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STATE SUPPORT AND BARRIERS TO SME AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT: EVIDENCE FROM AKMOLA REGION

Abstract

This study examines how small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) entrepreneurs in the Akmola region perceive government support measures and identifies systemic barriers that hinder business development, including within the social entrepreneurship sector. The methodological framework is based on two focus group discussions involving representatives of various business types, including social enterprises. The use of purposive sampling and semi-structured discussions allowed for a thorough understanding of entrepreneurs' subjective assessments, identification of key problem areas, and analysis of their interactions with government support instruments. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach of Braun and Clarke, which allowed the identification of nine major thematic problem areas, including administrative barriers, difficulties in accessing credit, grant financing constraints, infrastructure limitations, and challenges specific to social entrepreneurship. The findings suggest that official statistics on the number of SMEs do not always reflect their actual economic sustainability, while existing institutional support mechanisms are often perceived as formal, fragmented, and insufficiently accessible, particularly for microenterprises and rural businesses. Social entrepreneurs, in particular, emphasize the high value of obtaining official status but highlight excessive bureaucratic requirements and the limited applicability of current eligibility criteria. The scientific significance of the study lies in conducting a qualitative regional analysis of the development of SMEs and social entrepreneurship in the Akmola region, which allows us to supplement existing quantitative studies with empirical data on the practical experience of entrepreneurs. From a practical perspective, the results may inform policymakers and regional development institutions by highlighting critical gaps between formal support mechanisms and real business needs. The study offers targeted recommendations aimed at improving the transparency, accessibility, and adaptability of government support instruments, with particular attention to the needs of microbusinesses and rural areas, thereby contributing to more inclusive and sustainable regional economic development.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship, small and medium-sized enterprises, government support, focus groups, development barriers, regional development, public policy.

Introduction

The development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is widely regarded in global practice as one of the key drivers of sustainable economic growth, job creation, and enhanced social stability [1]. SMEs function not only as a source of economic activity but also as an instrument for economic diversification, unemployment reduction, and innovation stimulation. Under conditions of global economic uncertainty and digital transformation, the role of small and medium-sized businesses becomes particularly significant, as flexible and innovation-oriented enterprises are better positioned to adapt rapidly to changing market conditions and evolving social needs.

The theoretical basis of this study is the concept of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, according to which the development of small and medium-sized businesses is determined not only by financial resources but also by the quality of the institutional environment, the availability of infrastructure, the level of trust in government institutions, and opportunities for interaction between market participants. Within this approach, social entrepreneurship is viewed as an element of the regional ecosystem, contributing to both the economic and social development of the region [1]. It is important to note that the resilience of small businesses during periods of turbulence is directly correlated with the quality of the institutional environment. In the context of structural economic changes, SMEs act as a kind of shock absorber, mitigating the social impact of crises through their high operational agility and ability to quickly reallocate resources to the most in-demand niches.

According to entrepreneurial ecosystem theory [2], the sustainability of small businesses depends on the systemic interaction of six key areas: policy, finance, culture, support, human capital, and markets. In developing countries, institutional asymmetries often lead to “fragmented ecosystems”, where financial injections (e.g., grants) fail to deliver long-term benefits due to weak support institutions and market infrastructure. Therefore, this study uses an ecosystem approach to examine how regional characteristics and institutional gaps in the Akmola region distort the interactions between social entrepreneurs and local governments.

In recent years, increasing attention has been devoted to social entrepreneurship, which is a form of entrepreneurial activity that combines commercial objectives with the pursuit of social goals. Social entrepreneurship supports vulnerable population groups, contributes to the development of an inclusive economy, enhances corporate social responsibility, and fosters the formation of sustainable communities [3]. International experience demonstrates that countries with a well-developed social entrepreneurship sector tend to exhibit higher levels of social integration and economic innovation, underscoring the importance of actively promoting this form of entrepreneurship at the national level.

In Kazakhstan, social entrepreneurship is a relatively new phenomenon, yet it has demonstrated dynamic growth. As of 2025, 67 social enterprises are registered in the national registry in the Akmola region, indicating growing interest from both the population and the state in socially significant initiatives. Despite this positive trend, the region continues to face systemic barriers that constrain sectoral development. These include complex administrative procedures related to registration and reporting, limited access to financial resources, insufficient infrastructure support, and inadequate awareness among entrepreneurs regarding existing government support programs [4].

A better understanding of this issue also requires an analysis of the causes of these barriers. Specifically, entrepreneurs’ lack of awareness is often due to the lack of a single digital window for social initiatives, while difficulties with registration stem from strict criteria for eligibility for social enterprise status, which don’t always take into account the specifics of microbusinesses in remote areas.

An analysis of the SME development dynamics in the Akmola region for the 2023–2025 period demonstrates a moderate increase in the number of active business entities. However, according to data from the Bureau of National Statistics, the contribution of SMEs to the Gross Regional Product (GRP) remains unstable, fluctuating between 28% and 30%. The structural composition of regional SMEs is dominated by the service and trade sectors (exceeding 40%), while the share of manufacturing and innovative enterprises does not exceed 8% [3, 4].

According to regional entrepreneurship support programs, there has been an increase in government support, but entrepreneurs do not always associate this with improved business conditions in rural areas [5]. Research participants noted that limited support tools in rural areas may contribute to a decrease in entrepreneurial activity and increase economic dependence on large urban centers.

The relevance of this study is driven by the need for a comprehensive analysis of the state of SMEs and social entrepreneurship in the region that goes beyond quantitative indicators and incorporates qualitative aspects of business operations. Focus group discussions and interview-based methods make it possible to capture entrepreneurs’ subjective assessments, reflecting their real-world experiences in interacting with public and private support institutions, including grant financing, interest rate subsidies, credit guarantees, and consulting services. Analyzing these data allows for a comparison between formal statistical indicators and actual economic activity, thereby identifying critical gaps in the existing support system.

Accordingly, the findings of this study provide a foundation for the development of practical recommendations aimed at improving the institutional environment and fostering social entrepreneurship at the regional level. The design of effective SME support mechanisms, including those targeting social enterprises, contributes not only to economic growth but also to improvements in quality of life, the creation of a resilient social environment, and the strengthening of regional economic potential.

In general, social entrepreneurship is commonly defined as an activity oriented toward the creation of social value through sustainable economic practices [6]. This form of entrepreneurship integrates commercial objectives with social missions, enabling the simultaneous pursuit of social problem-solving and financial sustainability. Recent scholarship underscores the importance of supportive policy environments and institutional coherence in enabling social enterprises to balance social impact with financial sustainability [7]. International literature highlights a diversity of social entrepreneurship models that reflect countries' cultural, economic, and institutional contexts [8, 9]. For example, inclusive employment models aimed at integrating people with disabilities into the labor market are prevalent in Europe, while in Latin America and Africa, greater emphasis is placed on eco-entrepreneurship and initiatives focused on the sustainable use of natural resources [10].

In the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), social entrepreneurship has developed primarily through state-led initiatives, including grant support, tax incentives, and participation in national programs and social project competitions. However, research indicates that entrepreneurs often encounter limited access to information about available support measures, difficulties in demonstrating the social impact of their projects, and insufficient institutional infrastructure [11]. These constraints hinder the scaling of successful initiatives and restrict the participation of micro- and small enterprises, particularly in rural areas [12, 13]. More recent studies emphasize that institutional asymmetries and gaps between formal regulations and informal practices significantly shape entrepreneurial behavior and exacerbate barriers for SMEs in emerging economies [14].

It is also worth noting that in the CIS, trust between businesses and government agencies is a critical factor. Institutional asymmetry often manifests itself in small businesses perceiving government programs not as a development tool, but as a source of additional bureaucratic risks, which reduces the overall effectiveness of budgetary allocations.

Key areas of social entrepreneurial activity include the employment of people with disabilities, educational and cultural initiatives, environmental protection, and the provision of social services to vulnerable population groups [15]. International experience underscores that successful social enterprises rely not only on financial assistance but also on consulting, infrastructural, and educational resources, including mentoring, training programs, and engagement in professional networks and communities [16].

An analysis of domestic practice suggests that social enterprises demonstrating sustainable growth typically combine flexible organizational structures with active participation in government and regional support programs [17, 18]. These include grant competitions, interest rate subsidies, access to preferential credit, and professional consulting services [19]. A critical factor in this process is the ability to adapt international approaches to local conditions and regional specificities, taking into account labor market characteristics, infrastructure availability, and the social needs of the population.

Despite extensive international experience and the presence of successful local cases, social entrepreneurship continues to face common challenges, including information deficits, difficulties in measuring social impact, bureaucratic burdens, the need for continuous compliance with reporting requirements, and limited integration with the private sector. In Kazakhstan, existing SME and social entrepreneurship support measures, including grant financing and inclusion in the national registry of social enterprises, do not yet fully correspond to the needs of small and microenterprises, particularly in rural areas. This gap underscores the need for systematic analysis and the development of more tailored support instruments [19].

At the current stage of regional economic development, it is crucial to transition from universal support measures to customized programs that take into account the life cycle of an enterprise and the specifics of its social mission. Creating an ecosystem in which financial assistance is complemented by acceleration and access to markets will enable the transformation of social entrepreneurship from a niche phenomenon into a fully-fledged economic sector.

Therefore, the existing literature highlights the necessity of a comprehensive approach to the development of social entrepreneurship that integrates financial, institutional, and educational support. Attention to local context, infrastructural conditions, and social needs is essential for fostering sustainable and socially impactful enterprises capable of integrating into the regional economy and generating long-term positive outcomes.

The research's novelty lies in identifying specific regional barriers to SME and social entrepreneurship development in the Akmola region based on a qualitative analysis of entrepreneurs' perceptions. Unlike most existing studies, which rely primarily on statistical indicators, this work focuses on the practical experiences of business interactions with government support institutions.

Thus, this study answers the following question: How does regional institutional asymmetry distort the configuration of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (in particular, policy, financial and enabling factors) for SMEs and social enterprises in the capital region?

Materials and methods

The empirical component of the study was based on two focus discussions with 20 representatives of small and medium-sized businesses in the Akmola region, including social entrepreneurs. Ten people participated in the first focus group, and ten in the second. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, taking into account the sector of activity, legal structure of the business, geographic location, and experience with government support programs. Participants included representatives of microenterprises, small and medium-sized businesses, farms, and social enterprises operating in both urban and rural areas of the Akmola region.

Each focus group lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Discussions were conducted in a semi-structured format using a pre-prepared question guide, which covered topics such as government support, administrative barriers, access to funding, infrastructure constraints, and the specifics of social entrepreneurship. All discussions were conducted with the consent of the participants and were audio-recorded. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

The choice of a qualitative research method was driven by the need for a deep understanding of the internal decision-making processes within small businesses. Unlike quantitative surveys, focus groups allowed us to uncover hidden cause-and-effect relationships between the quality of institutional support and entrepreneurial motivation. Particular attention was paid to geographic representativeness when selecting the sample, enabling us to compare the opinions of businesspeople from the regional center and remote rural areas, revealing significant differences in infrastructure accessibility.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke's approach [20]. The analysis process included several stages as reading interview transcripts, initial open coding, grouping codes into thematic categories, formation of thematic clusters, and interpretation of the identified themes. Data analysis continued until thematic saturation was reached, at which point new discussions ceased to lead to the emergence of fundamentally new themes and categories. This ensures a high degree of reliability of the findings. During the analysis, particular attention was paid to entrepreneurs' recurring assessments related to institutional and financial barriers.

Table 1 – Socio-demographic characteristics of focus group participants

Participant category	Gender	Age	Business sector	Legal form	Location	Experience with government support
Microenterprises	5M, 2F	25–44	services, trade	sole proprietorship	rural	3 out of 7 participated
Small enterprises	3M, 1F	30–50	processing, trade	sole proprietorship, LLP	urban/rural	3 out of 4 participated
Medium enterprises	3M	35–55	processing, trade	LLP	urban	3 out of 3 participated
Farming enterprises	1M	45	agriculture	peasant (farm) enterprise	rural	participated
Social enterprises	2M, 3F	30–50	education, social services	sole proprietorship, LLP	various districts	5 out of 5 participated
Note: Compiled by the authors based on data from focus group discussions conducted in the Akmola region in 2024.						

This table demonstrates the diversity of participants, which is critical for analyzing the social enterprise sector. Notably, 100% of the social entrepreneurs group received government support, suggesting a high degree of dependence on external funding and an active search for tools to legitimize their activities through participation in official registries. At the same time, the low participation of microenterprises in government programs (3 out of 7) highlights the barriers to entry for the self-employed and small players in rural areas.

Results

An analytical assessment of the current situation reveals a profound gap between the institutional structure of support measures and their practical applicability. The problem of "formalism," noted by study participants, is illustrated by an analysis of regional dynamics: the increase in the number of registered social entrepreneurs in the national registry (67 organizations) is not reflected in proportional regional socioeconomic development. Focus group respondents note that "social enterprise" status is often acquired primarily to gain access to grant funding, rather than for the long-term scaling of a social mission [3, 4].

Further analysis shows that this "grant-hunting" approach devalues the very idea of social entrepreneurship, turning it into a tool for temporary business survival rather than a model for sustainable social impact. The lack of monitoring of results after receiving a grant leads to a significant number of projects ceasing operations immediately after spending their budget funds.

In addition, the regional specificity of the Akmola region, acting as an agro-industrial belt surrounding the capital, exerts a distinct influence. The proximity to Astana creates a "human capital drain" (or "talent gap"), where the most qualified entrepreneurs and employees migrate to the metropolis. This phenomenon significantly undermines the competitiveness of local small businesses, as they struggle to retain the professional expertise necessary for sustainable growth.

The phenomenon of "capital shadow " is also evident in the shift of consumer demand from the region's solvent population to Astana. Regional economic statistics for 2024 show that Astana's retail chains account for over 60% of retail turnover in nearby metropolitan areas (Tselinograd and Arshaly) [3]. Focus group participants emphasize that this redistribution of consumer markets results in significant revenue losses for local SMEs, making their investments in local infrastructure extremely risky.

The analysis of focus group data revealed several systemic problems affecting the functioning of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Akmola region. First and foremost, respondents highlighted a discrepancy between official statistics and actual economic activity. Entrepreneurs from rural areas noted that many registered sole proprietors formally exist in official registries but do not engage in real business activity. This mismatch undermines trust in statistical data and complicates the assessment of the region's true economic potential, reflecting a problem also observed in other CIS countries [9].

Administrative and documentary barriers emerged as the second most significant issue. Focus group participants highlighted the complexity of preparing the required documentation, inconsistencies in requirements across different banks, and limited access to advisory support. These obstacles are felt most acutely by microenterprises and start-up entrepreneurs, which is consistent with findings from Eastern Europe, where bureaucratic burden remains one of the key constraints on small business development [8].

The problem of the "digital divide" is particularly noted: despite the digitalization of government services, entrepreneurs in rural areas of the Akmola region often encounter technical glitches and difficulties when working with electronic platforms, forcing them to turn to intermediaries and increasing operating costs.

According to respondents' estimates, the cost of "entry" into government support programs for rural entrepreneurs is 25–30% higher than for urban ones, due to the need to cover transportation costs and the services of consultants for obtaining an electronic digital signature and working on portals (for example, Kezekte or Gosagro) [3, 4].

Government support instruments, including interest rate subsidies, credit guarantees, and grant financing, were perceived ambivalently by entrepreneurs. Although respondents were generally aware of subsidy programs, trust in these instruments remained limited. Frequent changes in program conditions created high entry barriers for new market participants. Empirical evidence from small business research shows that inconsistent or short-term government support reduces firm growth and survival rates, particularly among early-stage and resource-constrained enterprises [21]. Similarly, understanding of credit guarantee mechanisms was found to be insufficient: many respondents mistakenly perceived guarantees as a substitute for collateral, indicating a significant information deficit [15, 7, 10]. Social entrepreneurs assessed grant funding positively; however, intense competition and complex reporting requirements pose substantial challenges for early-stage projects.

Infrastructure constraints were also identified as significant. Microenterprises and rural firms face limited access to utility networks, production facilities, and warehouse space, which slows business development and the adoption of innovations. In the context of social entrepreneurship, participants emphasized the value of obtaining official status, while at the same time noting that excessive bureaucracy and strict eligibility criteria restrict opportunities for small-scale social projects [13, 14, 1]. Issues related to post-emergency recovery and access to credit also substantially affect business sustainability. Prolonged compensation payment periods reduce firms' adaptive capacity, while high interest rates and collateral requirements make loans largely inaccessible, particularly in the food service and manufacturing sectors [1].

Table 2 presents a systematization of the identified challenges by thematic clusters and participant groups:

Table 2 – Key thematic clusters of SME challenges identified in focus group discussions

Thematic Cluster	Key Issues	Participant Groups Most Actively Expressing Concerns
Statistics and activity	Discrepancy between official data and actual activity	Rural entrepreneurs
Administrative barriers	Complexity of documentation, bureaucracy	Microenterprises, start-up entrepreneurs
Subsidies	Limited trust, changing conditions	Small and medium enterprises
Credit guarantees	Lack of information, high collateral requirements	All groups
Grants	High requirements and competition	Social enterprises, the education sector
Infrastructure	Limited access to utilities and production facilities	Agricultural enterprises, microenterprises
Social entrepreneurship	Complex criteria, bureaucratic burden	Social enterprises
Post-emergency recovery	Delayed compensation, low adaptability	All groups
Credit access	High interest rates and collateral requirements	Food services, manufacturing
Note: Compiled by the authors based on thematic analysis of focus group discussions with SME and social enterprise representatives in the Akmola region.		

The table demonstrates that the challenges are multifaceted, affecting institutional, financial, and infrastructural dimensions of entrepreneurial activity, while also reflecting differences in the perception of barriers between urban and rural enterprises.

A comparison of the identified challenges faced by SMEs and social entrepreneurs in the Akmola region with international practice reveals both common trends and region-specific characteristics. The focus group analysis identified nine key thematic clusters, each of which has parallels in international research (Table 3).

Table 3 – Thematic comparison of regional SME challenges and international experience

Thematic Cluster	Key Issues	International Context and Comparison
Statistics and activity	Discrepancy between official data and actual activity	In CIS and Eastern European countries, official statistics often fail to capture actual SME activity, complicating decision-making and policy planning [11].
Administrative barriers	Documentation complexity, bureaucracy	European experience shows that excessive bureaucracy slows business start-ups and constrains innovation; successful models emphasize simplified registration and standardized requirements [10].
Subsidies	Limited trust, changing conditions	In countries with developed social entrepreneurship sectors, stable and transparent subsidy schemes increase trust and participation in public programs [3].
Credit guarantees	Lack of information, high collateral requirements	International evidence suggests that credit guarantee programs are effective only when combined with financial education and advisory support [16].
Grants	High requirements and competition	In Europe and the United States, grant funding for social enterprises is typically accompanied by training and mentoring, increasing project success rates [6].
Infrastructure	Limited access to utilities and production facilities	In developing economies, infrastructure constraints particularly hinder rural and microenterprise growth; effective approaches include industrial parks and coworking spaces [1].
Social entrepreneurship	Complex criteria, bureaucracy	International practice confirms that excessive regulation limits innovation and scaling; simplified registration procedures foster sectoral growth [15].
Post-emergency recovery	Delayed compensation, low adaptability	In countries with well-developed SME support systems, rapid compensation mechanisms enhance resilience to crises [1].
Credit access	High interest rates and collateral requirements	High collateral and interest requirements restrict access to finance, whereas in developed economies, SMEs benefit from preferential loans supported by public and international funds [16].
Note: Compiled by the authors based on thematic analysis of focus group discussions and a comparative review of international academic literature.		

Table 3 indicates that most identified challenges closely correspond to international observations; however, regional specificity is evident in the particularly high bureaucratic burden and limited access to infrastructure and financial instruments for rural and start-up entrepreneurs. For example, the gap between official statistics and actual entrepreneurial activity in rural areas of Kazakhstan mirrors patterns observed in other CIS countries, where formal registries do not accurately reflect real economic engagement [22, 10, 23].

Additionally, it was found that, unlike European countries, where the emphasis is on advisory support, in Akmola Oblast, the demand is predominantly for direct financing, indicating a low level of accumulated capital and the high cost of credit within the country. This underscores the need to shift from pure financial assistance to the development of development institutions capable of providing comprehensive business support [24].

Discussion

A detailed analysis of thematic clusters reveals that infrastructure barriers in the Akmola region are critical for microenterprises. Unlike Almaty or Astana, which have a well-developed network of coworking spaces and business incubators, entrepreneurs in smaller towns in the region (such as Atbasar or Makinsk) face a severe shortage of accessible production sites equipped with the necessary utilities. Research participants also emphasized that the lack of accessible production sites with connected utilities makes it virtually impossible to launch small manufacturing enterprises (processing plants, sewing workshops) without significant start-up investment, perpetuating the region's small business dependence on raw materials.

The lack of basic infrastructure in small towns and rural areas of the Akmola region creates an "infrastructure inequality" effect. While startups in the capital have access to accelerators and ready-made office solutions, regional entrepreneurs are forced to spend a significant portion of their start-up capital on basic infrastructure rather than developing their core businesses or social missions. In these remote, peripheral areas, launching even a small social project (for example, an inclusive bakery or a rural rehabilitation center) requires prohibitive upfront capital expenditures to address basic logistical issues, including autonomous heating, water supply systems (septic tanks), and private electrical substations.

These prohibitive entry barriers create a severe form of "spatial and institutional inequality" in the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. While urban startups in neighboring Astana utilize existing digital accelerators, subsidized coworking spaces, and ready-made utility networks, rural entrepreneurs face a highly fragmented environment. Consequently, the high cost of market entry effectively suppresses grassroots social initiatives in their early stages. Instead of reinvesting initial revenues into expanding social impact or upgrading staff skills, these enterprises are forced to devote their limited resources to ensuring physical survival. This dynamic alters the structural nature of rural social entrepreneurship: it ceases to function as a self-sustaining business model capable of simultaneously generating financial and social value. Instead, it finds itself in a state of structural vulnerability, transforming potential social enterprises into purely subsidized, grant-dependent structures that cannot survive without ongoing government or donor funding.

It is important to emphasize that this inequality is exacerbated by the lack of specialized industrial zones for small businesses in the small towns of the Akmola region. While large industrial parks focus on large-scale investment projects, social entrepreneurs and microbusinesses remain in a "gray zone" of infrastructure planning. This forces them to use premises that don't meet modern energy efficiency and sanitary standards, which automatically increases operating costs and reduces the competitiveness of the final product.

Furthermore, an analysis of the "access to credit" barrier reveals that state guarantees from the Damu Fund cover only a portion of the risks, while second-tier banks continue to demand "hard" collateral in the form of real estate. The liquidity of such assets in rural areas of the Akmola region is typically appraised as extremely low. This creates a «collateral deadlock" (or "collateral trap"), where even a profitable social project fails to secure financing due to geographic location of the business. This phenomenon is further exacerbated by the fact that the market value of real estate in villages is significantly lower than the estimated costs of doing business. Second-tier banks apply high discount rates to rural property, effectively rendering government guarantees ineffective for most rural entrepreneurs. Alternative credit assessment methods based on an analysis of a project's cash flow and social impact, rather than solely on the availability of hard collateral, are needed.

Administrative barriers, subsidies, and grant financing in the Akmola region underscore the need to enhance the transparency and predictability of government programs. International case studies demonstrate that integrated support, combining training, mentoring, and infrastructure provision, substantially improves the effectiveness and sustainability of social enterprises [3, 15].

The problem of "formalism" identified during the study indicates that the current grant funding system in the region is often focused on budget allocation rather than long-term social impact. To overcome this tendency, a post-grant support system must be implemented. Integrating financial literacy and marketing training into the application process would help weed out "random" participants and improve the viability of projects with a genuine social mission [25].

To fully understand how geography determines business success, it's necessary to systematize the differences in barriers. Below is a comparative table highlighting the specific challenges depending on the business's location:

Special attention should be paid to differences between urban and rural enterprises. Rural entrepreneurs tend to be more critical of statistical accuracy, access to credit, and infrastructure availability, which aligns with international findings on geographic disparities in SME development [1]. These differences highlight the need for regionally tailored programs that account for rural specificities and the needs of microbusinesses.

Table 4 – Comparative analysis of barriers to entrepreneurship development in the Akmola region

Barrier Type	Observed in urban centers (Kokshetau, Stepnogorsk)	Observed in rural areas and small towns	Impact on social entrepreneurship
Infrastructure	Relative access to rental housing, presence of business centers	Critical shortage of space, deteriorating networks, lack of coworking spaces	Limits the launch of inclusive workshops and educational centers
Financing	Highly liquid collateral, proximity to bank branches	Collateral trap, low real estate valuations by banks	Makes scaling socially significant projects impossible
Personnel	Competition with the capital, but availability of a core pool of specialists	Acute shortage of qualified personnel, talent drain	Difficulty finding specialists in special education and medicine
State support	High awareness, access to Damu consultants	Information vacuum, difficulty collecting documents remotely	leads to a low share of rural projects in grant competitions
Note: Compiled by the authors.			

The implementation of a post-grant monitoring system will not only ensure the targeted use of funds but also provide timely mentoring support to projects on the verge of closure. This will transform government support from a one-time subsidy into a long-term institutional development tool.

The gap in perceptions of barriers between urban and rural areas highlights the need to decentralize the management of support programs. In the Akmola region, rural entrepreneurs often act as the sole providers of critical social services (for example, private kindergartens or pharmacies in small villages). In such cases, the criteria for the effectiveness of state support should shift from purely economic indicators (tax increases) to social indicators (accessibility of services for the population).

The proposed decentralization would allow local executive bodies (akimats) to more flexibly adjust the terms of support. For districts immediately bordering the capital (Tselinogradsky, Arshalynsky), it would be advisable to develop service and logistics hubs, while for remote agricultural districts, support for primary processing and mobile social services should be a priority.

Concluding, the study’s findings confirm the necessity of a comprehensive approach to the development of SMEs and social entrepreneurship in the Akmola region, one that integrates financial, advisory, and infrastructural support while adapting government programs to regional conditions and to the distinct challenges faced by urban and rural entrepreneurs.

Ultimately, the success of SME development in the Akmola region depends on the transition to a “smart support” model that considers not only the size of the enterprise but also its geographic location, social significance, and contribution to the sustainability of the local community. Synchronizing the efforts of local governments, development funds, and the private sector will create an ecosystem capable of retaining human capital within the region and effectively countering the “outflow of talent” to the capital.

This transition requires abandoning “gross” success indicators in favor of qualitative indicators of sustainability, which in the long term will ensure the Akmola region’s status as a self-sufficient economic region, rather than simply an agricultural appendage to the capital.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), including social enterprises in the Akmola region, face a complex set of institutional, financial, and infrastructural barriers that affect the effectiveness and sustainability of their operations. The focus group analysis identified nine key problem areas: discrepancies between official statistics and actual economic activity; administrative barriers; limited trust in subsidy programs; insufficient understanding of credit guarantee mechanisms; difficulties related to grant financing; infrastructural constraints; bureaucratic obstacles faced by social enterprises; low adaptability to emergency situations; and limited access to credit.

The complex nature of the identified problems confirms that the barriers in Akmola Oblast are not isolated but cumulative. For example, infrastructure shortages in rural areas automatically reduce the liquidity of collateral, which, in turn, blocks access to credit, despite the existence of government guarantee programs. This requires regulators to shift from targeted measures to a policy of "package" solutions, where grants or loans are synchronized with access to basic utilities and production facilities.

Comparison with international practice indicates that most of the identified challenges are also characteristic of CIS and Eastern European countries; however, regional specificity is evident in the particularly high bureaucratic burden and the limited availability of infrastructure and financial instruments for rural and start-up entrepreneurs. International experience confirms that comprehensive support, combining transparent financial instruments, advisory services, educational programs, and access to infrastructure, contributes to improving SME performance and resilience, as well as to scaling social initiatives [3, 15, 17].

The findings allow for several conclusions of practical relevance to the development of SMEs and social entrepreneurship in the region. First, there is a clear need to improve the institutional environment by simplifying administrative procedures and enhancing the transparency of government support programs. Second, improving access to financial instruments and infrastructural resources is essential, particularly for microenterprises and rural entrepreneurs. Third, greater emphasis should be placed on information support and financial literacy in order to enable entrepreneurs to effectively utilize credit guarantees and subsidy schemes.

In addition to the above, the practical significance of the study lies in the need to implement digital tools for monitoring actual business activity. This would help narrow the gap between statistical data and the actual state of affairs, ensuring a more targeted allocation of budget funds. For the social entrepreneurship sector, simplifying the criteria for entering the register is critical, ensuring that "social enterprise" status is available not only to large projects but also to micro-initiatives solving local problems in small villages.

Future research should pursue several directions in greater depth. First, a quantitative assessment of the impact of the identified barriers on SME sustainability and growth, including social enterprises, using econometric methods and comparative analysis between urban and rural areas, is needed. Second, further research should examine the effectiveness of various government support instruments, including grants, subsidies, and credit guarantees, within the context of regional specificities. Third, the interaction between social enterprises, the private sector, and non-profit organizations warrants closer examination to assess its influence on social impact and the economic integration of regional communities.

Another promising area is studying the role of public-private partnerships (PPPs) as a mechanism for mitigating infrastructure risks for social businesses. Furthermore, an analysis of the social return on investment (SROI) in the context of the Kazakh economy deserves attention, as this would allow for an objective assessment of the effectiveness of grant funding not only through financial reports but also through actual changes in the quality of life in the region.

Overall, the results of this study provide a foundation for the development of practical recommendations aimed at improving the institutional environment and strengthening support for social entrepreneurship, while also identifying avenues for future research focused on fostering sustainable and inclusive entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan.

In summary, it can be argued that the Akmola region possesses significant potential for the development of social business. However, realizing this potential is impossible without a qualitative transformation in the interaction between the state and entrepreneurs,from formal administration to genuine partnership and support at all stages of the business project life cycle.

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ШАҒЫН ЖӘНЕ ОРТА БИЗНЕС ПЕН ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК КӘСІПКЕРЛІКТІ ДАМЫТУДАҒЫ МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК ҚОЛДАУ ЖӘНЕ КЕДЕРГІЛЕР: АҚМОЛА ОБЛЫСЫНЫҢ ТӘЖІРИБЕСІ

Аңдатпа

Бұл зерттеу Ақмола облысындағы шағын және орта кәсіпкерлік (ШОК) субъектілерінің мемлекеттік қолдау шараларын қалай қабылдайтынын талдауға және бизнестің дамуына, оның ішінде әлеуметтік кәсіпкерлік секторына кедергі келтіретін жүйелік тосқауылдарды анықтауға арналған. Зерттеудің әдіснамалық негізі әртүрлі бизнес нысандары өкілдерінің қатысуымен өткізілген фокус-топтық пікірталастарға сүйенеді, бұл кәсіпкерлердің субъективті бағаларын терең түсінуге, негізгі проблемалық аймақтарды айқындауға және мемлекеттік қолдау құралдарымен өзара іс-қимыл тәжірибесін талдауға мүмкіндік берді. Деректер тақырыптық талдау әдісі арқылы өңделіп, әкімшілік кедергілерді, несиелік ресурстарға қолжетімділіктің шектеулігін, гранттық қаржыландыру мәселелерін, инфрақұрылымдық шектеулерді және әлеуметтік кәсіпкерлікке тән қиындықтарды қамтитын тоғыз негізгі проблемалық бағыт анықталды. Зерттеу нәтижелері ШОК субъектілерінің саны жөніндегі ресми статистиканың олардың нақты экономикалық тұрақтылығын әрдайым көрсете бермейтінін, ал институционалдық қолдау тетіктерінің көбіне формалды және жеткіліксіз қолжетімді ретінде қабылданатынын көрсетеді. Әсіресе, әлеуметтік кәсіпкерлер ресми мәртебе алудың маңыздылығын жоғары бағалай отырып, бюрократиялық рәсімдердің күрделілігін және қолданыстағы өлшемдердің шектеулі қолданылуын атап өтеді. Зерттеудің ғылыми құндылығы ШОК пен әлеуметтік кәсіпкерлікті дамытудың өңірлік ерекшеліктерін сапалық тұрғыда талдауында көрінеді. Алынған нәтижелер өңірлік кәсіпкерлікті қолдау саясатын жетілдіруге, мемлекеттік қолдау құралдарының ашықтығын, қолжетімділігін және икемділігін арттыруға, сондай-ақ микробизнес пен ауылдық аумақтардың қажеттіліктеріне бейімделген шешімдерді әзірлеуге практикалық негіз бола алады.

Тірек сөздер: әлеуметтік кәсіпкерлік, шағын және орта кәсіпкерлік, мемлекеттік қолдау, фокус-топтар, Ақмола облысы, даму кедергілері, өңірлік даму, мемлекеттік саясат.

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ГОСУДАРСТВЕННАЯ ПОДДЕРЖКА И БАРЬЕРЫ РАЗВИТИЯ МАЛОГО И СРЕДНЕГО ПРЕДПРИНИМАТЕЛЬСТВА И СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ ПРЕДПРИЯТИЙ: ОПЫТ АКМОЛИНСКОЙ ОБЛАСТИ

Аннотация

Настоящее исследование посвящено анализу восприятия предпринимателями малого и среднего бизнеса (МСП) Акмолинской области мер государственной поддержки и выявлению системных барьеров, препятствующих развитию бизнеса, включая сектор социального предпринимательства. Методологической основой исследования послужили фокус-групповые дискуссии с участием представителей различных форм бизнеса, что позволило получить углубленное понимание субъективных оценок предпринимателей, определить ключевые проблемные зоны и особенности их взаимодействия с государственными инструментами поддержки. Анализ данных осуществлялся методом тематического анализа, в результате которого были выявлены девять основных проблемных направлений, включая административные барьеры, сложности доступа к кредитным ресурсам, ограничения грантового финансирования, инфраструктурные проблемы и специфические трудности социального предпринимательства. Результаты исследования показывают, что официальные показатели численности субъектов МСП не всегда отражают их реальную экономическую устойчивость, а существующие институциональные механизмы поддержки часто воспринимаются как формальные, фрагментарные и недостаточно доступные, особенно для микробизнеса и сельских предпринимателей. Социальные предприниматели, в свою очередь, подчеркивают значимость получения официального статуса, одновременно указывая на избыточную бюрократическую нагрузку и ограниченную применимость действующих критериев. Научная ценность работы заключается в качественном, регионально ориентированном анализе развития МСП и социального предпринимательства, дополняющем количественные исследования в данной области. Практическая значимость результатов состоит в возможности их использования при совершенствовании региональной политики поддержки предпринимательства, повышении прозрачности и адресности мер государственной поддержки и адаптации их к потребностям микропредприятий и сельских территорий.

Ключевые слова: социальное предпринимательство, малый и средний бизнес, государственная поддержка, фокус-группа, барьеры развития, региональное развитие, государственная политика.

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