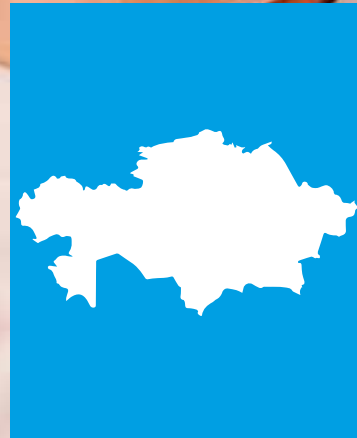




KAZAKHSTAN //
**Improving Access to Social Protection
and Cash Plus Services for Low-income
Families with Children**





Issue

Despite an impressive reduction in poverty from 47% in 2001 to 2.7% in 2017, the most disadvantaged children in Kazakhstan continue to experience poverty and persistent vulnerabilities. This is especially true of children in rural areas, in single-headed households, in households experiencing unemployment, and large households containing many children, or where a family member has a disability.⁵⁰

Kazakhstan has a mature social protection system that supports its low-income population through social assistance and other services. However, its effectiveness remains a concern due to limited effective coverage, benefit adequacy, and awareness of entitlements, and a lack of a robust M&E framework. Prior to a 2018 reform, there were three main poverty-targeted social assistance benefits to support low-income families with children: the targeted social assistance (TSA), the special child allowance (SCA), and a benefit for large families (with 4 or more children) (4+B). The take-up of these benefits by eligible persons was low by the standards of upper-middle-income countries. In particular, TSA exclusion errors were estimated to reach 80%.⁵¹

Efforts to improve the social protection system's effectiveness are hindered by an absence of a national

poverty reduction strategy, no appropriate poverty monitoring, and methodological limitations in the national poverty measurement. UNICEF studies have highlighted administrative and policy bottlenecks that restrict access to social assistance and social services.⁵² The low social assistance coverage relates to the low income-eligibility threshold and restrictive administrative rules. Administrative complexity in the benefit application process has resulted in confusion over eligibility and therefore benefit take-up failure and exclusion of prospective beneficiaries. On-demand application procedures often resulted in exclusion not only by design – i.e. not conforming to eligibility criteria – but also because of poor outreach and service delivery practices that did not actively seek out the most marginalised population to extend coverage.

Social services remain fragmented and are undermined by a lack of skilled social service workforce (including social workers and case managers), who could play an active role in the implementation of targeted initiatives that integrate services for vulnerable families at the service delivery level. Recognising that both the social assistance system and social services needed to be revised, the government embarked on a reform process for 2018.

Actions



UNICEF provided technical support to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection's (MLSP) major 2018 reform of its social assistance system to ensure it was child-sensitive. The Government primarily wished to reform the TSA and discarded the SCA and 4+B programmes. It substantially increased the importance of the TSA by raising the eligibility threshold to maintain support for some of the existing beneficiaries of the SCA and 4+B beneficiaries. This ambitious reform aimed not only to change the eligibility rules for social assistance, but also to transform the way access to benefits, and their administration, was implemented.

Since the benefits affected by the TSA reform were primarily received by households with children, UNICEF made children the central focus of social assistance reform. Prior to the reform, UNICEF provided technical support to the MLSP to better understand the role of the TSA on children. UNICEF developed simulations on the likely impact of the reform by assessing the revised design of the TSA and reviewing how its administration could also enhance access to social services. Findings of the 2017 assessment highlighted a heightened risk of exclusion for many poor children posed by the intended

reforms.⁵³ Using these findings, UNICEF outlined three major policy recommendations to modify the proposed reform to ensure poor and low-income children would benefit.

UNICEF recommended improving the eligibility criteria for social assistance, increasing the effectiveness of the TSA benefit and introducing a 'cash plus' approach to complement the TSA.⁵⁴ More specifically, these recommendations emphasised the importance of increasing the poverty line by 20% of the Government's subsistence minimum level (SML), revising the means test, reviewing and simplifying the benefit application process, improving outreach and social work activities. UNICEF argued a Cash Plus approach was needed to adjust the TSA programme design to better address the multidimensional nature of child poverty.

The 2018 TSA reform implemented by the government did not achieve its stated policy objectives of increasing coverage for families with children. By the end of 2018, the number of children benefiting from social assistance programmes declined radically from 562,300 to 363,200 TSA beneficiaries.⁵⁵ The reform implementation

confirmed design flaws previously identified by UNICEF. It failed to include beneficiaries discarded from the SCA and 4+B programmes as planned, additionally failing to extend coverage to those previously excluded from the TSA. The reform largely affected families with children,

particularly with four or more children due to halting further enrolment onto the 4+B programme. However, a change of government and further social sector reforms announced laid out a pathway to adjust the ongoing TSA reform back in a direction that is more favourable to children.

Impact



Based on UNICEF's pre-reform recommendations, several important adjustments to the TSA were implemented by the new government in April 2019. Some of the UNICEF policy 'wins' included expanding coverage by increasing the SML poverty threshold from 40% in 2018 to 70% in 2019 and strengthening focus on children's needs. For example, all children in families below the 70% SML poverty threshold are eligible for the monthly cash benefit of 20,800 KZT (USD55) per child. Furthermore, a revised means test which limits the definition of a household to direct relatives (i.e. parents/ caregivers and grandparents) was attained too, representing a more equitable method for computing household income and therefore entitlements. UNICEF was also able to eliminate the benefit-tested component from the means test. This prevented the TSA from excluding households with members that also received a child disability benefit or student benefit for example and therefore protected especially vulnerable households. The recommendations assisted the simplification of administrative rules, resulting in increased TSA take-up by households with poor children.

By the end of 2019, the TSA programme coverage had increased more than four times (approximately 1.6 million) since 2018. A total of 2,120,000 beneficiaries, including 1,292,000 children, are now covered. While the reform resulted in a significant expansion of social assistance coverage for low income and vulnerable children, it has also drastically increased demand for child-focussed cash transfers. In 2019, the national and local government faced major financing and implementation constraints.

Consequently, a new wave of reforms was announced to adjust the social benefits system for children. Given

that 56% of beneficiary children live in families with four children or more, the Government decided to reintroduce a categorical benefit for families with four or more children, which are among the most vulnerable groups. In addition, the TSA programme will continue to target those children living in families below 70% SML with social assistance benefits and a guaranteed package of services for pre-school and school children (nutrition, school feeding, school supplies, transport subsidies). The full effect of the policy revision and design improvements on exclusion errors and targeting effectiveness of means-tested social assistance will be measured in 2020.

Going forward, UNICEF is striving to better reform the TSA and has agreed, along with the MLSP, on a roadmap for piloting the 'cash plus' model to enhance reforms. UNICEF aims to further improve the targeting effectiveness of the TSA programme by increasing the poverty threshold to 100% MSL, improve cash administration, consolidate budgeting and improve redistribution of programme funding, and invest in outreach and community mobilisation. The proposed 'cash plus' model also aims to address poverty in a multidimensional way. UNICEF is piloting a cash plus model to enhance the TSA's impact on child poverty and strengthen the role of the newly established community-based social service workforce to promote social inclusion. The pilot aims to set up a family support system and safety nets for families with children who are ineligible for the TSA, but still face risks and vulnerabilities due to low incomes (families with incomes between 70% - 100% MSL). Caseworkers and case management will be key components of the cash plus pilot and will act as a key integration point at service delivery.

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Europe and Central Asia Regional Office

Palais des Nations
CH-1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland