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### Conditional Cash Transfers in Kazakhstan: Dynamics and Regional Profiles

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#### ABSTRACT

*The study used economic and statistical methods of analysis (calculation of specific and average values, coefficient of variation, data ranking), cluster analysis based on the k-mean link method. Authors divided the parameters of program participants in the official information base into socio-demographic and organizational and managerial. In the medium term, the program increased its focus on large families with children, the specific indicator of “full-time students” increased, which indicates improved conditions for the formation of human capital of children. There is a vector of movement of regions towards homogeneity in terms of specific socio-demographic indicators per family and an increase in heterogeneity in terms of participation in active employment measures. Using cluster and economic-statistical analysis, three types of regional profiles were identified. The profiles are clearly linked to the economic space and types of demographic behavior. The first type includes the northern and central regions, characterized by low demographic parameters, high unemployment and active participation in employment measures. The second type is represented by large agglomerations of Kazakhstan with average demographic indicators, low unemployment rates and a high number of workers per family. It is advisable to direct active employment measures to improve the skills of workers to increase their wage level. The third type is represented by five regions with high levels of demographic behavior indicators. In this type, there is also the problem of low qualifications of employees with low wages and the problem of unemployment. For the southern regions, it is advisable to stimulate re-settlement to the central ones and introduce subsidies for preschool services instead of a cash transfer.*

## INTRODUCTION

Social protection systems in modern economies are constantly being transformed, but targeted social assistance remains an integral part of it, since inclusive development requires equal starting conditions for all members of society. At the same time, countries' budgetary resources are always limited, which forces government authorities to look for solutions that simultaneously satisfy the principles of maximizing social effect and minimizing budget costs. The mechanism of conditional cash transfers (hereinafter CCT) has the potential to find an equilibrium solution to this management problem. CCTs establish rules for the recipient that are consistent with a given social goal, such as human capital development, while also setting expectations for the recipient's behavior in the form of economic activity. Until recently, countries avoided complex social assistance systems by reducing transaction costs. But digital technologies have simplified many procedures for working with information, and the complexity of the system is no longer a limiting factor for its implementation (Gentilini, 2020).

Among the methods used for targeting social assistance programs, the geographical method is often a priority and either strictly delineates the space for program implementation or determines the normalized load by region based on spatial variations in the need for assistance. In global practice, geographic targeting is used in about a quarter of programs, but is rarely the only method (Grosh et al., 2022).

Considering the regional characteristics of countries with a vast territory, a combination of a geographical method with different conditions for paying cash transfers or transforming them into in-kind forms can be an effective targeting method.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conditional cash transfer programs have a fairly long period of application and a stable positive reputation. Due to their flexibility in targeting specific population groups, they are able to provide a multifactorial system of protection against poverty (Cuesta, 2007). Conditional cash transfers are interpreted by a number of scientists as social innovations, since research results indicate positive changes in the well-being and inclusion of low-income citizens (do Vale, 2021; Béland et al., 2018; Barrientos & Malerba, 2020). The role of such programs as an effective tool for reducing inequality in starting living conditions for children, as they can be based on targeted investments in child health, quality child care, parenting programs and parental employment (Wolf et al., 2017).

Evaluations of the results of the implementation of such programs reveal positive consequences for the human capital of children, in particular: an increase in attendance at educational institutions and the duration of education for children (Meza-Cordero & Gulemetova, 2023), an improvement in the ability of citizens to use microcredit (Habibullah et al., 2023), a reduction in the number of adolescents participating in labor market (Quimbo et al., 2021). At the same time, open sources are actively discussing the comparative analysis of the consequences of using conditional cash transfers (since there are always errors in exclusion from the program) and universal social protection to achieve the Millennium Goals (Scheel et al., 2020; ILO, 2017; Saltkjel & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2017). The debate is supported by a number of recent studies that argue that the intended transformational potential of social protection through a conditional cash transfer program may not always be detectable (Ulriksen & Plagerson, 2023). Among the negative consequences of conditional transfer programs are the long stay of participants in the program, their commitment to paternalism and stigmatization in society (Borzutzky, 2012; Seekings et al., 2023). At the same time, researchers emphasize the dependence of the results on the content of the program itself and on the quality of its management (De Venanzi, 2022; Boko et al., 2023).

Conditional cash assistance, like many social programs, has a geographical projection, since the economic and socio-demographic parameters of countries with a large territory most often demonstrate pronounced heterogeneity. The regions of residence of program participants can determine their perception of the fairness of the program, its transformative role, and, consequently, their assessment of the government's performance, as has been found in a number of studies (Huang & Gao, 2018., Béland et al., 2017).

Hulme et al. (2014) summarize the results of medium-term cash transfer programs for the poor and, in particular, emphasize the decentralization of cash transfer programs to the municipal level in China and

Brazil as a way to increase social impact. Nasri K. (2022), argues that targeting effectiveness varies from one region to another. Attention is drawn to the fact that regional characteristics of residence can have a significant impact on the components by which the state of poverty is measured (food and nutrition structure, quality of housing and costs of its maintenance - Gibson, 2016). Jindra and Vaz (2019), based on 71 countries, argue that program management reduces the risk of poverty only if it takes into account regional characteristics of residence and is specifically linked to certain household characteristics.

In a number of cases, it is noted that programs that are geographically linked are being implemented, including for reasons of accessibility of social services (schools, medical and special social centers, etc.). Sometimes households are initially selected for a program based on geography (Kosec & Mo, 2017; World Bank, 2020; Arruda et al., 2021; World Bank, 2021). To speed up the response to the process of reducing family resources and entering the social group of the poor, early warning systems include, among others, geographical triggers (WorldBank, 2020; UNICEF, 2019; WorldBank, 2020; Gentilini et al., 2020; Boko et al., 2020) .

It is widely accepted that geographic information can help diagnose a program access problem that is generating exclusion errors (WorldBank, 2020). Geographic targeting opened a new stage for its method, which was made possible by processing complex sets of information and drawing up maps of poverty (Skoufias et al., 2017; Ohlenburg, 2020). At the same time, many studies note that the geographical method alone is not enough; it is used in parallel with the proxy method and monetary measures (World Bank, 2021). In our study, we use a geographical method to compile a typology of Kazakhstan's regions in the conditional cash transfer program and develop recommendations for program management for individual types.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

We adhere to the World Bank methodology (Grosh et al., 2022), which uses a broad interpretation of the term “program” and considers a program a system of interventions to achieve policy goals, even if a specific legal act does not use the term “program”. The goal in this case is to support the population in a situation of under consumption, risks of declining well-being and falling into chronic poverty. The study used economic and statistical methods of analysis (calculation of specific and average values, coefficient of variation, data ranking), cluster analysis based on the k-mean link method. We have grouped the parameters of program participants in the official information database as follows:

- Socio-demographic, designed for 1 family;
- Organizational and managerial, defined by us for 1 family and 1 able-bodied person.

Socio-demographic indicators are presented as follows: number of family members; amount of children; number of pensioners; number of disabled people; number of able-bodied people; number of unemployed; number of people employed at the time of application; the number of people caring for children, the disabled, and the elderly. Organizational and managerial factors are associated with active employment measures:

- Active measures in the field of employment, per family and per able-bodied person;
- Persons employed in permanent jobs, per one able-bodied person;
- Persons employed in public works/social jobs/professional retraining, per one able-bodied person.

The study compared the parameters of social groups for 2018, 2022 and 2023, because over a longer period, data are not comparable due to changes in monitoring and evaluation indicators. For comparability of results from year to year, data are presented for the regional structure of Kazakhstan, which was in force until 2022 inclusive. Since new regions were identified by dividing the territory of three regions into two parts, the data for parts of each of the three divided regions are summarized.

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS

#### 3.1 Characteristics of the average family of a Kazakh CCT recipient for 2023

The average family consists of 5.6 people, the composition is determined as follows:

- 3.6 children under 18 years of age,
- 0.02 disabled people of all groups,
- 0.01 pensioners,
- 0.19 full-time students (except for doctoral studies),
- 1.73 able-bodied citizens
- 0.03 others.

Translating the data into another measurement format, we can say that the probability of the presence of children in the family is 65%; full-time students (students, cadets, undergraduates) 3.5%; able-bodied persons 31%; disabled people and pensioners 0.3% and 0.2%, respectively; other categories 0.5%. By status in the labor market, out of 1.73 able-bodied citizens in the family:

- 0.12 unemployed;
- 1.01 has a job at the time of application;
- 0.6 are caring for other family members at home;
- 0.01 self-employed.

In other words, the probability of the presence of an unemployed family among able-bodied persons is 7%; having a job at the time of application - 58%; care workers -35%; self-employed - 1%. 14% of able-bodied persons or one able-bodied person out of 4 families are involved in active employment measures.

When calculating participation rates in active employment measures per able-bodied person, the following is revealed:

- one person out of seven is involved in active employment measures;
- one in 10 gets a permanent job
- one in 1000 undergoes professional training/advanced training courses;
- one in 14 ends up in a social workplace;
- one in 33 participates in community service.

#### 3.2 Dynamics of average indicators for the period from 2018 to 2023

The dynamics of the average demographic indicators of the program allows us to conclude that there are positive changes and a concentration of efforts on helping large families and children, including older children in full-time education. Indicators of the number of family members, children under 18 years of age, and full-time students have a positive sign of absolute changes. (Table 1) The last fact may indicate an improvement in the conditions for the formation of children's human capital, since the probability of the presence of full-time students in the family increased by 1.5%. The growth of universal social benefits for the disabled and pensions has reduced participation in the program for these categories.

At the same time, the dynamics of the social and labor characteristics of program participants is contradictory. As demographic shifts continue, working-age people and carers are becoming less likely to participate in the program. The likelihood of unemployed people being in the program increased slightly. The most controversial from the point of view of assessing the results of the program is the significant increase in the probability of the presence in the family of people who are employed at the time of application from 32% to 58%. Since such persons are entitled to receive assistance, it is obvious that the level of their wages does not allow the family to go beyond the poverty line. That is, the problem is both the low qualifications and wages of such participants, and the insufficient level of benefits for children and caregivers, since they are the dominant groups. A negative phenomenon can be considered a decrease in the intensity of active measures to promote employment: in 2018, a person from every third family was involved, and

in 2023 only from every fourth. The organizational and managerial indicators of the associated employment program, designed for one able-bodied family member, have negative dynamics. This applies to all indicators, except for the specific indicator of persons sent to social jobs, which has the least significance among the proposed measures. The specific indicator of able-bodied persons sent for vocational training and advanced training, which, given the current picture, should be the leading measures, decreased by twenty times compared to 2018.

### 3.3 Dynamics of the regional profile of conditional cash transfers

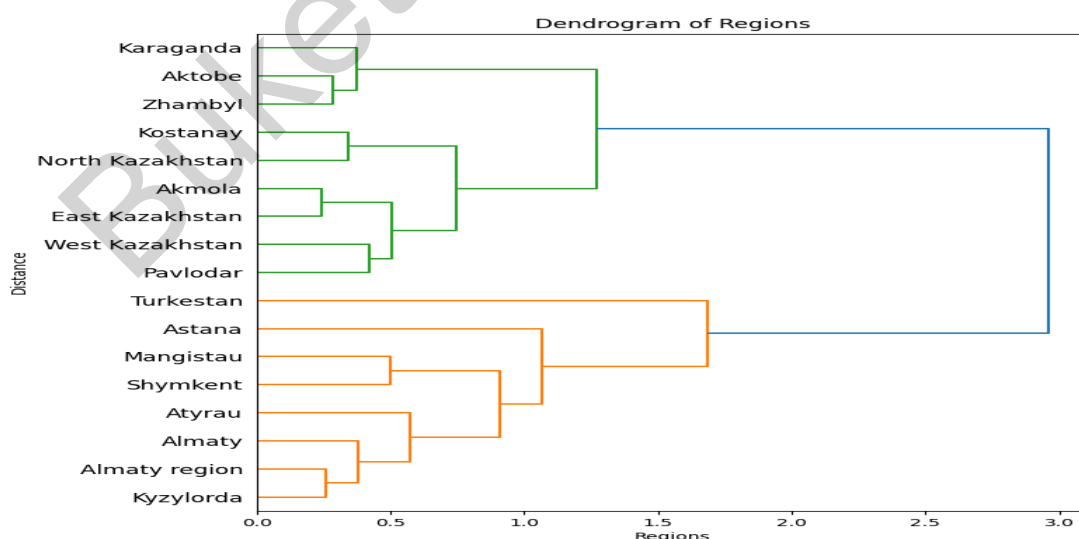
To assess regional differences, we selected a statistical coefficient of variation, according to which in 2023 in the regions, according to specific indicators per family: a) Insignificant degree of dispersion of regions by the number of family members, by the number of children in the family, by the number of able-bodied persons in the family, and b) Average degree of dispersion among full-time students; persons who have a job at the time of application; persons caring for other family members.

Based on these indicators, regions can be read as homogeneous aggregates. Regions are heterogeneous in terms of the number of disabled people per family; pensioners; unemployed; number of persons involved in active employment measures. It is interesting that over the period there is a decrease in the coefficient of variation, i.e. a vector of increasing homogeneity or decreasing heterogeneity appears for all specific indicators per family, except for persons involved in active employment measures. This is evidenced by the negative sign of absolute changes in the coefficient of variation in 2023 compared to 2018.

As for the specific indicators per able-bodied person, all employment projects across regions show pronounced heterogeneity, which increased in 2023 compared to 2018. The increase in heterogeneity reflects both the different economic development of the regions and the different effect of organizational and managerial efforts in the employment program.

### 3.4 Types of regional profiles

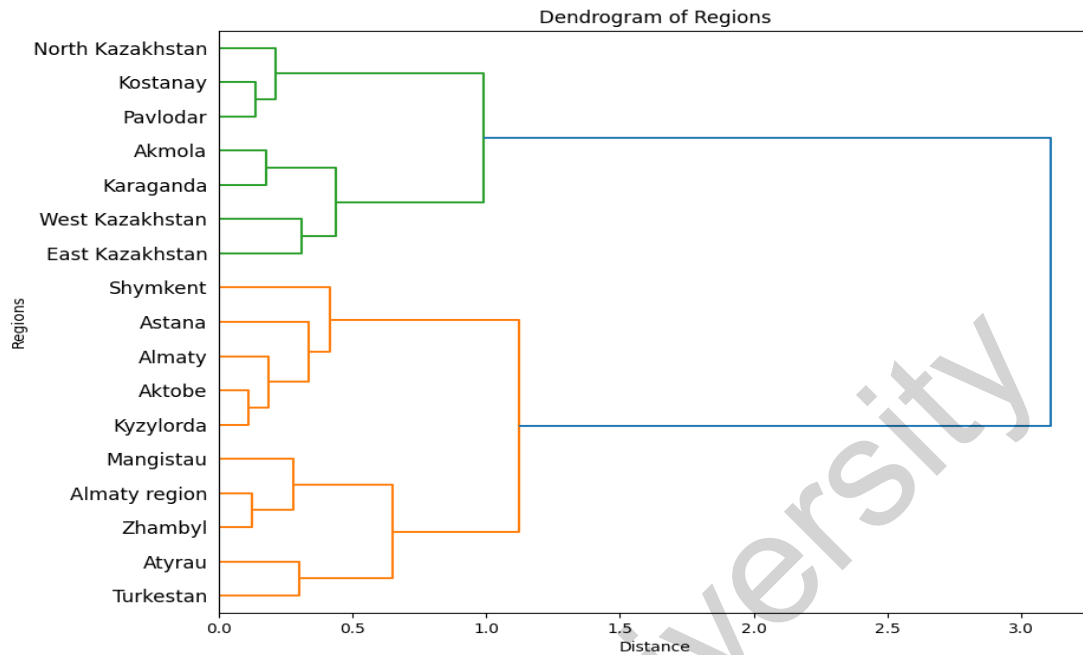
A comparative analysis of the results of regional profiles for the period from 2018 to 2023 allows us to conclude that over the past two years the geographical grouping of regions has been consolidated and agglomeration specifics are visible. In 2018-2019, we observed a mixed composition of clusters in terms of the geographical location of the regions. For example, the southern Zhambyl region was part of the northern cluster. The regions of Central and Western Kazakhstan were connected with it in one subcluster (Figure 1)



**Figure 1.** Dendrogram of the regions of Kazakhstan based on the characteristics of the social group of CCT recipients, 2018

Source: compiled by the authors

In 2022-2023, there is a clear geographical grouping with the identification of a type that has a clear agglomeration link (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Dendrogram of the regions of Kazakhstan based on the characteristics of the social group of CCT recipients, 2023

Source: compiled by the authors

Two clusters have formed, within each of them there are two subclusters. Cluster No. 1 includes 64% of the territory of Kazakhstan and 18% of CCT recipients. Subcluster 1.1 includes three regions that can be considered the northern arc: Kostanay, Pavlodar and North Kazakhstan regions. Subcluster 1.2 included the eastern, one western and two central regions of Kazakhstan. Cluster No. 2 includes 36% of the territory and 82% of CCT recipients. Subcluster 2.1 was made up of the agglomerations of the cities of Astana, Almaty, Shymkent, Aktobe and Kzyl-Orda regions. Subcluster 2.2 consisted of three southern and two western regions, which concentrate 54.2% of all recipients in Kazakhstan.

To clarify the characteristics of the resulting cluster distribution, we undertook a comparative analysis of the arithmetic mean value of the program indicators for the cluster with the average value of a specific indicator for the country. When analyzing specific demographic characteristics of a family, cardinal differences between clusters are revealed:

- In the first cluster, all demographic characteristics are below the national average. (Table 1)
- In the second cluster they are either close to the national average (subcluster 2.1, columns 4-8), or above the average (subcluster 2.2, columns 4.5).

The cluster distribution was determined by the demographic parameters of the population of recipients in the regions. Subcluster 1.1 differs from subcluster 1.2 in lower values of a number of indicators of the demographic block. This applies to family size; number of children in the family; number of caregivers; number of able-bodied family members; the number of people employed at the time of applying for help. In terms of the number of full-time students at the post-secondary level and the number of unemployed, the subclusters coincide. Subcluster 1.1 is the most problematic in terms of employment, as its “number of unemployed” and “those with a job at the time of application” indicators are worse than the national average. At the same time, it is characterized by high activity of measures to promote employment (per family), above the national average indicators of active measures of employment and placement of

persons in permanent jobs (per 1 able-bodied person). As well as the country's highest rate of professional training and advanced training per 1 able-bodied person.

In subcluster 1.2, some employment indicators are slightly worse. This applies to the indicator "the number of persons involved in active employment measures" and "the employment of persons in a permanent workplace". In general, for cluster 1, it can be said that a lower level of demographic burden on the family is combined with the highest number of students in the country continuing their education after school, which emphasizes the focus of support measures on children's human capital. The higher unemployment rate in these regions compared to the national average is combined with more intensive measures to promote employment.

Subcluster 2.1 has a number of demographic indicators at the national average (family size; number of children; number of people with jobs), but for all other indicators it is characterized by a level below average. The number of unemployed per family is two times lower than the national average, and the number of people with jobs in this cluster is higher than in other subclusters and the national regional average. This confirms the hypothesis of a low level of wages with high employment and an average demographic load, in which working family members cannot provide an average per capita income at the poverty line. The reasons for this may be both the low qualifications of workers, which does not allow them to increase their wages, and the high cost of living characteristic of large cities and agglomerations. This subcluster contains all the growing agglomerations of Kazakhstan and the Kyzylorda region with its oil producing companies. In the same subcluster, there is a deviation of the indicators of active employment measures by more than two times from the national average. Another unfavorable deviation is the lower activity of recipients in the field of post-school education, apparently associated with an early job search.

Subcluster 2.2 is the undisputed leader in terms of average family size, the number of children in the family, the number of able-bodied people and carers. In terms of the number of unemployed; number of people with jobs; and also in terms of employment promotion indicators, the cluster is slightly above or equal to the average. The exception is the indicator of professional training per able-bodied family member, which is almost two times less than the national average. It is obvious that the focus on large families, large families and a high dependent burden on the family are not combined with high economic activity of the population, which is to a certain extent related to the economic environment. In the western regions (Atyrau and Mangystrau regions) this is specialization in oil production and the predominance of large corporations with little development of other types of activities. And in the southern regions (Almaty and Zhambyl regions, Turkestan) agricultural orientation dominates, a focus on self-employment with unstable and insufficient income. The southern regions are characterized by a surplus labor market with a chronic excess of labor supply over demand.

## 4. DISCUSSION

We agree with the opinion of do Vale (2021) and Cuesta (2007), who substantiated in their works the ability of the instrument of conditional cash transfers to ensure the targeting of social protection to target groups of the population. Evaluating the results of the program over time confirms the positive impact on children's human capital, because the probability of having full-time students in the family increased by 1.5% in the medium term. Similar results were shown in studies by Meza-Cordero & Gulemetova (2023).

At the same time, we believe that there is a need to strengthen the transformative role of the program in terms of developing the human capital of children and parents, using the experience discussed in the study by Meza-Cordero and Gulemetova (2023).

We are close to the view that the results of a program certainly depend on the quality of its management (De Venanzi, 2022; Boko et al., 2023). We are alarmed by the trends identified in the agglomerations of Kazakhstan, which can be diagnosed by the proxy indicator "continuation of education after school." In agglomerations, the proportion of children in a family continuing education is lower than the national average. Combined with the fact that working parents cannot provide an average per capita income above the poverty line, this is caused by economic reasons, but cannot be justified in the long term.

We are confident that the regional characteristics of the program are of fundamental importance, as reflected in the works of Huang X., Gao Q. (2017) and Béland D. et al. (2017). Targeting effectiveness clearly varies from one region to another, as stated by Nasri K. (2022). This may be indicated by indicators of chronic poverty or staying in the program for more than 3 years. Unfortunately, in Kazakhstan such data is not provided in open sources of information and, apparently, the problem requires a separate study. Although there are no technical barriers to such research, digital databases of beneficiaries are becoming uniform across years.

**Table 1.** Correlation of average values of specific indicators (per family/one able-bodied person) by subcluster with the national average, 2023

Clusters	Subclusters	Territorial units	Average family size *	Amount of children	Number of full-time students (after school)	Number of able-bodied people	Persons caring for children, disabled people, the elderly	Number of unemployed	Number of people employed per family	Persons involved in active forms of employment	Active employment measures	Employment of persons in permanent jobs	Professional training
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1 C l u s t e r	Subcluster 1.1	Kostanay, Pavlodar, North Kazakhstan	4,7	2,8	0,24	1,53	0,45	0,16	0,92	0,25	0,16	0,11	2,9
	Subcluster 1.2	Akmola, East Kazakhstan, Karaganda, West Kazakhstan	5,1	3,7	0,24	1,61	0,5	0,16	0,94	0,22	0,14	0,07	2,3
2 C l u s t e r	Subcluster 2.1	Almaty city, Astana city, Shymkent city, Kyzylorda, Aktauibinsk	5,5	3,6	0,18	1,7	0,58	0,06	1,07	0,1	0,06	0,03	0,9
	Subcluster 2.2	Almaty, Atyrau, Mangistau, Turkestan, Zhambyl	5,9	3,8	0,22	1,74	0,63	0,15	0,98	0,28	0,16	0,1	0,6
National average			5,4	3,6	0,19	1,73	0,6	0,12	1,01	0,24	0,14	0,1	1,0

\* Indicators in columns 4-11 are calculated per family, in columns 12.13 per able-bodied person, column 14 per 1000 able-bodied people

\*\*White color of the cell – the average value of the indicator for the subcluster is below the national average, dark color of the cell – above the national average

## CONCLUSION

Over the reviewed period from 2018 to 2023, the program increased its focus on large families with children, including an increase in the specific indicator of “full-time students after school education,” which indicates improved conditions for the formation of children’s human capital. If in 2018, per 100 families, 12 children continued their education after school, then in 2023, 19 children. One of the significant consequences was the exclusion of persons with disabilities and pensioners from the program brackets with a parallel increase in categorical basic transfers for them. Of these categories, only members of large families, in which the average per capita income does not reach the poverty line, remained in the program, but the size of these groups is statistically insignificant.

The most controversial from the point of view of assessing the results of the program is the significant increase in the probability of the presence in the family of people who are employed at the time of application from 32% to 58%. Since such persons are entitled to receive assistance, it is obvious that the level of their wages does not allow the family to go beyond the poverty line. That is, the problem is both the low qualifications and wages of such participants, and the insufficient level of benefits for children and caregivers, since they are the dominant groups. A negative phenomenon can be considered a decrease in the intensity of active measures to promote employment: in 2018, a person from every third family was involved, and in 2023 only from every fourth.

The organizational and managerial indicators of the associated employment program, designed for one able-bodied family member, have negative dynamics. The specific indicator of able-bodied persons sent for vocational training and advanced training, which, given the current picture, should be the leading measures, decreased by twenty times compared to 2018.

Over the period, there has been a decrease in the coefficient of variation between regions according to the socio-demographic parameters of recipients, i.e. a vector of increasing homogeneity or decreasing heterogeneity appears for all specific indicators per family, except for persons involved in active employment measures.

As for the specific indicators per able-bodied person, all employment projects across regions show pronounced heterogeneity, which increased in 2023 compared to 2018. The increase in heterogeneity reflects both different rates of economic development of regions and different effects of organizational and managerial efforts in the employment program.

Using cluster and economic-statistical analysis, three types of regional profiles of Kazakhstani recipients have been identified, which have become established in 2022-2023. The profiles are clearly linked to the economic space and types of demographic behavior.

The first type (cluster No. 1) includes all regions of the northern border (except for the Aktobe region), central and eastern regions, which constitutes approximately 20% of the target group. The social subgroup is characterized by low or low demographic parameters relative to the national average, calculated per family. This type is characterized by specific unemployment per family above average, but high participation in employment measures, including vocational training. Since a number of industrial enterprises are planned to be localized in these regions in the near future, the number of this subgroup will most likely decline. The subgroup is characterized by the highest number of full-time students, which is certainly a positive phenomenon.

The second type (cluster No. 2, subcluster 2.1) is represented by large and developing agglomerations of Kazakhstan, which are characterized by demographic behavior corresponding to the average for the entire group of recipients in Kazakhstan. The group includes about 30% of conditional cash transfer recipients. A pronounced feature of the subgroup is the extremely low rate of unemployed and the high number of persons with wages per family. This, in our opinion, indicates the low qualifications of working people, whose wages cannot provide an average per capita income at the level of the poverty line for a family. Since prices in large agglomerations are usually higher than in other regions, it is more difficult to ensure a living wage. Active employment measures in this subgroup are calculated in scanty values, because formally able-bodied persons work. We believe that it would be advisable to offer vocational training and advanced training for people in this group to move to another job and increase their wages. The lower

proportion of full-time students than in other subgroups is of concern, which may be due to early job searches by young people.

The third type (cluster No. 2, subcluster 2.2) is represented by five regions with a high level of demographic behavior indicators, which together make up about 50% of recipients and this group tends to increase its share in the program. The subgroup is characterized by an above-average level of specific unemployment and a slightly below-average rate of people with jobs. In this type, there is also the problem of low qualifications of employees with low wages and the problem of unemployment. In terms of employment promotion indicators, the cluster is slightly higher than or equal to the average, but the indicator of professional training per able-bodied person is the lowest, which characterizes the economic environment as a whole. Large corporations in Kazakhstan's oil-bearing regions in the west of the country set high prices for consumer goods in the region, but other activities are not actively developing. Perhaps a solution could be the development of cross-sector partnerships between local governments, corporations and the non-profit sector in order to enhance social entrepreneurship and corporate volunteering. The southern regions are traditionally labor-abundant and it is necessary to more strongly encourage the relocation of those wishing to the central and northern regions. For these regions, it is advisable to give local governments the right in some cases to replace cash transfers with services. Replacing a cash transfer with subsidizing the services of a preschool institution is better aimed at building the child's human capital.

Further research will be devoted to clarifying the results based on sociological surveys of recipients, program operators, and experts.

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