

MEASURING THE LIVING WAGE IN THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

Theoretical and Methodological Aspects

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Abstract: During the current period of formation of a new economic system, measuring the poverty line and living wage is being given added relevance in the Republic Kazakhstan. The national living wage is used to assess annually the standard of living and determine the poverty line; establish specific strands of social policy and measures aimed at social support for the population; set a rationale for establishing the minimum size of wages, pensions, benefit allowances, and other social disbursements. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the way to measure the living wage in the Republic of Kazakhstan and through comparison with international practices develop practical recommendations on reducing poverty in this country. The major outcomes of the authors' research study are a set of inferences and practical recommendations on reducing poverty in the Republic of Kazakhstan – in particular, proposals on expanding the size of the living wage, reforming wages, and working out a targeted state program for concessional lending to the economically disadvantaged to help them start their own business.

Keywords: Poverty, living wage, social policy, poverty line, absolute poverty, relative poverty.

INTRODUCTION

In terms of GDP (at purchasing power parity) per capita, Kazakhstan has been on the list of the richest countries among the former Soviet republics. In 2016, the nation, with a GDP (PPP) per capita of \$24,176.91, was ranked 5th on the above list by the International Monetary Fund and 56th globally.

There is no European nation that is currently ranking among the world's poorest countries. However, when it comes to the poorest nation in Europe, it happens to be a former Soviet republic – the Republic of Moldova, with a GDP (PPP) per capita of \$5,082.09. Likewise, low figures have been exhibited by the post-Soviet nations of Central Asia: Uzbekistan (\$6,359.83), Kyrgyzstan (\$3,466.82), and Tajikistan (\$2,800.83).

A great many foreign researchers have shown that the level of the living wage may vary by country, culture, and a region's or city's development level, for which reason it appears to be impossible to establish a universally applicable and fair global living wage (Anker, 2011; Belser & Sobeck, 2012; Boeri, 2009; Allan & Scruggs, 2004; Ravallion, 2010; Pritchett, 2006).

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Even across a group of high-income countries it is hard to use the same poverty line, since there are differences in food choices, the way things are priced, and climatic conditions.

The need to establish the real living wage and poverty line is governed by the fact that different states have totally incommensurable norms of consumption of food and nonfood items and services.

Poverty is grounded in income inequality, brought about by one's inability to generate an income that would ensure the proper reproduction of one's labor power. Furthermore, this reproduction ought to meet the key condition: the income generated must ensure the proper subsistence of the worker's family and match the real size of the living wage.

Most countries across the globe have been following the path of developing several lines of poverty which are based on different methodological grounds but are not inconsistent and are quite tenable for resolving a certain array of issues.

In an attempt to ensure proper national monitoring, the nations within the EU and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have used the relative poverty line, which is defined based on the median income (Kakwani & Son, 2016).

However, in every country it is political expediency that always determines the ways to reduce inequality in income distribution and overcome serious deviations from prevalent life standards and limitations in the choice of life opportunities (deprivations) and, consequently, governs the choice of methods for assessing poverty.

The practical determination of the poverty line (the income level which separates individuals whom the state deems to be poor and provides with aid from all other "non-poor" citizens) appears to be based on a political compromise between various "groups of interests" within the ruling elite.

Also, some foreign authors equate the concept of a living wage with absolute poverty (Anker, 2011; Layard, 2006; Market Watch, 2010), and others with relative poverty (Lewinsohn, Rohde, Hops, & Clarke, 1991; Gentilini & Sumner, 2012).

R. Anker associates the living wage with absolute poverty and provides the following definitions: "The poverty line is the income necessary for a household to afford a low-cost nutritious diet and non-food necessities at levels considered acceptable in a given country; the living wage is the hourly wage rate required to support a household at the poverty line" (Anker, 2011).

An analysis of relative poverty indicates that poverty exists not only in low-income countries but also in other countries where the minimum wage is much higher than the poverty line established by the World Bank.

Even in the majority of developed countries the minimum wage is steadily lower than the living wage (Sumner, 2010; Layard, 2006), and there is a trend

toward increase in poverty levels in medium-income countries (Sumner, 2012; Andreoni, 1989).

A. Werner and M. Lim have presented the historical, philosophical, and economic contexts of the concept of a living wage, spanning from the works of ancient Greek philosophers and medieval scholars to modern-day teachings. According to the above authors, “the decline of a comprehensive and generous welfare system casts government in a different relationship to both businesses and wider society, and hands them a different remit with regards to ensuring that citizens do not have to live in poverty”. In addition, they are convinced that understanding the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the living wage is a vital step towards “social equality, fairness and poverty alleviation” (Werner & Lim, 2016).

In the view of D. Altig and S.J. Davis, the absolute poverty line ought to be established as behavior patterns and the nature of people’s needs that change endogenously as economic systems develop (Altig & Davis, 1989).

The above authors also suggest that a monetary approach to poverty is just one of the possible dimensions of such a multi-faceted phenomenon as poverty and cannot be applied for international comparisons.

In other words, according to the above authors, there is no “international” poverty line that could be used for all countries if it does not represent the living-standard needs and minimums that are acceptable in every country.

Furthermore, the poverty line (the minimum consumption basket) and minimum standards of living should be periodically reassessed each year.

The idea of the absolute poverty line appears to be better than that of the relative poverty line, since with the relative poverty line you do not compare between countries and measure income distribution as opposed to the lack of affordability of the minimum standard of living in a given society, which has also been established in much of the literature, while the absolute poverty line cannot be invariable.

Therefore, in the opinion of the above authors, it is worth developing a method for measuring poverty that is predicated on people’s main needs, i.e. use a social hardship matrix as opposed to the monetary poverty line.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the way to measure the living wage in the Republic of Kazakhstan and, based on international comparisons, come up with practical recommendations on reducing poverty in the country.

METHODS

The methodological and theoretical basis of the study is made up of concepts and views brought forward by leading scholars and the theory of the living wage, dealing with issues related to income and living wage. The authors make a critical use of existing methodologies for assessing the income and living wage of the

population. The paper employs a variety of methods and techniques for economic research: comparative, grouping, graphic, computational, monographic, statistical, and selective observation. As part of this study of the living wage in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the authors employ a set of theoretical cognition methods (hypothetical-deductive and the method of ascending from the abstract to the concrete), logical methods (analysis and synthesis, abstracting, analogy, and a systemic approach), as well as a set of sociological research methods:

- documentation analysis;
- questionnaire surveys;
- expert surveys;
- unstructured interviews;
- the self-identification and deprivation method.

RESULTS

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, measuring poverty and the size of the living wage takes on added relevance during a period characterized by transformations in society and inconsistent economic reforms, as well as new mechanisms for control over economic stability being introduced and tested.

Based on data from the Committee on Statistics of the Ministry of the National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in 2016 the share of the population with income levels below the living wage was just 2.2% (Committee on Statistics of the Ministry of the National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016).

In Kazakhstan, they normally use the size of the living wage or the size of its food-related portion as a key criterion for absolute poverty.

Depending on the objectives in assessing poverty, one may also use the relative poverty line, which may be established as a percentage (40%, 50%, 60%, or 75%) of the size of one's median income (expenditure) or consumption levels.

In Kazakhstan, the Law on the Living Wage established the legal basis for the determination and use of the living wage. In particular, it provides the following definitions: 1) the living wage is necessary minimum cash income per person which is equal to the cost of the minimum consumption basket; 2) the minimum consumption basket is a minimum set of goods and services in physical and monetary terms (*Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan o Prozhitochnom Minimume*, 1999).

The minimum income (the living wage), minimum wage, and minimum retirement pension are among the key measures guaranteed by the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the population based on the social-economic development level achieved by the nation. The living wage and the consumption basket are two sides of the same thing, which is the minimum amount of money

necessary for a person to live. The difference is that the “basket” expresses the natural side (a roster of food items, as well as of necessary goods and services), while the living wage represents the monetary side of it (their price).

Kazakhstan’s National Statistics Agency conducts monthly assessments of the cost of the basket in local (regional) prices, as well as makes monthly adjustments to the living wage by reference to inflation and changes in the prices for food, goods, and services. A basket-based approach to determining the living wage is employed in Russia, Kazakhstan, and some other countries. The consumption (food) basket was introduced in Kazakhstan in the 1990s. At first, it was not intended to measure poverty levels, as officially there was no “poverty” back then. The food consumption basket is calculated not only based on the amount of a certain product but based on the amount of proteins, fats, and carbohydrates needed to provide for the body’s physiological needs by reference to people’s age, gender, and eating habits at different times of the year.

Right now, the consumption basket includes 43 basic food items (e.g., bread, flour, cereal grains, macaroni, vegetables, fruits, beef, fish, milk, butter and vegetable oil, eggs, sugar, tea, salt, and spices), and as a percentage of the minimum consumption basket that is 60%.

The remaining 40% is expenditure on nonfood items (utility bills, transportation expenses, expenditure on clothing, footwear, medication, and personal hygiene products).

The current total consumption basket does not fully reflect all necessary expenditure, with, for instance, one’s utility bills and transportation expenses constituting a sizable portion of one’s expenditure.

Theoretically, the nonfood basket consists of utility bills, transportation expenses, and expenditure on clothing, footwear, medication, and personal hygiene products. But in reality the nonfood basket indicator has a nominal nature and accounts for 40% of the overall level of the food basket.

In Kazakhstan, the poverty line is the threshold of income needed to satisfy one’s minimum needs established in the Republic depending on its economic potential (Committee on Statistics of the Ministry of the National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015).

Right now, the Republic’s poverty line for providing social aid constitutes 40% of the living wage.

To explore the living wage, the authors conducted a sociological study. The instrumentarium for this sociological study was a questionnaire composed of 24 queries. The questions reflected the following topical units:

- affordability of the minimum norms of consumption of basic food items;
- affordability of nonfood goods;

- affordability of services;
- factors impeding improvement in one's material status;
- social-demographic.

For the purposes of the survey, the roster of the minimum norms of consumption of basic food, consisting of 43 food items and representing the food basket, was slightly modified, with certain items subsumed into relevant groups of food items, to, eventually, end up featuring 21 items.

The first topical questionnaire unit, dealing with the affordability of the minimum norms of consumption of basic food items, elicited the following distribution of answers: respondents from the stratum of the economically disadvantaged citizens (77.3%) stated "I can afford the entire set of food items listed", while those from the stratum of the poor (18.2%) responded "I can afford only a certain portion of the set of food items listed". From the stratum of the poor, 57.1% stated they could not afford 7 food items from the set of items listed: sausage products and rennet cheese, meat (pork, beef, lamb, and horse meat), fruits and berries, by products (liver), fish, and poultry. Among the lower stratum of the middle class, 4.5% stated "I can afford all the items listed plus other products".

The findings of the authors' analysis indicate that most of the low-income population (77.3%) could afford all the food items listed above, and 4.5% of this segment could even afford some extra items. In particular, the study has identified the following affordability indicators for each of the basket categories. Regarding the affordability of food items, rural residents were found to be able to afford the entire set of items listed to a lesser degree than their urban counterparts, with 62.0% able to afford it only partially as opposed to 53.5% among urbanites. In addition, those employed in agriculture who could afford the set of items listed only partially and belonged to the stratum of the poor constituted 75.0%, with just 25.0% belonging to the stratum of the disadvantaged and able to afford the entire set of items listed. Within the stratum of the poor who could afford the above set of items only partially, the majority (75.0% to 100%) are retired citizens, the unemployed, and students. In respect of the affordability of nonfood items, the authors obtained the following distribution of answers: 54.5% said they had the full capacity to provide their family with seasonal clothing and footwear, and 45.5% said they could do it partially. The capacity to provide one's family with seasonal clothing and footwear depends on the number of children in the family. 90.9% of respondents said they had the capacity to fully meet the needs of their children in the way of clothing and footwear, while just 9.1% confessed to not being able to do that.

Compared with the urban population (43.0%), just 15.0% of rural residents were found to have the full capacity to provide their family with seasonal clothing and footwear. 86.4% were found to have the capacity to purchase household supplies

and personal hygiene products (soap, laundry detergent, toothpaste, shampoo, etc.), which qualify as the minimum social indicators, while 13.6% said they could not afford most of these goods.

Below are the minimum social indicators which provide a sound characterization of the stratum of the poor. 100% said they could take care of their telephone-related expenses in full. 95.5% stated they had the capacity to pay for the use of transportation (buses, street-cars, etc.) inside the city, while 4.5% said they did not. 77.3% confessed to being able to pay their utility bills on time and in full, while 22.7% of respondents said they could only pay for certain utility services.

The study's next unit intended to help set the low-income strata of the population apart from the medium-income ones is the affordability of paid services.

This makes it possible to determine the real threshold of poverty based on the degree of satisfaction of people's basic needs for services, determine the real size of the minimum consumption basket, and, based on that, gauge the sociological differentiation of poverty.

The roster of services includes healthcare services, educational services, and the ability to attend cultural activities (movies, theater, concerts, etc.) and leave their hometown on vacation. 40.9% of respondents said they could afford all of the above services, while 50.0% stated they could afford only some of them. 4.5% of respondents said they had the capacity to afford more services in addition to what was on the list. Finally, likewise, 4.5% of respondents from the stratum of the poor stated they could not afford any of the services listed.

In terms of the inability to afford certain paid services, the results were the following:

- 18.2% could not afford paid healthcare services and medication, 27.3% – educational services, and 45.4% – attending cultural activities;
- 100% could not afford leaving their hometown on vacation.

Thus, as a result of ranking the low-income population, the authors identified 2 major strata (layers): the disadvantaged and the poor.

81.8% of low-income respondents (the stratum of the disadvantaged) were found to have the capacity to afford the entire roster of food items listed and some of the nonfood goods and services.

18.2% of low-income respondents (the stratum of the poor) were found to be unable to afford the minimum norms of consumption of basic items and able to afford only partially or unable to afford most of the nonfood goods and services.

The study also investigated the factors hindering providing for the minimum standard of people's needs. Figure 1 displays a set of such factors identified via a subjective assessment.

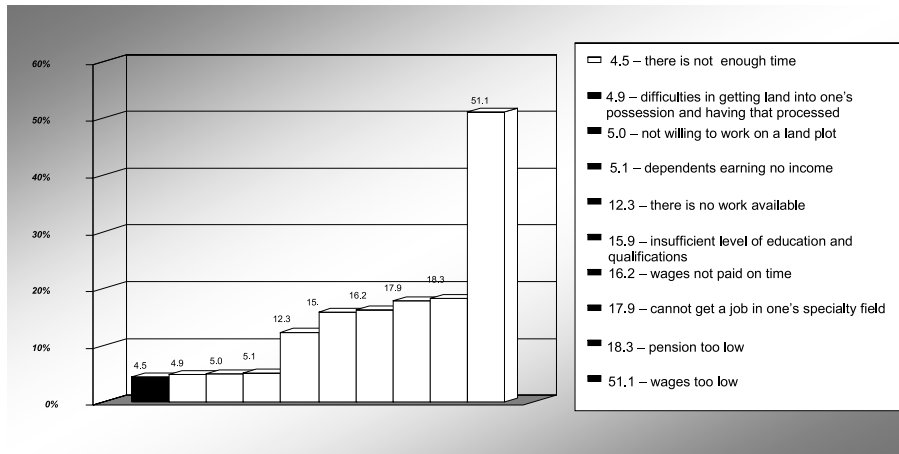


Figure 1: Factors that hinder providing for the minimum standard of needs

In the view of respondents, the most salient causes of poverty are: low wages (51.1%), low pensions (18.3%), shortage of work in one's specialty field (17.9%), delays in paying wages (16.2%), and lack of education and qualifications (15.9%).

An important element in the analysis of the stratum of the low-income population is the affordability of housing.

The authors' sociological measurement of the above parameter revealed that 4.5% of the low-income population do not own a dwelling and have to rent a place from a landlord. 77.3% were found to own an apartment or a house. Among those who owned a place, 72.7% were found to be able to afford having partial repairs made to their dwelling, and just 27.3% said they could afford the complete repair.

An accessible way to effectively combat poverty among the low-income population is lending. 77.3% confessed to having taken out a loan. Among these residents, 41.2% said they had borrowed money to purchase durable goods (e.g., a fridge, a TV set, a washing machine), 13.6% – to go somewhere on vacation, 17.6% – to purchase a car or get a mortgage for a dwelling, 5.9% – to purchase clothing, and 6.0% – to get an education. 22.7% said they had never taken out any loans.

Listed among the major reasons some of the respondents had never taken out a loan were the following: low wages (40.0%), high interest rates (40.0%), and a lack of steady income (20.0%).

The majority of those within the low-income category were distinguished by social optimism. Thus, for instance, to the question 'Do you think there will be an improvement in your quality of life in the near future?' 72.7% of respondents

replied ‘Yes, we do. Things will improve’, while 27.3% had difficulty answering the question.

The respondents listed the following major reasons behind their inability to fully afford the minimum consumption basket and social activities: low wages (50.0%), a low pension (13.6%), and shortage of work in one’s specialty field (4.5%);

The majority of the disadvantaged portion of the population evinced social optimism and confidence in an improvement in their quality of life expected in the near future.

DISCUSSION

Having summarized the results of their sociological study on differentiating the low-income (disadvantaged) portion of the population, the authors came up with the following inferences and practical recommendations on reducing poverty levels:

- there is a need to further correlate social stratification and market reforms undertaken, determine social positions and ranks within the social hierarchy pyramid, and work out a program for stabilizing the social-economic transformations achieved;
- there is a need to put together a new model for the socialization and adaptation of the low-income population under conditions of undertaken social-economic reforms and the making of new economic, political, and professional stratification;
- it is worth instituting as the primary social standard the minimum consumption budget (instead of the living wage), which appears to be more objective in terms of determining the necessary level of needs, or use the normative method to calculate the living wage;
- it is worth considering reforming national wages, putting in place a minimum wage as a really significant quantity for reproducing manpower, and indexing income that is below the official poverty line;
- it is worth working out a targeted state program for concessional lending to the disadvantaged with a view to helping these citizens start a business and be able to purchase consumer goods they may need right away or for some other purposes – the ultimate purpose being the boosting of people quality of life; it may also be worth providing poor rural families with the opportunity to take out interest-free loans;
- it is worth adapting the labor market to the conditions of social-economic transformation and the needs associated with the social-economic division of labor in the Republic of Kazakhstan.
- to reduce the size of the strata of the disadvantaged and poor, it is worth creating the right conditions for boosting the education and qualifications

levels of the low-income population stratum through making each stage of education affordable for representatives of this stratum.

Thus, one of the major causes of poverty is low wages. The poor portion of the population includes a major portion of the republic's working population. There is a need to increase the size of the minimum wage to the size of the rational consumption budget and direct some attention to improving the status of wage workers.

Kazakhstan has already embarked on the path of conducting purposeful activity on overcoming poverty. Reducing poverty levels is among the top-priority areas in the national 'Strategy for Development through to 2010' and the 'Kazakhstan-2050' strategy. To help reduce poverty levels, the nation has passed a number of laws and made a number of amendments to existing social legislation aimed at reducing the republic's poverty levels. Poverty is viewed not only from the viewpoint of income but also in terms of opportunities that society could provide citizens with to prevent their relegation to the status of the poor.

An example of an integrated approach to reducing poverty are specific government programs on combating poverty and unemployment. Among the positive characteristics of these programs are that they set out a clear-cut definition of the poverty line and provide a detailed substantiation of goals, objectives, and mechanisms underlying the reduction of the size of the poor population. The strengths of these programs also include proposing a specific plan of relevant activities and clearly defined time frames for implementation.

It is worth noting that a lot of attention has been paid to the importance of people being informed of the integrated nature of poverty, its causes, and possible ways of overcoming it. Real progress in reducing poverty levels can be achieved only through the concerted efforts of the state, private sector, and civil society.

While the government's job is to develop policies aimed at reducing poverty and a relevant legal framework, as well as monitoring and assessing poverty, local authorities are fully responsible for the efficiency of the state's policy locally in the regions.

The most efficient social policy is the policy of sustainable employment, which is determined not by the needs of the social strata but by the preparation of hardworking citizens.

CONCLUSION

The current decline in the level of polarization of the income of social groups is the result of the state policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which reflects the concept of the social protection of the population as a system of ensuring the affordability of essential goods and a proper level of well-being for people who, on account of certain circumstances (e.g., old age, health issues, loss of one's primary breadwinner,

loss of one's job, and other legal grounds), are unable to become economically active and earn an income by taking part in decently paid work.

It incorporates state benefit allowances, social insurance, ensuring employment, stimulating small business, housing assistance, support for needy population groups, rehabilitation work with people with disabilities and those with psychological issues, foster care, and volunteering.

The state's social policy in Kazakhstan is, thus, expressing a targeted focus on the social leveling of income among the various population groups and ensuring them the affordability of social goods.

In the literature, the distribution of households on the grounds of property ownership, which serves as the basis for economic stratification, is the principal subject matter of the analysis of the differentiation of the economic structure.

The hierarchy of the social stratification pyramid, as one of the key concepts in sociology representing a system of attributes of and criteria for social stratification and social status, contains major differences in terms of the differentiation of income and savings.

In terms of the cumulative savings criterion, economic stratification is characterized by a greater degree of economic polarization of society and, therefore, a greater distance between ranks in the social hierarchy.

Following the logic of the analysis of the economic stratification of the population, the authors have singled out people's material capacity as the main attribute, which is measured on a scale of income and relation to property, and differentiated the following: the higher stratum of the rich; the medium stratum of the well-provided-for earning income that matches the generally accepted consumption and lifestyle standards; the lower stratum of the poor, which incorporates the portion of the population earning income that is lower than the living wage; the economically disadvantaged.

Over the last decade, Kazakhstan, as an independent state, has witnessed the formation of three major independent economic strata: the rich, the middle class, and the poor. There has been taking place the process of their proportional making in the direction of social stability, i.e. the economic profile has been taking on a diamond shape.

The authors' study of the standard of living of the low-income portion of the population based on subjective assessments of the affordability of the minimum consumption basket and minimum social indicators has revealed a high degree of differentiation among the low-income portion of the population, which may require regulating by the government.

Thus, poverty issues remain topical. The nation is witnessing further polarization of the population and the making of a new type of social stratification. Among the

government's major ways to control the issue of poverty and increase the middle-class stratum at the regional level are special programs for combating unemployment and targeted social aid.

The author's investigation into a set of issues related to the living wage for the low-income portion of the population and empirical indicators for measuring it has helped gain a proper insight into the current situation with poverty and develop a set of relevant practical recommendations on reducing poverty levels across the nation.

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