

# Improving health and education

Ambitious welfare policies result in improving living standards

Over the last two decades of Kazakhstan's independence, sustained economic growth has been accompanied by ambitious and far-reaching social and cultural policies resulting in significant and sustained increases in the living standards and quality of life of the country's 16 million people.

## Health

Government spending on health increased threefold between 2004 and 2010, a period that saw the introduction of a unified National Health System with medical provision for low-income households. Progress has been made in providing remote regions through two specific programs. The latest health program, to run from 2011 until 2015 reflects the continuing efforts of the administration of President Nursultan Nazarbayev to improve the wellbeing of Kazakhstan's people.

As Prime Minister Karim Massimov pointed out to the Kazakh Parliament earlier this year when the latest health program was announced, its principal aim is to strengthen coordination between different sectors of the economy and between government ministries and agencies.

## Education and development

The country's institutions of higher learning have benefited from a decade of unprecedented economic growth. Motivated by the desire to avoid the so-called Dutch Disease – in which some sectors of the economy are left behind while a country experiences a boom thanks to its much sought-after natural resources – Kazakhstan's government introduced an ambitious program of reforms in the mid-1990s with the goal of entering the club of the 50 most developed nations within the next decade.

In 2001, the government introduced a decade-long initiative to develop education, which was later extended until 2020. In 2008 alone, Astana channelled around US\$4.7 billion into education. The list of the changes introduced in education in general, and in higher education in particular, has been impressive. The country's universities have emerged much stronger and healthier as a result, with higher salaries and educational state funding for research and development helping to attract and retain experienced educators and administrators. Standards have been improved with

the introduction of the Unified National Test, roughly similar to the SAT test in the United States. Among the most important changes have been the decentralization of the education system and the introduction of private education, which allowed additional funding to be raised by accepting fee-paying students to state and private universities across the nation. Fee-paying students constitute a substantial proportion of the student population of about 180,000 in all 140 universities in Kazakhstan; these fees have helped fund many ambitious projects and hire new faculty staff, with the result of acquiring new technologies and introducing new courses and classes.

## Language policy

More than 60 per cent of the population of Kazakhstan are ethnic Kazakhs, with Russians making up a further quarter – although in some regions that figure is much higher, particularly in the north of the country, which borders with Russia. Kazakh was introduced as the official language in 1997, although Russian is constitutionally protected as being equal with Kazakh in Government institutions. Recognizing that the Kazakh language is a key factor in creating national unity, and that a developed language culture represents the intellectual potential of the nation, the government has implemented successive programs to develop the linguistic capital of Kazakhstanis.

Over the last two decades, state revenues have increased greatly, giving Kazakhstan the opportunity to raise budget funding for education and public health services, and to increase wages in the public sector. A network of social support for the population has been created in the country, including social support for vulnerable groups in the population, specifically children and large families. Despite the current global economic downturn, Kazakhstan's Government has made clear its commitment to common standards of language proficiency and teaching of the official language, while strengthening the role of media in the language environment through the creation of television and radio stations broadcasting in the state language. It will also support the preservation of the Russian language, creating favourable conditions for the study and preservation of languages of other ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan while providing support for learning English and other foreign languages. E

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