

Targeted Social Assistance in Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

Social protection programs have now become important in alleviating poverty and vulnerability at the national and international levels. Social protection policies are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals - especially SDG 01 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) because they offer income support to the most vulnerable in the society. This assistance enhances social inclusion and human development.

The TSA is the main component of the social protection policy in Kazakhstan. It is intended to alleviate poverty and assist struggling families through means tested cash transfers in line with SDGs. Despite the importance and achievements of this policy, there are issues related to the accessibility of the program and administrative challenges. This study examines the accessibility and selection criteria of the TSA program in Kazakhstan, and the experiences and views of social workers who are directly engaged in the administration of the program.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach and empirical data collected using semi-structured interviews and direct observations. Semi structured interviews were conducted on social workers who work in career centers and who administer the TSA program. This method was adopted to capture situation-based information and data on the day-to-day administrative practices, interpretation of eligibility and selection criteria as well as the relationship between the social workers and applicants to the TSA program. These insights are not indicated in official reports and policy documents related to the program. Direct non-participant observation was conducted to complement interviews, and it enabled researchers to explore the mechanism of administration, interaction between the clients and staff and other organizational processes in their natural institutional settings, thus adding more depth and credibility to the results.

The findings of the study indicate that though the TSA plays a vital role in the support of low-income households in Kazakhstan; it is constrained by a number of institutional and procedural issues. The major obstacles to enrollment are complex eligibility criteria, documentation issues, limited knowledge about the benefits and misinterpretation of the regulations by the frontline workers. Social workers also face severe administrative pressure and lack of resources which diminish their credibility in offering valuable guidance and support to TSA applicants.

The paper concludes that the TSA in Kazakhstan can be improved by addressing the ambiguous eligibility and selection criteria, the complicated documentation procedures, and increasing support to social workers. The study provides a clear understanding of accessibility challenges encountered by applicants to the program through the perceptions and experiences of social workers who administer the program in different centers of the country. Moreover, the findings of this study are useful to policymakers in improving social protection measures in Kazakhstan since it provides a more distinct picture of eligibility criteria and how to implement them in social assistance

ABBREVIATIONS

ICESCR — International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
eGov — Electronic Government Services of Kazakhstan
HRW — Human Rights Watch
MCI — Monthly Calculation Index (often used for thresholds/penalties in Kazakhstan)
MPA — Master of Public Administration
PMT — Proxy Means Test
PSF — Personal Subsidiary Farm
SDG(s) — Sustainable Development Goal(s)
TSA — Targeted Social Assistance

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and context

Social protection is a key mechanism for poverty reduction, social inclusion, and human development (World Bank, 2018; ILO, 2021). International organizations note the importance of coordinated social policy measures to reduce social inequality and support vulnerable groups of the population. In this context, targeted social assistance (TSA) in Kazakhstan is one of the important instruments of social protection, consistent with the country's international obligations and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 1 "Poverty eradication" and SDG 10 "Reducing inequality" (UN, 2015).

According to article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966), participating States recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including food, clothing, housing, and the continuous improvement of living conditions. Thus, States undertake to take appropriate measures to realize these rights individually and through international cooperation, including specific social support programs. It should also be noted that Kazakhstan signed the Covenant and ratified it in 2005, which strengthens the state's obligations to ensure social protection and the implementation of the TSA program.

Despite the economic growth that Kazakhstan has achieved over the years of independence, the problem of poverty remains serious. A significant portion of the population still faces difficulties in accessing basic resources such as housing, medicine, and education. Because of this, it is more difficult for people to raise their standard of living and actively participate in the economic life of the country. In such circumstances, social support for low-income households is becoming one of the important tasks of the state aimed at ensuring social justice, stability and sustainable development (OECD, 2019).

Kazakhstan's social policy was built as a socially oriented one, where the state actively redistributes income and helps reduce social risks. Since the early 2000s, the system of social benefits has gradually expanded to cover various categories of the population: families with children, large families, people with disabilities, senior citizens and the unemployed.

As a result, a multi-level social protection system was formed, which includes universal, categorical and targeted support measures (Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). Realizing the need to support the socially vulnerable part of society and fulfill its obligations, Kazakhstan has developed the TSA program aimed at providing financial assistance to people living below the poverty line. This program was introduced in 2001 on the basis of the Law "On State Targeted Social Assistance", the TSA in Kazakhstan is a quarterly-assigned, monthly-paid cash transfer provided to households whose per-capita income falls below a regionally defined poverty line. The benefit is calculated as the difference between the poverty line and the household's average per-capita income (i.e., an income top-up), with the poverty line set by region/city and defined in recent guidance as 35% of regional median income but not less than 70% of the regional subsistence minimum. The TSA is delivered as unconditional or conditional monetary assistance (the latter linked to employment/social adaptation measures), and includes an additional child supplement of 1.5 MCI per child aged 1-6 paid monthly on top of the TSA amount (e.g. KZT 5,538 in 2024). While the formula does not establish a separate "urban vs rural" rate schedule, benefit generosity varies across regions/cities through the poverty line and subsistence needs so when the computed top-up is small (especially for households just below the threshold), the payment may not offset the perceived administrative burden and stigma (Gov, 2024). The main work carried out through precinct commissions, which included representatives of local representative bodies, local governments, public associations, cooperatives of owners of premises (apartments), the population, organizations, and authorized bodies of education, health, social protection, and law enforcement officials. The TSA is implemented as part of a broader social support system that includes various measures to help families and vulnerable groups. The State also provides benefits for the birth and care of a child, payments to large families, social and basic pensions, housing subsidies, and measures to promote employment and professional retraining (World Bank, 2013; OECD, 2019). These programs give some families the opportunity to receive government support in other ways without participating directly in the TSA. Nevertheless, even with such a variety of measures, many households still remain below the poverty line, so the TSA remains the most important tool to compensate for income shortfalls.

1.2. Problem Statement

According to Forbes Kazakhstan (2023), in 2023, more than one million people lived below the poverty line, but only about 598.4 thousand received the TSA. That is, there is a clear difference between the potential need and the actual coverage of the program. It is important to understand that the formal opportunity to participate in the TSA depends not only on the fact that the household lives below the poverty line. The program sets a number of criteria: some families cannot participate if they do not meet these conditions (for example, according to documents or income set by the program). Therefore, some poor people do not receive assistance, not because the program does not work, but because they formally do not meet its conditions (Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023).

In addition, there are administrative and information barriers: complex application procedures, low public awareness, and bureaucratic difficulties (Human Rights Watch, 2022). All this indicates that there are significant gaps between the number of eligible families and the number of actual beneficiaries. The study will focus specifically on studying these factors that hinder the effective coverage of the TSA, and analyzing its work in the context of the entire social protection system

1.3. Aim and Objectives of the Study

In this regard, the aim of the study is to understand what factors limit effective access to TSA among low-income and socially vulnerable households, including both barriers that discourage applications and institutional rules and procedures that restrict eligibility in practice. limit the participation of low-income families in the TSA program. The document examines the existing selection criteria, the role of local commissions in the aid allocation process, as well as possible ways to increase the accessibility of the program, especially in the case of increased government funding. The practical part of the study will be based on the work of the Labor Mobility and Career Centers in Astana and Akmola region.

1.4. Research Questions

Based on this, the main research question is: What institutional and administrative factors limit the participation of low-income households in TSA? As part of the disclosure of this question, the following aspects are additionally considered: To what extent do the selection criteria reflect the real situation of vulnerable families? Which

groups are formally or actually excluded from the program? The results of this study will provide valuable information and recommendations to stakeholders about existing gaps in the program and the selection criteria for recipients of assistance, which in the future will enhance its impact on low-income families.

1.5. Scope and Significance of the Study

In conclusion, the TSA is a response to the need for social protection of the less privileged segments of the population and the fulfillment of the domestic and international obligation of the state of Kazakhstan to ensure standard and adequate living conditions for the citizens. In this regard, it is of great importance to what extent this program, with existing selection criteria, covers truly vulnerable people. In this introduction, we examined the importance of the TSA and outlined the objectives of this study, which include analyzing the criteria for obtaining the TSA in Kazakhstan and identifying what gaps exist in this program, as well as how these gaps may affect the number of people who need assistance as vulnerable populations. Furthermore, research questions have been established to guide our research for a comprehensive examination of the TSA program in Kazakhstan.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The TSA plays a crucial role in social protection systems that aim to support the most vulnerable segments of the population by providing financial assistance to people with low incomes. In recent years, due to economic instability and increasing poverty, the TSA has become vital in Kazakhstan. However, the effectiveness of the TSA remains unclear. Many studies have raised concerns about its adequacy, target mechanisms and structure. This literature review will examine both the positive aspects of the TSA in Kazakhstan and the barriers and negative aspects of the TSA in Kazakhstan in order to assess their overall impact and suggest ways to improve on problematic issues.

2.2. Social Protection in Kazakhstan

The evolution of the social protection system in Kazakhstan is remarkable since 1991 when the country gained its independence changing from its Soviet-inherited model of universal benefits to a targeted means tested system. The modern system of social protection in Kazakhstan includes social assistance, social security and social insurance (Issakhova et al. 2018). In 2002, the TSA was created to become a central component of social protection policy to provide both unconditional and conditional assistance depending on the situation of the household (UNDP, 2025).

The TSA in Kazakhstan is a liberal-residual welfare system in spite of the post-socialist experience of the country. Contrary to traditional liberal regimes, the system in Kazakhstan is in a transition context characterized by strong state control, administrative discretion, and fragmented institutional coordination (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

2.3. The impact of the TSA on poverty reduction and social integration

Despite the difficulties faced by the program, the TSA has made significant strides in reducing poverty and socially integrating low-income people and vulnerable groups in society. The TSA has been able to help many families in Kazakhstan improve their standard of living by making money transfers and providing them with access to necessary services.

The TSA program provides direct financial assistance to low-income households, thereby reducing poverty by raising incomes and ensuring that the basic needs of families are met.

Over the past decade, thanks to the program, the Government has reduced poverty in the country, targeting vulnerable groups such as large families, single-parent households and the unemployed. Kazakhstan is also making efforts to ensure that the standard of living of households exceeds the subsistence level through social policy reforms, including cash payment programs (O'Brien, 2015).

Furthermore, a giant step has been taken to reduce the income disparity among households in the country through the TSA. With the shift from a centralized economy to a market-oriented economy, the country has embarked on extensive social protection reforms to address health and education gaps with a view of reducing income disparities and making greater provision for the needy sections of society (O'Brien, 2015). Supporting the above assertion Albert and Svante (2019) noted that conditional payments were made to the low income, able-bodied persons on the basis that they agree to undertake employment promotion programs. Cash transfers were also availed to persons who fall beneath the legal poverty level or where the per capita income of families is beneath the poverty level.

Social inclusion and integration are important factors that help people participate in society, especially those who are in difficult financial situations or excluded from society. The objective is to ensure equal access to opportunities and resources and to enhance a sense of belonging for the less privileged (Bugubayeva et al., 2016). According to Kuttigalieva et al, (2024), the TSA has performed well in the aspect of the country's social life by increasing public participation in Kazakhstan. To them, aligning the TSA programs with international standards can lead to more effective and fair social assistance activities, improvement of access to healthcare and financial aid.

Urbaeva and Koo (2002) in their study noted that the class and income class stratification has placed many segments of the global society in poverty and low quality of life mostly in the post-socialist world including Kazakhstan. Furthermore, they supported the gains of social programs in reducing inequality and noted that the increase in basic governmental mechanisms for social programs implies increased use of public services, government expenditure on welfare and social protection to boost the social inclusion of citizens who are disadvantaged. These reforms are intended to help reduce the divide between diverse echelons within society at a time when economic disparity has been on the rise. Rollan and Somerton (2019) in their evaluation of the place of post-Soviet social

reform, noted that inclusive education is important to achieve all round social inclusion in Kazakhstan. They posited that Kazakhstan willingly took the responsibility to provide equity in access to education and participation for all learners including disabled people to improve the citizens' social and economic wellbeing.

An appraisal of the above indicates that the TSA was introduced to reduce poverty and improve social integration of the disadvantaged individuals and low-income families in Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, there are certain problems that make the TSA an ineffective program.

2.4. Barriers to participation in the TSA Programs

One of the important issues of the TSA is that a large proportion of eligible people do not apply to this program. To understand this in detail, we need to study the experience of other countries. According to Bruckmeier et al. (2012), 20% of eligible people in all countries have not used targeted social assistance and in the case of Germany, this figure ranges from 43.3% to 63.1%. Different barriers contribute to these phenomena such as bureaucratic process, stigmatization of benefit recipients, unclear rules and misinformation (Baumberg, 2016). The main goal of social assistance is to improve people's well-being, but this goal may not be fully achievable if people who really need this help do not participate in it because of these barriers. To reduce these barriers, it is necessary that people who are eligible for the program can enroll in the program.

2.4.1. Administrative and Procedural Barriers

The first significant obstacle to accessing the TSA is the administrative process. According to Masada-All-Kamal and Saha (2014), complicated application procedures may demotivate and push potential participants out of the program. TSA tends to require the applicants to provide a great deal of documents and meet strict deadlines, which often confuses those who are poorly educated or have limited time. Also, many people faced repeated refusals and delays since they did not know about the specific requirements for documents. This bureaucratic process excludes from the list of participants those who really need such assistance and reduces the effectiveness of the TSA.

2.4.2. Stigma and Socio-psychological Barriers

The second barrier that reduces the number of people participating in the program is the stigma. This is because some people can feel shame or embarrassment when applying for

benefits because the TSA is often perceived as a form of charity. The findings from Placzek (2021) highlighted that respondents feel shame using the services since it is believed that those people who participate in such programs are considered low-income, disabled or incapacitated people with disabilities. Also, people with disabilities may also decide not to participate in programs due to stigma associated with their disability (Lasky-Fink & Linos, 2024). In many cases potential beneficiaries avoiding public condemnation, refuse to receive social assistance which further increases their vulnerability.

2.4.3 Limited Awareness and Information Barriers

The third reason is lack of awareness of the existence of the TSA programs. Many people who meet the criteria and are eligible for social assistance reported that they did not even know that they were eligible for assistance (Devereux et al, 2011). This problem mainly occurs in rural areas or isolated communities where access to information is limited. Public programs aimed at providing information about existing programs to potential beneficiaries are insufficient. Consequently, it leads to the fact that those who really need this help are unaware of the existing program, and this leads to a decrease in the number of participants and the effectiveness of the TSA.

2.5. The effect of the TSA on social/economic stability

The effectiveness of the TSA is defined by a number of factors including the targeting mechanism, administrative organization, and its relationship with the overall economic strategies of the country. Research demonstrates that properly designed and implemented social protection programs can enhance the living standards of low-income families.

Evidence from empirical studies indicate that the TSA assists in reduction of poverty by increasing household incomes, access to basic services, and increasing human capital. Barrientos (2023) asserts that well-designed social assistance programs in the third world have significantly enhanced the living standards of poor households. Barrientos, Nino-Sarazua and Maitrot (2010) further posits that cash transfers reduce poverty divide as well as lead to social integration. However, the success of such programs is defined by their selection criteria, targeting accuracy, funding sustainability, and their connection to the overall economic policies.

The weaknesses of social programs were also more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nasution et al. (2023) investigated the effectiveness of social assistance in alleviating poverty during the crisis, and they found that even though the programs provided short term support, a large number of people in need were not covered due to administrative challenges and faulty data. Studies on Indonesia social programs indicate it provides significant assistance to poor families, however, according to Julius et al. (2022), its long-term effect on poverty is questionable because it has low funding and difficulty in identifying vulnerable groups. These results emphasize the importance of improving in targeting and administrative strategies in social protection.

The next key to the success of the TSA is its consistency with the overall economic policies of the country. Arkham et al. (2024) investigated fiscal transfers in Indonesia and noted that the strategy reduced poverty in the short-term, but the effect in the long-term was subject to the presence of other programs like employment and access to education. Howie et al. (2023) contend that the Workfare programs can create a pathway to lift people up from chronic poverty and also alleviate the poverty caused by the economic shock. According to Gao (2017), a similar situation occurred in China, where social assistance programs were closely interconnected with the work policy, and the reduction of poverty became more sustainable. These papers show that TSA should be a component of a long-term strategy that involves employment support and human-capital development.

2.6. Challenges of the TSA in Kazakhstan

The TSA in Kazakhstan delivers cash support to families with low income and below the poverty line. This has decreased the total number of people classified as poor. The number of families receiving the TSA exceeded 13,186 in 2014 thus demonstrating the program's effectiveness in poverty reduction and social welfare improvement (Rakymzhanova et al., 2018). However, the program is faced with some challenges which affect the full realization of its objectives and goals.

Rakymzhanova et al. (2018) noted that the TSA in Kazakhstan encounters several obstacles including limited range of coverage, financial limitations, complicated administrative system and low awareness among beneficiaries. In addition, they highlighted that insufficient data and auditing systems create challenges for evaluating the impact of the program on poverty reduction and improvement of livelihood of

beneficiaries. Khamzina et al. (2015) in their evaluation of impacts of economic crisis on social obligations opines that the amount provided by the TSA in Kazakhstan presents a major challenge; beneficiaries are allocated funds which cover only 40 percent of basic subsistence needs. In addition to this, imperfect methods for determining the poverty line together with insufficient payments through the TSA programs reduce the effectiveness of the program by limiting adequate social support for many beneficiaries, especially children.

Kuttigaliyeva et al. (2024) in line with the authors above noted that the poverty threshold determines the quality of the TSA programs because it establishes benefit adequacy levels while ensuring programs match population living standards and operate effectively, however, the TSA in Kazakhstan encounter multiple obstacles due to inadequate benefit payments which are below international criteria, in consistent definition of poverty with living standards and weak control mechanisms for service provision. They posited that achieving the strategic objective of social protection programs needs patience, dedication and adaptability to learn new methods to yield immeasurable benefits for Kazakhstan citizens.

Esping-Andersen posits that welfare states which are dominated by means-tested provision are likely to lead to de-commodification and market dependence as benefits are low, conditional and largely stigmatizing. This resonates with the TSA in Kazakhstan where eligibility is based on income thresholds and household means testing, making the program a residual safety net rather than a social right based on citizenship (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In addition, Proxy Means Test makes welfare assessments based on characteristics of the family and its members and this can make estimations that lead to exclusion of poor households and make it statistically inaccurate (Coady, Grosh, & Hoddinott, 2004).

2.7. The problem is in determining the types of assistance to people covered by the TSA

Another problem with the low effectiveness of the TSA program is its limitations in the types of such assistance and which categories of people it should be provided to. This problem is determined by the presence of diverse target groups. By unifying all these groups, the TSA offers, as the main tool for helping low-income segments of the population, the payment of funds as an increase in income. Chulanova et al. (2024) point

out that poverty is a multifaceted concept that does not consist solely of understanding income and consumption levels. According to the authors, the need for the welfare of the population may differ based on factors such as the availability of social benefits in the form of health and education, the degree of development of the social sphere, and the unemployment rate. For this reason, as noted by Chulanova et al. (2024), the poverty rate in rural areas is higher than in cities of Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, as Khamzina et al. (2015) point out, poverty refers to incomes below a certain level. And in this perspective, according to Khamzina et al. (2015), the cost of living as an indicator for the provision of social assistance should also apply to persons employed in jobs with harmful working conditions, such as miners, miners and other professionals whose ability to work may be lost before retirement age.

Children and large families are a separate category that require social attention from the state. Temirbayeva (2019) notes that targeted assistance is provided to low-income families with children, and according to the statistics provided in the study, most of it was paid to families from rural areas. According to the author's research, the welfare of families is calculated based on the current level of money per capita. Along with this, Temirbayeva (2019) explains that fertility policy also affects poverty levels. As an example, the fact that the possibility of receiving social services helps to reduce the number of poor families is given. Rakymzhanova et al. (2022) indicate that government agencies aim to gain access to targeted social assistance for low-income families with children living in poor areas. According to the authors' analysis, it is this category of the population that faces a problem with access to benefits.

Spanova et al. (2015) note that such categories of low-income citizens as able-bodied people with disabilities, poor young people, and large families are also provided with grants in addition to money to engage in economic and entrepreneurial activities. This is due to the need to change social policy so that the poor are competitive. The conclusions about the need for diverse assistance from the state are also confirmed by the study of Valieva et al. (2020), in which, using the example of European countries, it was noted that paying only cash benefits to the poor develops dependent behavior. In this regard, the authors draw attention to the need to modernize the processes of providing social assistance.

In sum, the literature review demonstrates that the TSA in Kazakhstan is a medium through which the government protects the vulnerable segments of the population against adverse economic shocks and provides their basic human needs, but various challenges still hamper the effective implementations of the program. Current literature emphasises the target of efficiency, institutional structure and integration of the program in the labour market, but issues like errors of exclusion, ambiguous eligibility and selection criteria, rule interpretation, cumbersome administrative processes and lack of coordination among implementers still persists.

Moreover, limited studies have been conducted on how the program is influenced by elite, political-economic dynamics and governance systems. Insights from such study would enhance the effectiveness of the program.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Objectives and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the key factors that limit the participation of low-income families in the TSA in Kazakhstan. Despite the fact that the program is aimed at supporting households living below the established poverty line, in practice, a significant part of vulnerable families remains outside this form of government support. The research focuses not on a formal analysis of the regulatory framework or aggregated statistical data, but on the practical implementation of the TSA program. Special attention is paid to the institutional mechanisms that affect access to assistance, including income assessment rules, documentation requirements, and the role of local commissions that make decisions on the allocation of benefits. The analysis is conducted from the perspective of social workers who are directly involved in the administration of the program and interact with applicants.

The research addresses the following questions:

1. What institutional and administrative factors limit the participation of low-income households in TSA?
2. To what extent do the selection criteria reflect the real situation of vulnerable families?
3. Which groups are formally or actually excluded from the program?

These questions guide both the design of the study and the analytical focus of the empirical research.

3.2. Venue of the Study

This master's research is conducted at the Career Centers of Astana city and Akmola region, which play a key role in the local-level implementation of the TSA program.

Career centers operate within the structure of executive bodies (akimats) under the authority of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the national agency responsible for employment and social protection policies.

Career centers play an important role in the administration of the TSA program. Their functions include receiving and reviewing applications, assessing household incomes,

verifying submitted documents, and coordinating the work of local commissions that make decisions on the appointment of assistance. In addition, Career Centers accompany recipients of the TSA, including measures for employment and social adaptation.

The choice of Career centers in Astana and Akmola region as a research site is due to their direct participation in the implementation of the program, as well as differences in the socio-economic context. This makes it possible to analyze the practice of implementing TSA in both a large city and a predominantly rural region, while maintaining a single institutional mechanism for providing social assistance.

3.3. Research Design

This research is qualitative research. The reason behind the selection of this approach was due to the fact that the aim of the work is to know what factors restrict the involvement of low-income families in the targeted social assistance program in the context of its practical implementation. As quantitative data does not enable us to consider the entire institutional and administrative specifics of the program, the primary emphasis was laid on examining the experience of social workers who are directly engaged in its administration.

The study centers on the policy of applying the program but not the analysis of the regulatory structure. The TSA rules and criteria are nationally laid down but locally implemented at the employment and career centers, local commissions. As a social worker, one experiences circumstances during the implementation process when rules must be interpreted and decisions made regarding a certain situation, and this directly influences the availability of the program to the families.

The empirical part of the study was conducted in two regions - the city of Astana and the Akmola region. The choice of these regions is due to differences in socio-economic conditions and population structure, while maintaining a single institutional mechanism for implementing the TSA. This makes it possible to compare the practices of program implementation in urban and more rural settings and identify both common and contextually determined barriers to participation.

3.4. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is the process of implementing the TSA at the institutional level. The analysis is aimed at identifying barriers to participation in the

program that arise during its practical administration, as well as examining how formal rules and criteria are applied in real conditions. The following observation units are used to study this process:

- Professional assessments and interpretations of Career Center social workers obtained during semi-structured interviews
- Organizational and behavioral practices recorded during the monitoring of the applicants' service process in Astana Career Center
- Accessible administrative and descriptive data used to contextualize qualitative findings.
- Regional differences between Astana and Akmola region as an analytical framework for comparing program implementation practices.

This distinction between the unit of analysis and the units of observation ensures a logical consistency of methodology and allows for a comprehensive review of the barriers to participation in the TSA program.

3.5. Sampling Strategy

The study used a purposive selection strategy for respondents, since the purpose of the work was to study the practice of implementing the TSA program, rather than forming a representative sample. Social workers of career centers who are directly involved in the administration of the TSA and interaction with applicants were selected as respondents.

The sample included social workers involved in income assessment, document verification, citizen counseling, and interaction with local TSA commissions. The selection was based on practical experience and the degree of involvement in the implementation of the program.

A total of 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 8 with social workers of the career centers of Astana and 5 with representatives of the career centers of the Akmola region (Shortandy, Tselinograd, Akkol, Kosshy and Astrakhan). This sample composition allowed us to take into account the differences between the urban and rural contexts of the program implementation.

3.6. Data Collection Methods

Empirical data was collected in the framework of this study using qualitative methods. The main focus was on obtaining information on the practical implementation of the TSA program and identifying barriers to participation from the point of view of social workers directly involved in the administration of the TSA. The study used two complementary methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews and observation.

3.6.1. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews with social workers of career centers involved in the implementation of the TSA program have become the main method of data collection. The choice of this method is due to the fact that it provides detailed and contextual information about day-to-day administrative practices, interpretation of selection criteria and interaction with applicants, which are not always reflected in official documents and statistics.

An interview guide was developed for the interview, which included key thematic blocks such as: the procedure for assessing household income, document requirements, the role of local commissions, typical reasons for refusals or difficulties in applying, as well as the observed barriers to participation in the program. At the same time, the interview structure remained flexible, which allowed the respondents to disclose in detail the most significant problems, in their opinion.

Interviews with respondents from Astana were conducted face-to-face, as the city's career centers are located in one place. Interviews with representatives of the Akmola region were conducted in an online format due to the territorial remoteness and fragmentation of the districts. The average length of the interview was 40 to 70 minutes.

3.6.2. Non-participant observation

In addition to interviews, the study used the method of non-participant observation. The researcher did not participate in the work processes of the career centers and did not interact with applicants or social workers, but monitored the general organization of work and the daily situation in the career centers of Astana.

The observation was carried out during 4 visits and was aimed at studying the general process of citizens applying for the TSA, as well as the nature of interaction between

visitors and social workers of career centers. The monitoring focused on the typical stages of the applicants' service, the consultation procedure, the handling of documents, as well as the general logic and rhythm of the institution's work.

Particular attention was paid to how the social workers of the career centers explain the terms of the program, answer applicants' questions and help them navigate the application procedure. The monitoring also revealed typical difficulties faced by visitors, including difficulties understanding requirements, using electronic services, and navigating administrative procedures.

The use of non-participant observation protocol allowed us to supplement the interview data and gain a more holistic view of the practical implementation of the TSA program in career centers. In combination with interviews, this method helped to increase the reliability of the study by comparing the respondents' statements with the observed practices of daily work.

3.7. Main Indicators

In this study, key indicators are used as analytical measurements that allow to structure qualitative data analysis and systematize the identified barriers to participation in the TSA program. Indicators are not quantitative indicators and do not set expected results in advance, but serve as a framework for interpreting data obtained during interviews and observations.

Initially, the set of indicators was formed based on the logic of the functioning of the TSA program and the analysis of existing research in the field of social assistance. In the process of analyzing empirical data, the indicators were refined and used to group specific barriers identified during thematic coding.

The following main indicators were used in the study:

Income assessment practices and selection criteria that reflect how the formal rules of the program are applied to determine eligibility for the TSA. This indicator allows you to analyze how criteria are used in practice and what limitations arise in the process of their application.

Administrative and procedural accessibility, including the complexity of application procedures, document requirements, and organizational specifics of the process of seeking help.

Institutional freedom of action and the role of local commissions, which shows the impact of local decisions, interpretations of rules and organizational practices on the results of inclusion in the program.

Social and behavioral factors of participation that relate to the attitude of potential recipients to the program, and their willingness to seek help and perception of social support.

The coverage and inclusion of target groups, which make it possible to identify categories of households that are formally or actually excluded from the program, despite the presence of social vulnerability.

Each of these indicators was used to analyze interviews and surveillance data, within which specific empirical barriers were identified, presented in the research results section.

3.8. Data analysis techniques

In this study, the data was analyzed using qualitative methods. Particular attention was paid to identifying and interpreting recurring themes and barriers to participation in the TSA program, which were noted in interviews and observations.

To begin with, all the interviews were transcribed and translated into text format. The next stage of the analysis was the thematic coding of the respondents' statements, which were grouped according to their meaning in accordance with the key research directions. The coding process was iterative: as the work progressed, the codes were refined, combined and revised, which helped to form stable thematic categories.

Next, comparative analysis of interviews from Astana and the Akmola region was conducted. This helped to see both the common barriers to participation in the program and the differences related to the regional specifics of the implementation of the TSA. This analysis of regional differences has become part of the analytical triangulation.

To ensure the visibility of the results, the study used elements of descriptive statistics such as the frequency of mentions of other topics and barriers. It is worth noting that

frequency analysis was an auxiliary tool and was not used for quantitative generalizations or statistical conclusions.

Moreover, the interview data was compared with observations of applicants to career centers in Astana who did not participate in the survey. This combination helped to check to what extent the respondents' statements correspond to real practice, and to increase the reliability of the conclusions.

In general, the combination of thematic analysis, regional comparison, and methodological triangulation provided a systematic and consistent approach to data analysis that fully meets the goals and issues of the study.

3.9. Ethical Considerations

According to Brayman (2012), adherence to ethical principles is an important part of any social research, especially if it concerns sensitive topics or may affect participants. In our case, the study is related to the implementation of the TSA program and is conducted jointly with social workers who are directly involved in its implementation. This creates certain ethical difficulties: social workers may feel uncomfortable criticizing the program or sharing professional experience, especially if there is a risk that their opinion will be misinterpreted or somehow related to their place of work. That is why to minimize such risks, all participants will be provided with complete information about the research objectives and the interview format. Special attention is paid to the fact that participation is voluntary, and any participant can withdraw at any time without giving reasons.

All collected data will be anonymized, and the results will not indicate who provided this or that information. Specific organizations, institutions, or positions will also not be mentioned.

Compliance with these principles - confidentiality, voluntariness, and respect for participants - is especially important in research related to government programs, where the topic may be perceived as sensitive and potentially causing tension among respondents.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. General characteristics of the sample and the analysis method

The study conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with social workers of career centers involved in the implementation of the TSA program. Of these, 8 respondents represented career centers in Astana (Nura, Yesil, Saryarka, Almaty, Sarayshyk, Baikonur districts, as well as a manager and a data processing specialist). Despite the administrative division into districts, all career centers in Astana are actually located in one place, and interviews with social workers were conducted face-to-face. Another 5 respondents represented career centers in the Akmola region (Shortandy, Tselinograd, Akkol, Kosshy, and Astrakhanka districts). These centers are geographically located in different districts of the region, and interviews with their social workers were conducted online.

The data analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis with elements of descriptive statistics. All interviews were transcribed, after which thematic coding was performed, which made it possible to identify key topics and assess the frequency of their mention. Frequency analysis was used not for the purpose of statistical generalization, but to understand which questions and problems were most often raised by the respondents.

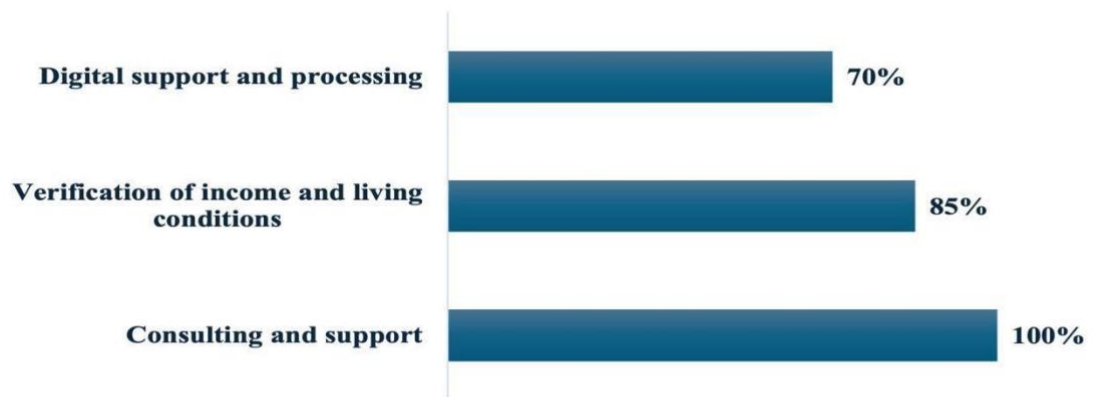
The topics mentioned by more than half of the study participants were considered sustainable. Their interpretation was based on the principle of triangulation: the results were compared between two different contexts - the career centers of Astana and Akmola region. The coincidence of key topics in these geographically and organizationally different conditions made it possible to increase the reliability of the conclusions and consider the revealed patterns as a reflection of the general features of the implementation of the TSA program, rather than individual local cases.

Table 1: Sample Composition

Region	Number of participants	Districts	Main functions
Astana	8	Nura, Yesil, Saryarka, Baikonur, Almaty, Sarayshik	Digital support, consulting, application processing
Akmola region	5	Akkol, Koshy, Shchortandy, Tselinograd, Astrakhanka	Field visits, document collection, work with low-income families

4.2. The role and functions social workers

All respondents (13 out of 13, 100%) replied that their main function is to accompany recipients of assistance at all stages, from applying to concluding and fulfilling a social contract. In addition to administrative work, social workers provide consulting and explanatory services and help citizens understand the criteria of the program and collect the necessary documents. In Astana, special attention is paid to digital support (working with eGov and a Digital Family Card), while in rural areas of the Akmola region, the emphasis is on personal interaction and on-site consultations.

Figure 1: Main function of TSA social workers

As shown in Figure 1, citizen consultation and support at all stages of the program are key functions for all specialists (100%). Verification of real living conditions and income reliability also takes up a significant part of the burden (85%), especially in rural areas, where data inconsistencies are often recorded. At the same time, about 70% of specialists participate in the digital processing of applications, which confirms the active introduction of electronic tools in the management of social benefits.

4.3. Main barriers identified

The results of the interview analysis showed that the TSA implementation social workers generally assess the process of providing targeted social assistance as transparent and orderly, however, during practical implementation, several structural problems are identified that reduce the effectiveness of the program. An analysis of 13 semi-structured interviews with social workers of career centers in the Astana and Akmola region revealed a number of persistent barriers limiting the participation of vulnerable households in the TSA program. Despite the differences in the territorial context, most of the problems are systemic and are reproduced in both regions. The analysis identified the five most significant barriers most frequently mentioned by the respondents.

4.3.1. Accounting for the status of individual entrepreneurship as an actual income

Respondents describe a situation where the status of an individual entrepreneur is automatically perceived by the system as a sign of economic activity and income. At the same time, in reality, some of the applicants have not been active for a long time, but they have not closed the sole proprietor due to a lack of understanding of the procedure and

the duration of interaction with the tax authorities. An important point is that the current rules for calculating total income apply a minimum income level “for offset” (at least 25 MCI), which can lead to accounting for conditional income even at low/zero rates.

“If a person is registered as an individual entrepreneur, even without turnover, his income is still considered, and the family loses the right to help.” (Respondent, Akkol district)

The process of closing an individual entrepreneur, according to social workers, remains long and bureaucratically complex: it requires interaction with tax authorities and the collection of additional certificates, which further reduces the motivation of citizens to participate in the program.

4.3.2. Families that do not formally meet the TSA criteria

About half of the respondents noted that a significant part of families does not receive assistance due to slightly exceeding the established poverty line. As a rule, we are talking about families with unstable incomes (temporary work, seasonal earnings) who formally do not meet the criteria, but in practice live in conditions of financial instability. Social workers emphasize that such a rigid boundary does not reflect the real picture of need and requires a revision of approaches to assessing income and expenses.

“There are families who are several thousand above the threshold, but they live in the same conditions as the recipients of the TSA. They drop out of the support system.” (Respondent, Nura district, Astana)

This comment reflects one of the key problems of the TSA implementation - the use of a strict threshold criterion in determining eligibility for assistance. Interviews show that families with unstable and irregular incomes do not formally qualify for the program, despite their actual financial vulnerability. As a result, some of the needy households are excluded from the social support system, which the respondents consider as a significant barrier in the work of the program.

4.3.3. Features of accounting for income from personal subsidiary farms

The most problematic topic for rural areas of the Akmola region is accounting for income from personal subsidiary farms. According to current rules, income from livestock or

homesteading is automatically counted as profit, excluding expenses for feed, veterinary services, fuel and depreciation. As a result, the family's income is inflated, and it loses the right to participate in the program, despite its real economic vulnerability.

“Household income is fully accounted for, but no one considers how much is spent on food and care. It turns out that the family is not technically poor, but it lives from paycheck to paycheck.” (Respondent, Kossy)

Thus, experts point out that the income assessment system in its current form is formal and, in some cases, leads to the exclusion of needy families from the TSA program. This is especially noticeable in rural areas, where subsistence farming is not a source of profit, but rather a way of self-survival.

4.3.4. Alimony obligations as a condition of access to the TSA

A significant barrier to access to the TSA, especially for women with children, is the requirement for alimony obligations. Interviews with social workers of career centers show that in real practice, this condition often conflicts with the applicants' social and family circumstances. Respondents note that some women deliberately do not file for alimony for reasons beyond the formal legal framework: out of fear of conflict with their ex-spouse, out of pity for the father of the child, as well as in situations where women continue to actually cohabit with a partner without formalizing marriage.

In such situations, the absence of alimony payments is perceived by the system as a violation of the requirements of the program, which serves as a reason for refusing to assign TSA, even if there is an objective financial need for the family. The study participants also point out that the process of obtaining alimony is complicated, protracted and emotionally stressful, and also requires significant time and bureaucratic costs. As a result, some women face the need to choose between trying to maintain family relationships and the opportunity to receive social support, which ultimately narrows the actual coverage of this program.

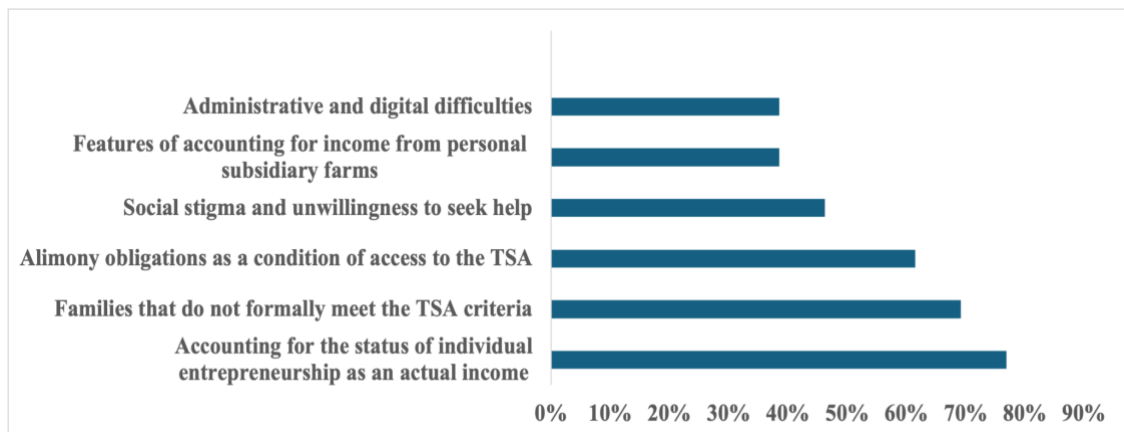
4.3.5. Social stigma and unwillingness to seek help

Also, during the interview, an intangible barrier was identified in the form of social stigma associated with receiving the TSA. According to the respondents, even if there are

objective reasons for receiving support, some families prefer not to apply for the TSA. This is especially true in rural areas and small towns, where social ties are close and personal life is less closed from others.

As a result, applying for social assistance is perceived not as a neutral administrative measure, but as a public confirmation of poverty and social disadvantage, which hinders the participation of potential recipients in the program. Respondents note that fear of being judged by neighbors, relatives, and the local community, as well as fears of being "registered," form internal resistance to participating in the program. As a result, some potential recipients of the TSA remain outside the support system not because of formal restrictions, but for social and psychological reasons. According to experts, this barrier reduces the actual coverage of the program and remains poorly reflected in official statistics.

Figure 2: Frequency of barriers mentioned (%)



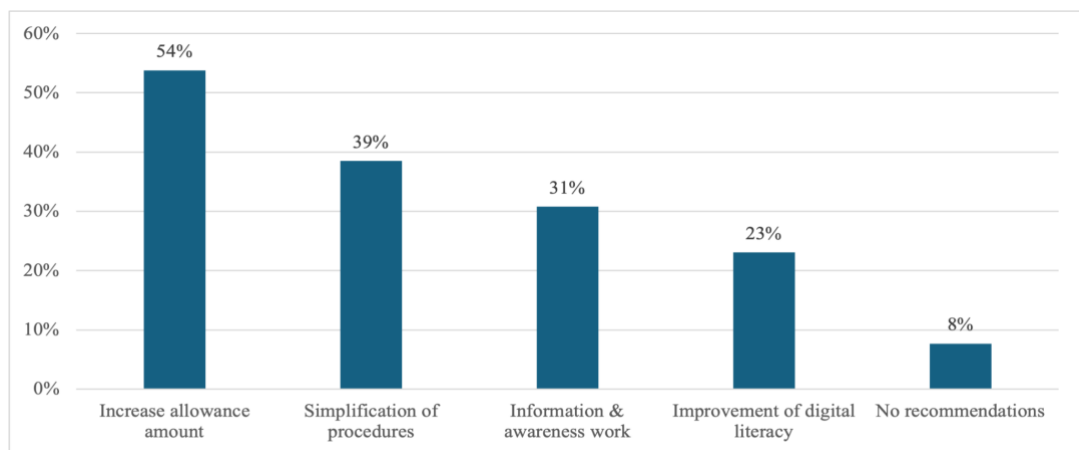
Note: Percentages are calculated based on the number of respondents ($N = 13$).

As shown in Figure 2, the most frequently mentioned barriers to participation in the TSA program are related to household income assessment practices. In particular, respondents most often note the consideration of the status of an individual entrepreneur and the situation of slightly exceeding the poverty line. Alimony obligations also remain a significant limitation on access to the program. Social stigma and administrative and digital difficulties are mentioned less frequently, but they remain important for certain categories of applicants, especially in rural areas.

4.4. Suggestions for improving the program

During the interview, the respondents not only pointed out the existing barriers to participation in the TSA program, but also suggested possible measures to improve its effectiveness and accessibility. The suggestions made show the practical experience of the social workers who are directly involved in the implementation of the program and their understanding of the key challenges faced by applicants. Some of the recommendations were repeated in several interviews, which allows us to consider them as priority areas for improving the program. The frequency of mentions of the main proposed measures is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Frequency of proposed recommendations (%)



As shown in Figure 3, respondents most often suggested an increase in the amount of the TSA allowance, which was mentioned by more than half of the respondents. Simplification of procedures and awareness-raising measures were proposed less frequently, and the need to improve digital literacy was noted by fewer respondents. One respondent did not make specific recommendations.

4.5. Observational insights from the Career Center in Astana

To complement the interview-based findings, four direct non-participant observations were conducted at the Career Center in Astana. The observations were not intended to generate independent analytical categories but to provide contextual evidence of how the TSA implementation unfolds in everyday institutional practice.

Observational data show that the delivery of the TSA services in Astana is highly structured and procedural. The use of an electronic queue and standardized consultation procedures generally contributes to a more organized and predictable provision of services. At the same time, it was found that the quality and effectiveness of consultations directly depend on the staffing and level of preparation of applicants. Even minor organizational problems, such as the temporary absence of a social workers or high workload during rush hours, led to increased waiting times and caused dissatisfaction on the part of visitors.

Observations also indicate a high administrative and emotional burden on social workers. A significant part of the consulting time was spent not on formal paperwork, explaining the rules, conditions for providing assistance, principles for calculating total income, and helping citizens use digital government services, including eGov. This confirms the conclusions of the interview, according to which social workers actually act as intermediaries between a complex system of social assistance and applicants, who often lack understanding of bureaucratic and digital procedures.

As for the experience of the service recipients, most of the applicants showed patience and calmness. However, in cases of refusal to provide assistance or, if necessary, to provide additional documents, some people experienced feelings of frustration and emotional discomfort. This reaction is related to the discrepancy between the formal criteria of the program and how the applicants themselves assess their neediness, which was also emphasized in the interview.

In addition, the observations revealed limitations related to the terms of service. Overcrowded waiting rooms, a limited number of seats and a high workload of specialists during rush hours reduced the comfort of service, especially for vulnerable categories of the population — the elderly and parents with young children.

In general, the observation results complement the interview data and clearly show how the rules and administrative requirements of the targeted social assistance program are implemented in practice in the conditions of the urban employment center.

4.5. Generalized conclusions of the findings

In general, the results of the analysis of semi-structured interviews show that, despite the formally built system of providing the TSA, its practical implementation is accompanied by several persistent barriers. The main difficulties, according to the respondents, are related to formalized approaches to assessing neediness, which do not fully reflect the real living conditions of households.

One of the key barriers is accounting for income without considering actual expenses. Income from personal subsidiary farming, including animal husbandry, is counted as net income, despite significant maintenance and maintenance costs. Similarly, having the status of an individual entrepreneur is automatically interpreted as having income, even if there is no actual activity.

Additional obstacles are related to alimony obligations. For example, in some cases, women with children do not apply for alimony for family or social reasons, but the lack of payments is considered by the system as a violation of the terms of the program, which limits their access to assistance. Respondents also note that the procedure for applying for alimony is lengthy and complicated.

A separate barrier that the interview participants drew attention to is social stigma. For some families, seeking the TSA is perceived as an admission of their own financial insolvency, which is why they refuse to apply out of shame or fear of negative evaluation from others.

One of the serious limitations of the program remains its strict reference to the official poverty line: families whose income slightly exceeds the established threshold are formally excluded from the support system, although their financial vulnerability remains. These difficulties are compounded by administrative and digital barriers, especially for the elderly and rural residents, which together reduce the availability of the TSA for some households in real need.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results indicate that even though the TSA program in Kazakhstan is an indispensable tool that helps to alleviate poverty and enhance social inclusion, a number of administrative, socio-cultural, and digital barriers still hinder its performance.

One of the major trends in interviews is the fact that bureaucratic complexity is one of the most urgent aspects. Almost all respondents indicated that the application is a process that consumes a lot of time particularly in terms of verifying income among individual entrepreneurs. The addition of inactive entrepreneurs assumed income to systematically lock out a large group of those who deserve assistance. This is an indicator of a disconnect between policy formulation and actual socioeconomic realities whereby formal criteria cannot represent informal or changing livelihoods.

In addition, the method of calculation of incomes, especially with respect to the personal subsidiary farming, in rural settings was inclined to exaggerate actual income. Respondents stressed that although livestock ownership can be considered as a source of income, the program fails to take into consideration the fact that it is associated with some costs, including feed and veterinary services. This distortion of the financial situation unwillingly screens out truly needy families, and there is a need to have a more subtle assessment model.

The challenges associated with gender and family were also found in the category of critical barriers. This problem of child support and alimony payments demonstrates the inefficiency of the administration and the social-cultural complications. A lot of women are rendered ineligible because formalized court orders are not taken, which is often caused by fear, or social stigma. This shows that better interagency cooperation between the courts, bailiffs, and social service providers is needed.

Socio-psychologically, the absence of awareness and stigma is still also a significant barrier to access. The social norms relating to pride and self-reliance put some groups of people, especially men and the aged, off seeking help. These results indicate that the perception of welfare dependence within the cultures and structural factors contribute to the implementation of poverty alleviation programs in Kazakhstan.

Digital transformation has introduced significant improvements with eGov-like platforms like the Digital Family Card that helped simplify the process of application and verification. Nonetheless, the digital divide continues to exist, particularly in rural communities, where access to the Internet is low, and digital literacy is low, as well as obsolete data. Unequal access to digital services poses a threat to the reproduction of inequalities in urban and rural communities.

Overall, the TSA has been confirmed as a successful framework with great potential, although its effectiveness is limited due to bureaucratic inflexibility, digital divide, and lack of interagency collaboration. To cover these gaps, it is necessary to not only refine the policy, but also conduct special capacity-building among social workers and beneficiaries.

CHAPTER 6

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research faced several limitations which should be put into consideration in explaining the findings. First, the study is entirely based on qualitative research; semi-structured interviews with social workers and direct observation. Although this method offers detailed and contextual information about the implementation and eligibility criteria of the TSA programme, it reduces the transferability of the findings to other areas and administrative settings in Kazakhstan.

The biggest drawback is related to the lack of direct beneficiary perspectives because of the ethical considerations and the absence of the formal permission from IREC to administer questions to the beneficiaries of the TSA programme, thus our proposed methodology was modified to remove the direct participation of the programme beneficiaries. Consequently, the analysis is an embodiment of the experiences and interpretations of frontline social workers and not beneficiaries themselves. Even though social workers offered useful insights on eligibility assessment, administrative practices and common participation barriers, their perspective might not entirely reflect the lived experiences of beneficiaries, their perceptions of access, as well as their subjective perspectives of programme outcomes.

Moreover, financial constraints restricted the scope of direct observation to Astana. The researchers could not carry out direct observation at the other Akmola regions, which might vary in terms of administrative capacity, socio-economic conditions, as well as implementation practices. Through this, the findings might not capture key regional differences in TSA implementation. As a result of this, regional variations in the interpretation/ application of the eligibility and selection criteria of the TSA may not be fully represented in the findings of this research.

To overcome these constraints, the research triangulated the interview data with observations and document analysis. However, further studies on the TSA could cover more regions of the country, have face-to-face interaction with beneficiaries, adopt mixed methodological approaches, provided there is sufficient funding and ethical approval as it would help to have a more comprehensive view of the TSA implementation in all of Kazakhstan.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The conducted research confirms that the TSA occupies a central place in the social protection system of Kazakhstan and remains one of the key instruments of state policy to reduce poverty and social vulnerability. In the context of persistent socio-economic inequality, regional income differentiation and a high proportion of unstable employment, the TSA is potentially able to perform not only a compensatory, but also an integrative function, contributing to social inclusion and increasing household sustainability. At the same time, the results of the study show that the actual implementation of the program is largely at odds with its legally defined goals and does not lead to the expected social effects.

The key conclusion of the study is that the low effectiveness of the TSA is primarily related not to the very concept of the program, but to how it is implemented in practice and in what administrative environment it operates. In particular, access is limited for potential recipients due to complex and multi-step application procedures, strict income verification requirements, and the substantial volume of documents requested. Such costs become a serious barrier for vulnerable groups of the population, which actually puts them outside the support system. As a result, the population categories targeted by the TSA measures are not included in the coverage of this program.

The study also showed that the current income accounting mechanisms poorly reflect the real economic instability of households. Information from official databases does not always fully reflect the actual financial situation of applicants, as a result of which it leads either to unjustified refusals or to exclusion from the program of families with temporary income fluctuations. The focus on formal indicators makes the system poorly adapted to the unstable forms of employment typical of the modern economy of Kazakhstan.

Special attention should be paid to socio-cultural factors that limit access to TSA. For some families, seeking help is associated with a sense of loss of dignity and social inadequacy, which is why they are not ready to seek support even if they clearly need it. The increased emphasis on control and prevention of abuse also undermines the credibility of the program.

The digitalization of TSA procedures, despite the stated goals of increasing efficiency and transparency, demonstrates a dual effect. On the one hand, it really speeds up data processing and simplifies individual stages of interaction, on the other hand, in the absence

of measures to ensure inclusiveness, it increases existing social inequalities, especially for rural residents, senior citizens and people with low digital literacy.

In general, the identified problems indicate the systemic nature of the TSA restrictions and reflect the gap between the declared principles of social policy and the practice of their implementation. At the same time, the program retains significant development potential due to its institutional stability and political importance. Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that strengthening the role of TSA is impossible without rethinking approaches to its implementation, which logically leads to the need for further discussion of ways to improve it.

CHAPTER 8

RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1. Methodological Improvements in Assessing Household Neediness

The analysis revealed that the main barriers to the implementation of the TSA in Kazakhstan are related to the discrepancy between the formalized criteria for assessing neediness and the real socio-economic living conditions of households. Despite the institutional orderliness and transparency of procedures, in practice, existing mechanisms in some cases lead to the exclusion of vulnerable groups from the support system, especially with unstable incomes, personal housekeeping and difficult family circumstances.

In this regard, the improvement of the TSA program requires a transition from a formal approach to a more flexible and context-sensitive model of social policy. The recommendations presented are aimed at eliminating the identified barriers by adjusting the income accounting methodology, institutional procedures for access to assistance, and management decisions at the level of social policy development and implementation. Collectively, the proposed measures are aimed at increasing the targeting, fairness, and actual accessibility of the TSA program.

8.1.1. Implementation of the actual accounting of entrepreneurial activity

As it was revealed during the study, the formal equation of sole proprietor (SP) registration with income and the use of a conditional minimum income distort the assessment of need and lead to the exclusion of vulnerable families from the support system. In this regard, we propose to introduce the principle of an actual assessment of economic activity based on real business turnover, confirmed by data from authorized bodies. For this purpose, a mechanism for automatic reconciliation of tax reporting data reflecting real turnover (or lack thereof) with social protection information systems can be implemented. In the case of zero turnover during a certain period (for example, 6-12 months), income should not be conditionally counted in the calculation of total income.

It is also advisable to introduce a simplified mechanism for temporarily suspending the status of SP for socially vulnerable citizens. Such a temporary suspension can be issued through the e-government portal upon application, confirmed by a social worker, without the need to completely close the SP and complex tax procedures. This will reduce the

administrative burden on applicants, eliminate the barrier associated with bureaucracy, and preserve the opportunity for citizens to resume business in the future. It should be noted that from the point of view of the state, such a measure does not require significant budget expenditures.

8.1.2. Reforming the income calculation methodology for households with unstable sources of income

The identified barriers demonstrate the limitations of a strict income threshold as the main criterion for access to the TSA, especially for families with temporary, seasonal and irregular incomes. We recommend switching to a more flexible model for assessing need, including income averaging over a longer period or the use of smoothing coefficients. Under this approach, families with incomes slightly above the established threshold could receive partial support, reduced in proportion to income growth. This will take into account the instability and irregularity of earnings typical of temporary and seasonal employment, and reduce the risk of families falling out of the support system.

In the medium term, it is possible to consider the possibility of introducing an expanded need assessment model that includes not only income, but also structural vulnerability factors: family composition, children, disability, debt burden, housing and utility costs. Implementation is possible through pilot projects in selected regions, followed by an assessment of effectiveness.

8.1.3. Introduction of a differentiated approach to the assessment of income from personal subsidiary farms

For rural areas, it is necessary to reconsider the existing approach to accounting for income from personal subsidiary farms, since automatic income transfer without taking into account production costs leads to an overestimation of the welfare of families and distorts the criteria of need. This can be implemented through regulatory cost coefficients (feed, veterinary, fuel), differentiated by type of activity and region. This approach will bring the income estimate closer to the real economic conditions of rural areas and reduce the risk of overestimation of wealth.

8.2. Institutional and Procedural Adjustments to Access Social Assistance

8.2.1. Introduction of flexible exceptions for alimony issues

The requirement of mandatory alimony as a condition of access to the TSA in some cases conflicts with the objectives of social protection, especially in relation to women with children. In order to increase the actual availability of assistance, it is advisable to introduce a mechanism for flexible exceptions that take into account the applicants' real-life circumstances, including conflict risks, security threats, psychological pressure, and the length of court proceedings. The decision on the application of exceptions can be made on the basis of the professional opinion of the social worker and (or) the interdepartmental commission. This will take into account the applicants' real-life circumstances and prevent a situation where formal compliance with the rule is placed above protecting the well-being of children.

8.3 Transition to a more proactive TSA administration model

Social stigmatization and unwillingness to seek help indicate the limitations of the declarative principle of providing the TSA. In this regard, it is recommended to develop proactive mechanisms for identifying potential recipients based on interdepartmental data analysis, in which the right to assistance is determined without a public appeal from citizens. This approach reduces the psychological and reputational costs of participating in the program, and helps to expand the actual coverage of social support. Proactive administration enhances trust in government institutions and increases the effectiveness of social policy without increasing administrative costs. This approach works especially well in small towns where it is difficult to maintain anonymity. The pilot implementation of proactive models will allow us to assess their impact on program coverage and at the same time reduce psychological barriers to participation.

8.4. Financial Sustainability and Adequacy of the TSA Program

8.4.1. Regular review of the size of the TSA, taking into account inflation and regional differences

The majority of respondents noted that the current amount of the allowance does not cover basic needs. Taking into account rising prices and noticeable differences in the cost of living between regions, it seems reasonable to introduce a mechanism for regularly

reviewing the size of the TSA, which would allow it to maintain its real purchasing power. Insufficient indexing of payments reduces the effectiveness of budget expenditures, since it actually weakens the protective role of the program. In this regard, we propose to adjust the amount of benefits based on official inflation indicators, as well as to provide for regional differentiation based on statistical data. In our opinion, this approach will increase the efficiency of government spending on social protection, avoid sharp one-time increases, and make budget planning more sustainable and predictable.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions for Social Workers Involved in the TSA Program

1. How would you describe your role and main responsibilities within the TSA program?
2. What are the main challenges you face when working with individuals and families who apply for or receive the TSA?
3. In your opinion, how effectively do the current eligibility criteria identify those who are most in need of social support?
4. How would you assess the adequacy of the TSA benefit amount in terms of covering the basic needs of recipients?
5. Could you describe how conditional cash assistance is implemented in practice? What specific features or challenges arise in this process?
(For example, assistance is provided in exchange for actions intended to help families overcome poverty in the long term, such as ensuring children's education and health.)
6. In your view, what barriers prevent eligible citizens from accessing the TSA program?
7. Based on your experience, are there families or individuals who meet the eligibility criteria but do not apply for the TSA? What might explain this behavior?
8. What difficulties do applicants most frequently encounter during the application process (e.g., document collection, internet access, understanding procedures)?
9. Do you think applicants are sufficiently informed about their rights and opportunities related to receiving the TSA?
10. In your opinion, does stigma or fear of social judgment discourage some families from seeking social assistance?
11. How do you assess the impact of the "Digital Family Card" on access to the TSA program? Has it improved access or created additional challenges for certain groups?
12. What do you consider to be the main strengths and weaknesses of the current TSA program structure?

13. Do you have any recommendations for improving the TSA program? What changes could make it more effective?

APPENDIX B

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Observers: Assel Gutova and Umit Azhigaliyeva

Location of the observation: Career Center, Astana.

Date and time of the observation: 8 September, 2025; 11.00 PM.

Length of the observation in minutes: 40 minutes.

Direct non-participant observation: This method was chosen in order to observe how consultations for the TSA are delivered in the Career Center, as well as to note the behavior of clients and the working conditions of staff. Remaining a non-participant made it possible to observe the situation more objectively and avoid influencing the process.

Observation Protocol		
Focus of observation	Descriptive notes	Reflective Notes
Physical place and objects	The career center has an organized service system: screens with queue numbers are installed in the hall, and people are calmly waiting for their room using coupons. The room is not crowded, the applicants sit quietly and wait for their turn. There are seven employees in the consulting room: five social workers who work directly with TSA recipients, one department head, and one	The waiting area is generally comfortable and functional. However, the consulting room itself seemed a little cramped, as seven people work in it at the same time. On the one hand, this ensures the accessibility of social workers, but on the other hand, it creates a feeling of crowding and lack of space. The electronic queue system works well and helps maintain order, but the absence of at least one social worker can quickly disrupt

	employee responsible for collecting statistics.	the service process, as was seen in one of the cases.
Social actors and interactions	Most of the visitors were women, some came with children. The people looked neat and behaved calmly. In general, the atmosphere was quiet and friendly, but there was one case when a woman expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of a social worker and the fact that she could not be admitted. At the same time, the social workers behaved professionally and calmly.	The predominance of women among visitors may indicate that they are the ones who most often seek targeted social assistance. The calm behavior of customers in general shows trust in the service system, but this single conflict showed that people can quickly get annoyed by waiting.

Activities and goals	The main thing that was observed was the consultations of social workers with applicants. Social workers explained the rules, recorded the necessary information and accepted documents for receiving TSA. The consultations helped to check whether a person was eligible for help and to fill out the documents correctly. The statistics officer kept records, and the head of the department supervised the process.	The social workers worked confidently and in an organized manner, and it was clear that they had experience. But the process strongly depends on the number of staff: if there are not enough employees, consultations go slower, and people have to wait longer.
Emotions felt and expressed	Most applicants behave calmly and patiently while waiting. However, when there are delays, for example, if there is no social worker, some begin to express dissatisfaction. Social workers generally behave professionally, although sometimes there is tension when dealing with complaints.	In general, the atmosphere was calm, but moments of irritation arose when the applicants' expectations did not match reality. Social workers reacted correctly to such situations, but it was clear that this affected their work rhythm and created additional stress.

The observation showed that the Career Center in Astana works in a fairly organized manner and provides professional advice. The electronic queue helps to maintain order, and most applicants are calmly waiting for their turn. But the work of the center is highly

dependent on the availability of social workers, and even minor disruptions can cause dissatisfaction among visitors.

Although the room and procedures generally help the work, there is room for improvement. For example, they can enlarge the consultation areas, add more seats in the waiting room and prepare a backup option in case of social workers absence. This would make the work of the center smoother and reduce stress for applicants and social workers.

APPENDIX C

Consent Form

Introduction. You are invited to participate in a research study entitled the TSA.

Procedures. The purpose of this study is to study the experience and opinion of social workers involved in the implementation of the targeted social assistance program in Astana and the Akmola region. The results obtained will be used to improve the mechanisms for providing social assistance and improve the efficiency of social services. As part of the study, participants will be asked to complete a semi-structured interview, which will cover topics such as the daily practice of working with the TSA recipients, the difficulties faced by specialists, as well as possible ways to improve the program. The interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes and will be conducted at a time convenient for the participant.

Risks. The risks of participating in this study are minimal. However, some psychological discomfort may arise due to the sensitive nature of the topic, which includes discussing poverty, receiving social assistance, and professional difficulties related to the implementation of the targeted social assistance program. Participants may also feel uncomfortable when expressing critical views about current procedures.

To minimize these risks, the research team guarantees complete confidentiality. All responses will be anonymized and used only in a generalized form, without any names or other identifying information. Participation is entirely voluntary, and participants have the right to skip any question or withdraw from the interview at any time without providing a reason and without any consequences.

Benefits. The results of this study may be useful for Nazarbayev University and researchers, as they will help to better understand how the social assistance system works. In addition, the data obtained can become the basis for improving government programs, which in the future may positively affect the quality of services provided.

Compensation. There is no financial reward for participation. However, at the end of the study, participants will be able to get acquainted with its results. To receive a copy of the final report, you can contact the contacts listed in the survey.

Confidentiality & Privacy. Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent possible. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The information collected during the research will be securely stored on secure servers of Nazarbayev University. Only researchers participating in the project will have access to it. All necessary measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality, however, as with any study, it is impossible to eliminate the risk of unintended disclosure of information. Personal data will not be disclosed and will be used solely for the purposes of this research.

Voluntary Nature of the Study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and if agreement to participation is given, it can be withdrawn at any time without prejudice.

Points of Contact. It is understood that should any questions or comments arise regarding this project, or a research related injury is received, the Principal Investigator, *Assel Gutova*, +7.700.41.00741, assel.gutova@nu.edu.kz should be contacted. Any other questions or concerns may be addressed to the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee, resethics@nu.edu.kz.

Statement of Consent.

I, _____
_____,

Give my voluntary consent to participate in this study.

The researchers clearly explained to me the background information and objectives of the study and what my participation in this study involves.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I can at any time and without giving any reasons withdraw my consent, and this will not have any negative consequences for myself.

I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher:

Signed _____ Date _____