fostering public resentment (NGO2, NGO3, NGO4, NGO5). Such narratives deepen societal divisions and hinder efforts to promote mutual understanding. For instance, one respondent (B26) observed that 'it is common to use refugees for political agendas between parties, especially during elections', underscoring how refugees are framed as either a burden or a threat to gain political leverage. Another respondent (B24) highlighted that 'suspicious media agendas fuel hatred and exploit the suffering of refugees for political gain', drawing attention to the role of media in perpetuating negative stereotypes and deepening societal divisions. NGO representatives echoed these concerns; one supervisor (NGO3) stated that 'the general hate speech directed towards refugees, especially during election periods by political entities, coupled with systematic campaigns against refugees through media channels, significantly contributes to the challenges they face'. These insights underscore the interplay between political and media dynamics in shaping public attitudes towards refugees and complicating their integration efforts.

The manipulation of public perception through political and media channels exacerbates existing prejudices, making it more difficult for refugees to gain acceptance within the host community (NGO2). This environment of suspicion not only hampers the integration process but also perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and marginalisation. Such dynamics are particularly

detrimental during political campaigns, where sensationalist and divisive rhetoric can overshadow genuine efforts to foster social cohesion and mutual understanding (B24, B26).

One significant factor affecting sociocultural adaptation is the legal status of refugees. Clearly defining their legal status helps alleviate anxiety about the future and enables them to envision a shared future with the host society. In Türkiye, however, Syrians are classified as temporary residents, and as a result, there is no state-led or coordinated integration policy across the country. A supervisor from NGO12 outlined several legal challenges faced by refugees:

Lack of familiarity with local laws: Many refugees struggle to navigate the legal system due to limited knowledge of national regulations, which can lead to unintended legal complications.

Difficulties in obtaining documentation: Some refugees face obstacles in acquiring essential legal documents, which can restrict their movement and residency rights.

Limited awareness of labour laws: A lack of understanding of economic and employment regulations hinders refugees' ability to integrate into the workforce.

The absence of a comprehensive integration framework weakens the impact of NGO programmes, making it difficult for them to foster successful sociocultural adaptation on their own.

Cultural challenges also contribute to the difficulties refugees experience in adapting to their new environment, with 13.2% of responses citing this as a significant issue. These challenges go beyond language barriers and touch upon deeper societal values, norms and traditions. Refugees may struggle to navigate these cultural differences, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation.

Economic problems, another prominent challenge, are intricately linked to refugees' ability to engage with sociocultural adaptation programmes. Many refugees face economic hardships, including high inflation, reliance on informal labour and limited access to formal employment. These economic pressures force refugees to prioritise immediate survival over long-term integration goals, making it harder for them to participate in NGO programmes that aim to enhance skills, language proficiency and social integration. The lack of financial resources also limits refugees' access to quality education and vocational training, further hindering their ability to integrate into the host society. This cycle of economic hardship perpetuates dependency, leaving refugees with little opportunity to invest in their future and integrate successfully.

Discussion and conclusion

This study utilised both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to investigate the impact of NGO programmes on the sociocultural adaptation of refugees. The findings indicate that while the overall sociocultural adaptation of Syrians is relatively high, participation in NGO programmes does not significantly influence overall adaptation levels. However, a closer examination of specific sub-domains, particularly language proficiency, revealed that beneficiaries of NGO programmes exhibited higher LP scores compared to non-participants. This points to a potential association between NGO participation and host-language acquisition, a key component of sociocultural adaptation. Nonetheless, this association does not imply a direct causal link, nor does it suggest that higher language proficiency alone determines broader adaptation outcomes.

Additionally, the study found that younger individuals and university students demonstrated significantly higher language proficiency, highlighting the importance of socio-demographic characteristics in shaping adaptation experiences. These factors were independently associated with language proficiency, suggesting that personal background characteristics may play a more substantial role than NGO programme participation alone. The findings underscore the need for a broader analytical focus on structural and demographic determinants in the integration process.

The strong association between host language proficiency and sociocultural adaptation underscores the need for targeted language training in fostering integration. Proficiency in the host language enhances employability, promotes social cohesion and reduces sociocultural difficulties by increasing intercultural contact and satisfaction in social interactions (Ager and Strang 2008; Liebkind et al. 2004; Masgoret and Ward 2006; Nakhaie 2020; Ward and Kennedy 1999). Moreover, acquiring the ability to speak the host community's language provides refugees with greater opportunities to gain support from local society members (Sorgen 2015). However, the qualitative findings highlight that sustained instruction, professional resources and long-term commitment are often lacking – limitations that NGOs, operating under financial and logistical constraints, may struggle to overcome on their own.

The qualitative findings help contextualise the limited statistical association between NGO participation and sociocultural adaptation. While programme beneficiaries acknowledged the role of NGO-led activities in fostering social interaction and building shared spaces with host community members, these initiatives were generally viewed as insufficient for facilitating deeper integration. Many participants pointed to persistent barriers – such as feelings of exclusion, precarious legal status and negative media narratives – that constrain adaptation irrespective of programme engagement. These perceptions resonate with broader research identifying perceived discrimination as one of the most enduring resettlement stressors for immigrants (Liebkind et al. 2004).

In light of these constraints, several areas for improvement in NGO programming emerged. Both beneficiaries and NGO representatives consistently highlighted a lack of expertise among trainers, language barriers, and insufficient programme duration as key challenges. When asked about ways to enhance sociocultural adaptation, NGO representatives emphasised three primary areas for improvement.

First, multisectoral collaboration was identified as essential. Effective integration requires coordinated efforts among government agencies, educational institutions and private enterprises. As two NGO representatives stated, collaborative efforts between international organisations, local governments, and governmental initiatives are vital for designing and implementing comprehensive integration programmes (NGO1, NGO12). This collaborative approach can create a more supportive and structured framework for refugee integration. However, it should be noted that some NGOs are perceived as state-led, generating suspicion among refugees regarding their true aims (Danış and Nazlı 2019; Mackreath and Sağnıç 2017). The involvement of multiple actors without necessary coordination can hinder the success of integration efforts.

Second, the representatives stressed the need for robust vocational training programmes. These programmes equip refugees with relevant skills, thereby enhancing their employability and facilitating integration into the local economy. One NGO representative noted, 'economic empowerment programmes, including job training, entrepreneurship support and microfinance initiatives, empower refugees to build sustainable livelihoods and contribute

positively to their host communities' (NGO12). Such initiatives not only help refugees secure employment but also encourage them to become active contributors to their communities, thereby improving their long-term integration prospects.

Thirdly, NGO representatives emphasised the need to overcome detrimental political rhetoric. They argued that political leaders and media outlets play a crucial role in shaping public perception and, therefore, must promote inclusive and supportive narratives. Reducing negative stereotypes and addressing misinformation can help build a more accepting and cohesive society, thus improving refugees' sociocultural adaptation. One representative stated, 'It is essential to advocate for inclusive policies at local, regional, and national levels to create an enabling environment for social integration' (NGO9). Political leaders and media must prioritise messages of unity and acceptance, especially during politically charged periods such as elections, to reduce the polarisation surrounding refugee issues.

For NGOs to effectively fulfil their mission, they must address both immediate programme challenges and broader political and social factors shaping refugees' experiences. This entails combating prejudice, fostering empathy and creating an environment conducive to social cohesion. Only through a multifaceted approach – involving NGOs, government agencies, media and the public – can structural barriers to refugee integration be dismantled, thereby enabling refugees to contribute actively to their host communities.

The legal difficulties encountered by refugees exacerbate perceptions of discrimination, as evidenced by the current study. Successful integration depends on a multifaceted approach involving long-term commitment from various stakeholders, including government institutions and the broader community. These findings align with existing research, which underscores that successful adaptation is influenced by a combination of social and economic conditions, legal status and language proficiency (Ager and Strang 2008; Putnam 1993; Woolcock 1998). These elements contribute to bonding, linking and bridging within communities, which are essential for a comprehensive integration process.

Nevertheless, the study's scope was limited to NGOs operating in Gaziantep, a single province in Türkiye. The effectiveness of NGO programmes and refugee experiences may vary significantly across different regions. A broader geographical scope would offer a more comprehensive understanding of NGO programme outcomes. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal inference. While this study helped identify independent associations, it does not allow for conclusions about moderation or mediation effects. Future research employing longitudinal designs and larger, more diverse samples could provide deeper insights into the dynamics of sociocultural adaptation, particularly the interplay between NGO participation and socio-demographic variables such as age, income and employment status.

In conclusion, while NGO programmes may support aspects of refugee sociocultural adaptation – particularly language acquisition – their overall impact appears limited when broader structural factors are considered. This study found that NGO participation and socio-demographic characteristics such as age and employment status were independently associated with language proficiency, but not with overall sociocultural adaptation. These findings also underscore the importance of coordinated, multisectoral efforts that go beyond programme-level interventions. Addressing systemic challenges – such as exclusionary political rhetoric, legal uncertainty and economic vulnerability – is essential for fostering an inclusive and supportive environment that enables mutual understanding and sustainable integration.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Hasan Kalyoncu University (Approval Number: E-97105791-050.01.01-36716). Informed consent was obtained verbally prior to in-person interviews and questionnaires, and electronically for those conducted online. Participants were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. To preserve anonymity, no identifying information was collected.

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Aynur Türkan holds a degree in political science and international relations from Hasan Kalyoncu University in Gaziantep. As part of her undergraduate studies, she conducted a research project on the role of NGOs in the sociocultural adaptation of refugees.

Notes

1. In this study, 'refugee' is used sociologically to denote those forced to flee their country and in need of international protection.
2. Following the literature, where terms such as 'sociocultural adaptation', 'adjustment', 'harmony', 'integration', and 'social cohesion' are often used interchangeably (e.g. Bierwiazzonek and Waldzus 2016; Searle and Ward 1990), this article centres on the concept of sociocultural adaptation.

3. As of 17 October 2024, Istanbul hosts 528,156 registered Syrians, while Gaziantep hosts 429,017. However, Syrians make up a higher proportion of the overall population in Gaziantep (16.54%) than in Istanbul (3.26%) (Presidency of Migration Management 2024).
4. The variable was coded as 'unemployed', 'employed' and 'university student not working' to distinguish university students from the unemployed. This distinction draws on literature indicating that young immigrants often demonstrate higher levels of language proficiency (Buchanan et al. 2018; Sorgen 2015), and on the role of universities as structured social environments that promote interaction between refugee and host communities. Identifying university students as a separate category is particularly relevant, as their academic and social engagement may facilitate integration through different mechanisms than those available to the unemployed.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author (CKD) upon reasonable request.

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