

Assessment of Socio-Contractual Relations as a Mechanism for Overcoming Poverty in Modern Russian Families (Based on Sociological Studies Conducted in the Perm Krai)

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Abstract: Poverty is one of the most sensitive problems that Russian society has encountered. Household income has been falling since 2015, especially in the regions, thereby affecting families and their budgets. The social security system offers new technologies that are focused, first and foremost, on families with children and allows maintaining them by activating their resources. These technologies include a social contract. The signing of social contracts with families in the Russian regions began in 2013 and has become widespread in the Perm Krai. It became possible to analyze the efficiency of socio-contractual relations only recently because it was necessary to monitor the relevant data for several years in order to make substantiated conclusions. Based on the data of an empirical study, the authors study poor families who joined the social contract system.

Index Terms: poverty, family, social contract, reduction of poverty, income level, poverty level, welfare state.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, poverty is one of the widespread phenomena that characterize the peculiarities of financial and property inequality. It is characterized by the situation when a person is unable to satisfy their minimum material needs or has to spend all their savings to do so. Although Russia holds a range of resources and fundamentals of the welfare state are established legislatively, poverty in the country is still one of the most urgent problems, which also hamper economic development. According to the official data from the Federal State Statistics Service, the number of Russians whose income is below the subsistence minimum totals 20.3 million [1]. This is around 15% of the country's total population. Often, these people have average or high qualification and a decent education, but the place of their residence or age do not allow them to get out of poverty [2]. There is a stable viewpoint that social support measures

aimed to struggle with poverty are secondary regarding economic development [3]. There is another similar point of view that social work does not reduce poverty and it is a matter of state policy [4]. The most vulnerable category of the poor is families with children. A poor family as a special social group is characterized by the lack of various types of resources, insufficient consumption of products, goods and services compared with the social standards, the conflicting nature of relations among its members, vulnerability and the lack of child protection. A family's poverty is determined by a wide range of features that mainly include low income and insufficient consumption [5]. A special term appeared in the Russian scientific discourse, describing such a phenomenon as the "working poor", and it is studied in the works by V.V. Radaev [6]. More and more often, poor families are young families and families of pensioners that are socially vulnerable due to the initial and final stages of the working cycle amid low qualification and wages. Specifically, monitoring conducted by the Higher School of Economics – National Research University in 2017 showed that every third pensioner assessed their financial situation negatively and every second pensioner said that they found it difficult to buy food or clothes [7]. Over the past decade, Russia has been looking for new approaches to the management of social processes and has introduced market technologies. Many of them have already been tested in other countries as part of various programs [8]. Measures designed to overcome poverty have been especially relevant since the 1990s. Innovative approaches are introduced, including those based on socio-contractual relations [9]. The technology of a social contract with a poor family is one of them. The main peculiarity of this technology is the exact definition of duties and actions that a family needs to take to get out of poverty with active support from interested bodies.

II. BACKGROUND

Poverty plays a key role in sociology because indigence determines interactions among individuals in the group, consumer models of behavior, and habits.

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The poverty of most of the population affects the possibilities of economic growth and development of human potential. For Russian society, this is stipulated by negative trends showing an expansion of the social stratum of the poor and the search for measures to solve this problem. Depending on the chosen scientific approach to the understanding of poverty and the opinion about its essence, role in the society, reasons, consequences, possibilities, and the need to overcome it change. Representatives of functionalism [10, 11, 12] regard poverty as a result of various individual and acquired capabilities, as well as different roles played by individuals in the society. Specifically, T. Parsons pointed out that various types of activities and a person's qualities are assessed not in the same way and depend on the system of values and goals of the society, i.e. they can be of special importance in the social system [10]. K. Davis and W. Moore believed that a social position held by individuals corresponds to the presence or absence of special talents inherited from their parents or special training acquired [12].

The approach became widespread, considering the culture of poverty through the analysis of standards, values, lifestyle, and social environment typical for the poor [13, 14, 15]. The authors of this approach proceed from the assumption that in the course of time, social strata in society generate subcultures with their stable peculiarities.

Another approach to the issue is the capability approach, which was proposed by A. Sen. Analyzing poverty-related problems, the economist noted that a decisive role is played by capabilities (of freedom), which a person has, and ways to use them: "The capability approach that is applied when studying the phenomenon of poverty, broadens the understanding of the nature and reasons for poverty by shifting our focus from means to the goals that a person pursues having some grounds and, consequently, to the freedoms allowing to reach these goals" [16].

The deprivation approach is to a certain extent opposite to Sen's capability approach because it is based on deprivations – hardships or the impossibility of meeting personal needs in the required scope. P. Townsend is one of the most remarkable representatives of this concept. In this case, considering oneself as poor depends on average living standards in the society (befitting), with the current standards and the widespread way of life being benchmarks. In this case, of importance are needs and resources in various areas: "Along with material deprivation that includes such indicators as food, clothing, housing conditions, durable goods, the place and state of the environment, conditions and character of labor...indicators of social deprivation that include the nature of employment, peculiarities of leisure, education" [17].

In the framework of P. Bourdieu's capital theory, the social position of an individual is determined by an aggregate of various capitals [18]. This theory highlights economic capital (money, property), cultural capital (educational qualifications), and social capital (social obligations, connections). From the viewpoint of this approach, poverty is caused by the insufficient scope of economic, cultural, and social capital in groups of the population, as well as by the

lack of this capital in the specific society. The problem of poverty was also considered by U. Beck, the author of the concept "risk society", in which modern civilized and modernized processes are criticized due to the generation of a considerable number of global risks that pose a threat to nature, environment, health, and all areas of social life [19]. This approach puts an emphasis on social risks and non-social reasons that relate to the natural environment, ecology, destruction of the planet's resources, and environmental pollution.

III. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

The experience amassed in the conclusion of social contracts makes it possible to assess the efficiency of the program's mechanism and peculiarities of changes in the condition of poverty that families suffer. Specifically, based on the Ministry of Social Development of the Perm Krai, a sociological study was conducted in March-April 2018 with regard to socio-contractual relations with modern Russian poor families. Empirical data were mainly collected through formalized questionnaires given to poor families that signed social contracts. In-depth interviews conducted with professionals from social security bodies. Methodological and spatial triangulation was used, which allowed conducting analysis at various levels of the study object and supplement the results obtained via questionnaire surveys in the quantitative tradition [20, 21] and interview data in the qualitative tradition [22]. The sampling of formalized distributed questionnaires was 1,102 respondents (N=1,102). The percentage of questionnaires returned was 98%. The sampling was performed with the available database for the period, during which the socio-contractual technology was used (since 2014). When analyzing data from the questionnaire results, factor and correlation analysis were conducted [23]. Certain resources that a family has were highlighted as a substantial factor and were divided into subgroups. The factor is seen as the basis, impacting a family's behavioral peculiarities. The study of poverty demands from a researcher to concentrate on the living conditions and cultural status of respondents, otherwise data can be distorted [24].

IV. RESULTS ANALYSIS

The Socio-contractual relations with poor families in the Perm Krai are implemented as part of the targeted technology "social contract" that implies an interaction between social security bodies and low-income families, as a result of which special measures are taken to help overcome poverty by expanding the family's already available or new resources. These measures are divided into main areas, which include the search for work, completion of professional training courses and supplementary professional education, conduct of individual business activities, private subsidiary farming, etc.



Accordingly, this helps eliminate the deficit of labor resources, skills, knowledge, educational and professional competences, initiative, adaptability to living and social conditions, agricultural resources, goods, equipment, tools, and property in poor families. Here, one mainly emphasizes independent efforts taken by participants of the project, their interested active position, and cooperation with professionals

aimed to improve living standards in the long term.

Poor families in the Perm Krai have been participating in the program aimed to provide social contracts since 2014. The number of the program's participants increases year after year. While 747 social contracts were signed in 2014, their number nearly tripled in 2017 (2,057) (Figure 1).

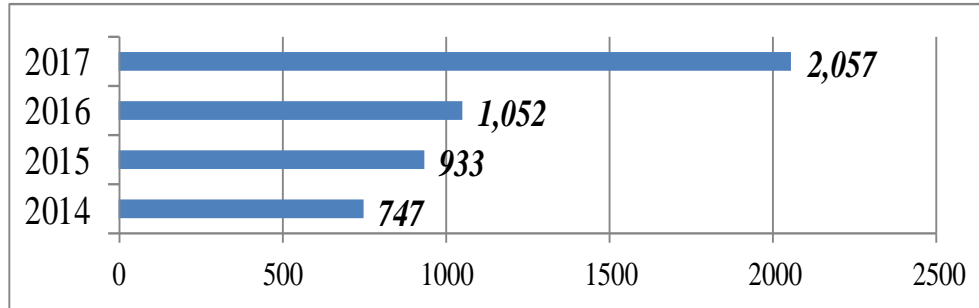


Fig. 1. The dynamics of social contracts number growth in the Perm Krai (quantity of social contracts)

The experience amassed from the signing of social contracts allows us to assess the efficiency of the program's mechanism and peculiarities of changes in the poverty level of the families that participate in the program.

The study results show that social contracts are signed most often with poor families for the development of private

subsidiary farming (77.5%). In demand are also contracts that promote the provision of services to the public (7.1%), the purchase of property (6.6%), and the production of goods (4.2%). The least popular areas are education (2.7%) and medical services (0.5%) (Figure 2).

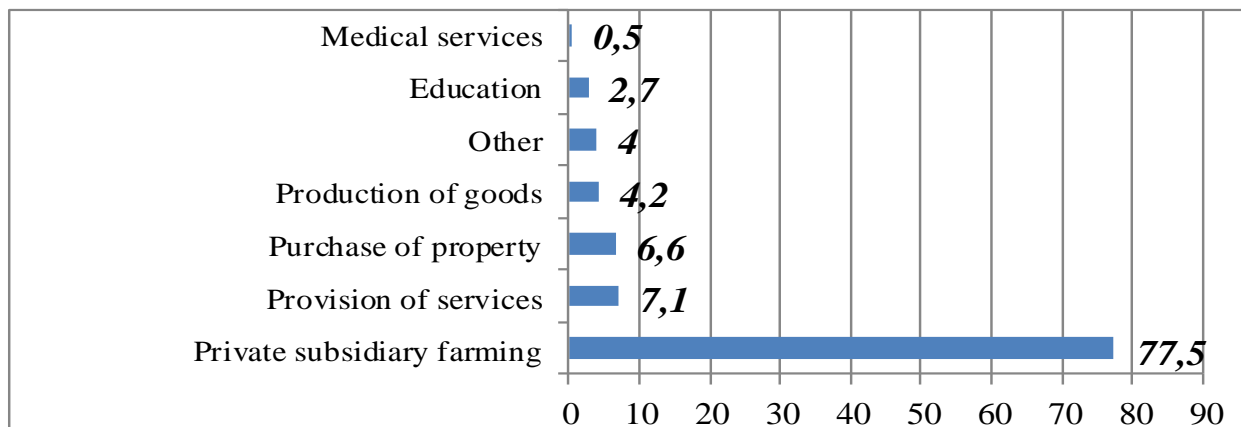


Fig. 2. Demand for various types of social contracts (as a percentage of the respondents; it was allowed to give several answers to the question)

In the framework of these types of social contracts, poor families spend funds provided for the purchase of animals (large, medium and small cattle: cows, bulls, goats, sheep, pigs, rabbits), poultry (hens, geese, ducks, turkeys), bees, animal feed, seeds, as well as for the construction of greenhouses to engage in cattle breeding, poultry farming, beekeeping, floriculture, and vegetable growing. Special equipment (sewing machines, machine tools, etc.) is bought for the provision of services and the production of goods. This helps poor people sew and knit clothes, repair vehicles, make toys, produce bedding, handmade soap, and confectionary.

Knowledge, skills, and competences are most often obtained in the area of further training and additional education. This helps participants attend courses that allow

them to fulfill themselves as manicure and makeup professionals, hairdressers, drivers, confectioners, and tutors. As part of the survey that we conducted among poor families, which participate in the social contract program, we studied the population's subjective assessment of their total income for the latest month that averaged RUB 22,401. On average, a family's monthly average income per capita is RUB 5,372.00, or nearly half of the subsistence level in the Perm Krai [25]. This is related to insufficient consumption in poor families. Specifically, half of the surveyed point out that they can only afford to buy the bare necessities: food, clothes for children, medicine.

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15% are also limited in funds in terms of buying clothes and medicine. Only 2% of poor families can afford substantial purchases (Figure 3).

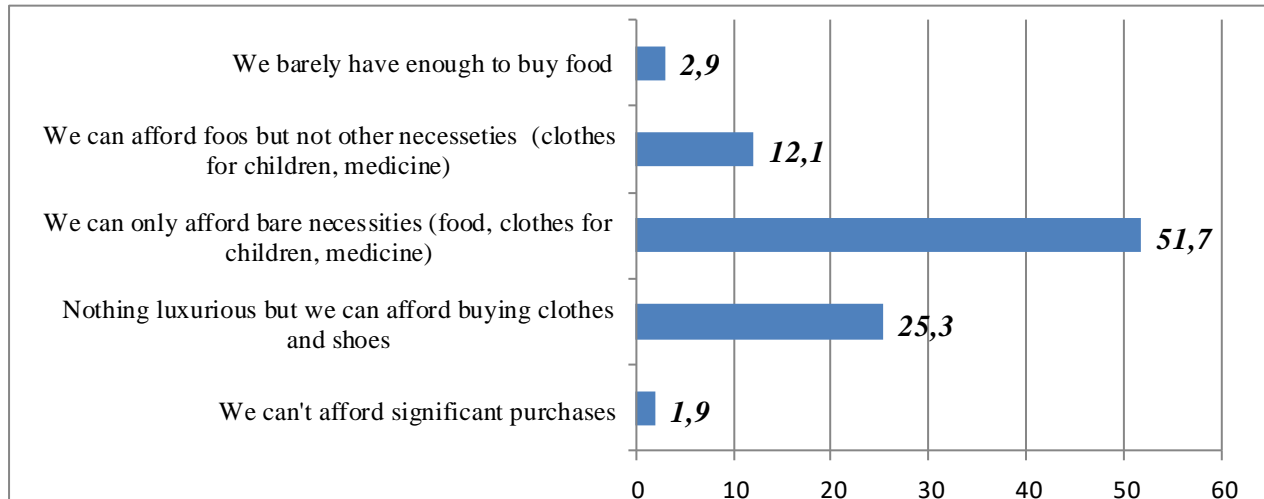


Figure 3. The financial situation of the respondents (as a percentage of the surveyed)

If we compare these results with the data of the research by E.E. Grishina and K.G. Chagin conducted in 2003, we can conclude the following [26] (Grishina E.E., Chagin K.G. Targeted Social Assistance Technology Self-Sufficiency: Implementation Guide for Local and Regional Administrations - Foundation "Institute for Urban Economics", 2008. 96). The financial situation of the current participants of socio-contractual relations has improved substantially. In 2003, families assessed their financial situation worse, with 83% selecting the first three positions, according to which, they either only had enough funds to buy food and the bare necessities or did not even have enough

money to buy food [27]. This fact shows that the poverty issue was much deeper in the early 2000s due to the recent critical crisis period, instability and poor efficiency of the social security system that had just started introducing new technologies, with the academia providing the relevant support.

Possibilities are also considerably limited by another fact, namely, food accounting for a big portion of a family's aggregate monthly budget. Specifically, 38% of the surveyed spend most of their funds on food and 41.6% spend half of their monthly budget on food (Figure 4).

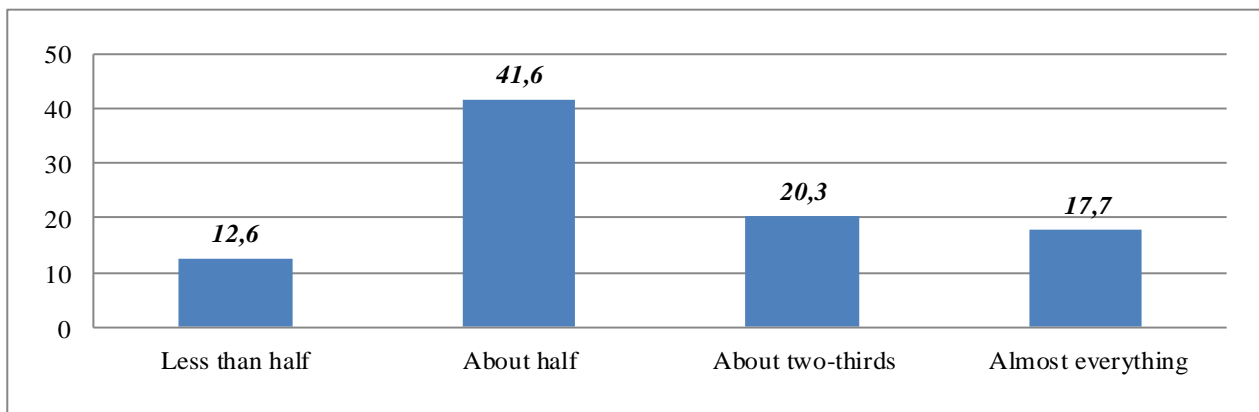


Fig. 4. Families' monthly average food expenses (as a percentage of the surveyed)

Wages (79.7%), social benefits (58.9%) and income derived from agricultural activities (25.6%) were mentioned most often as sources of income (Figure 5). The study's participants mentioned in a special question the following main sources of income: wages (75.3%), social benefits (12%) and pensions (8.2%). That is, poor families' income depends a lot on wages offered in the labor market and state support programs that target poor families.

78% of the surveyed participants of social contracts are either officially married (64%) or are in unregistered marriage (14%). While the percentage of

married families is close to the proportions typical for people who are not poor, the number of the respondents who just live together exceeds the number, which is common for people who are not poor, by several times [28]. This leads to the conclusion that the number of unregistered marriages among poor families is higher than in the groups of people who are not poor. Minors live in many families (84%).

The number of children under 16 averages 2.29, and 1.63 for families with children aged under 18. In the aggregate, there are around 4 children in the family. In addition, 13% of the respondents said that their growing children attended educational institutions every day. 11% of the surveyed families have some life limitations due to chronic diseases, disabilities or mental disorders. Moreover, 13.5% of the families include disabled women aged under 55 and men

aged under 60. Furthermore, 77% of the families have four and more members, with this value being less than a third in the country's average [28]. The families on average have about five members and only two of them are employed. All this means that modern poor families bear the heavy burden of dependents and face difficulties in supporting children and unemployed relatives. As a result, people have low resources and become poor.

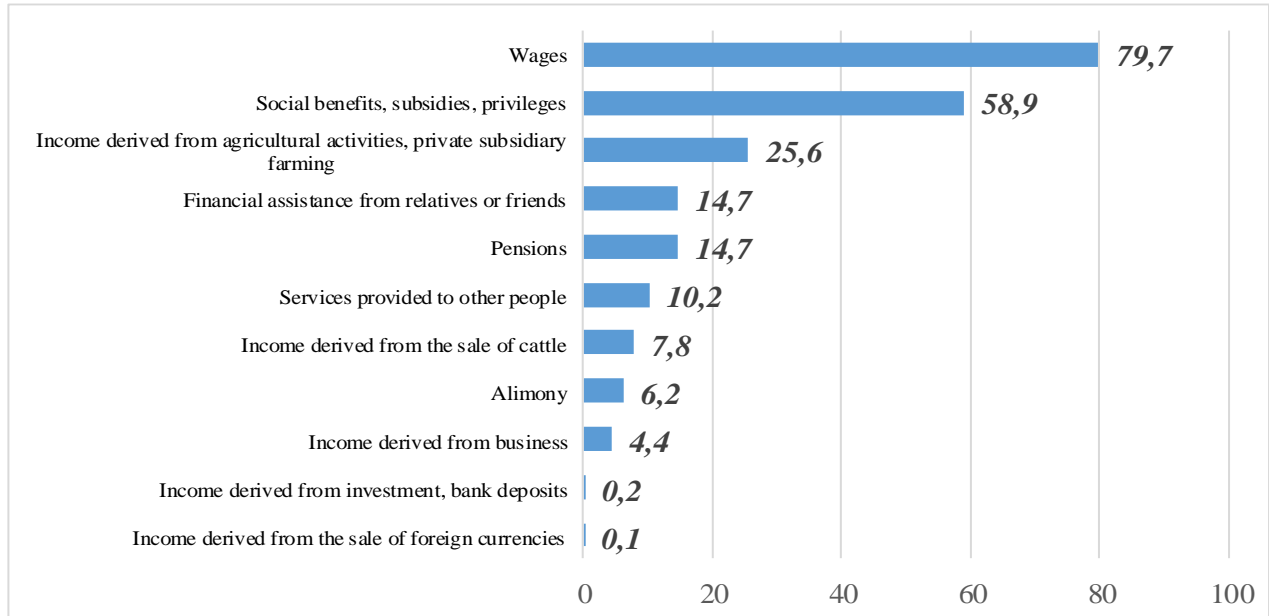


Fig. 5. Breakdown of the respondents by sources of income (as a percentage of the surveyed)¹

One-fourth of the poor families are employed in the budget-financed sector, which in the Russian conditions is often characterized as the least attractive in terms of wages and possibilities of social mobility. Moreover, 56.6% of the respondents are employed, which confirms Russian sociologists' conclusions about the phenomenon of the "working poor" in Russia [2, 29]. 38% of the surveyed are unemployed, with 21% of them refer to themselves as

unemployed and 14% as people on maternity leaves (Figure 6). This confirms families' problems related to women's execution of their motherhood duties because after children are borne some young mothers lose their wages as the main source of income and their possibilities for full professional self-fulfillment in the future are limited. They find themselves in unstable alarming conditions that force them to adapt to the situation.

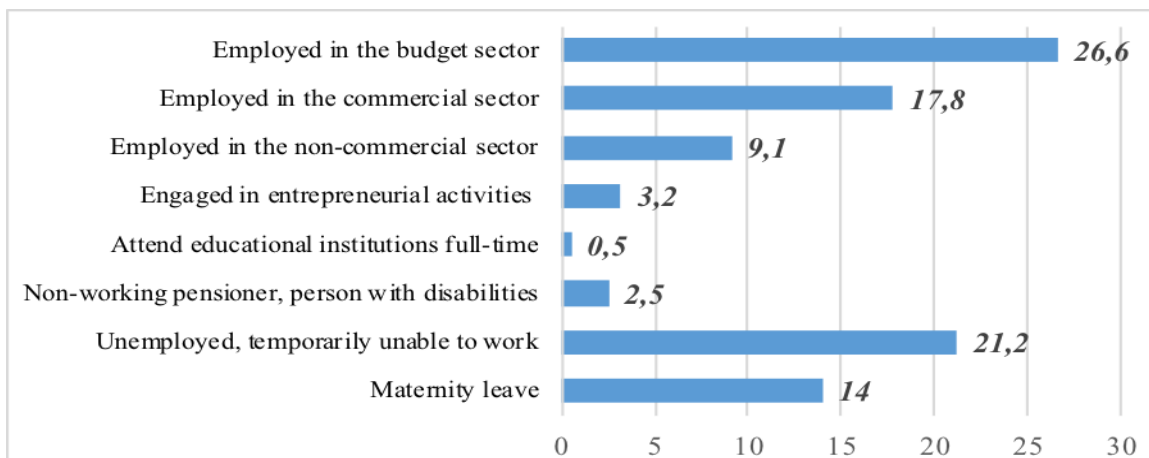


Fig. 6. Breakdown of the respondents by occupation (as a percentage of the surveyed; when answering the question the respondents were allowed to choose several answers)

In the course of the survey, poor families were offered to choose reasons behind social

¹When answering the question the respondents were allowed to choose several answers.

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inequality and poverty in Russia and to express their viewpoints on the possibilities for the independent improvement of their financial situation without state assistance programs. The majority of the surveyed believe that main reasons include low wages (73.3%) and unemployment (69.1%), i.e. poor families highlight reasons of mainly external nature, for which the social environment and the state are responsible (Figure 7). The same tendency is seen in the answers to the question about the independent

improvement of welfare without seeking support from state programs, with half of the families doubting that this is possible. However, the search of reasons, above all, in external social institutions and the human environment and the opinion that it is an objective of other people to solve the problem means that a person adopts a passive waiting position and does not take any efforts to get out of the situation.

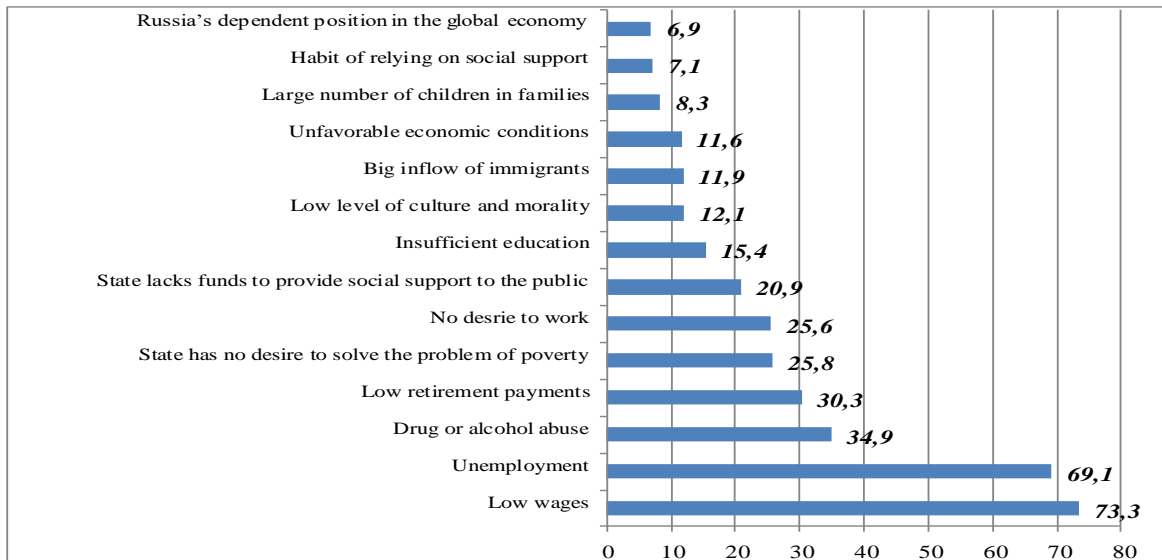


Fig. 7. Breakdown of the respondents' answers concerning the reasons behind social inequality and poverty in Russia (as a percentage of the surveyed)

When comparing the financial situation of their families with others in the locality, most participants of the study thought that they corresponded to the overall living standards (Figure 8). This fact, on the one hand, shows that living standards are low and poverty is widespread among the public. However, on the other hand, this can imply average self-identification when a subjective impression that one's own family does not differ much from other dampens

motivation and efforts required to overcome poverty. It is interesting that data on the percentage of families that assess their financial situation as "slightly below average" and "significantly below average", which is around 45%, coincide with the results obtained by E.E. Grishina and K.G. Chagin in 2003. This shows the positive effect of socio-contractual relations [27].

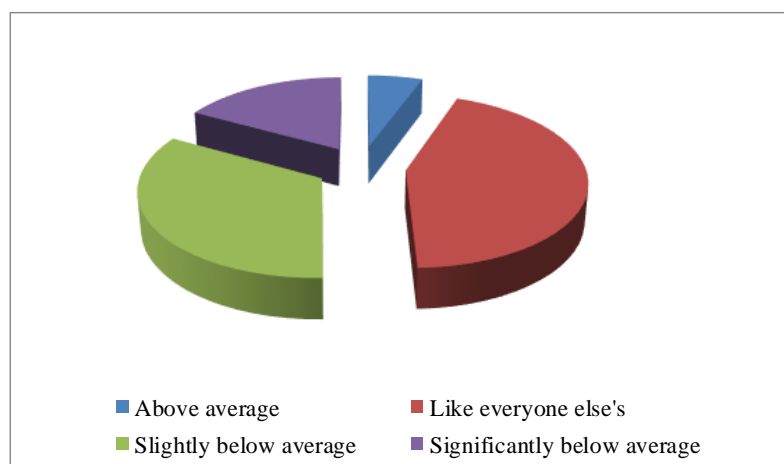


Fig. 8. Comparison by the respondents of the financial situation of their families with other families in the locality (as a percentage of the surveyed)

Generalizing the obtained data, one can make a conclusion that poor families have low income, consume insufficiently,

experience a high burden of minors, have secondary and



primary professional education, work as workers and technical personnel without higher education, are employed in the budget-financed sector, have serious health problems and average self-identification and look for external reasons for poverty.

At the time of the surveys, most poor families were in

socio-contractual relations (70%), the remainder had previously obtained state benefits on the basis of social contracts. Around 80% of the respondents believe that social contracts helped them improve the welfare of their families. Meanwhile, only 17% saw substantial changes and 65% think that the situation changed slightly (Figure 9).

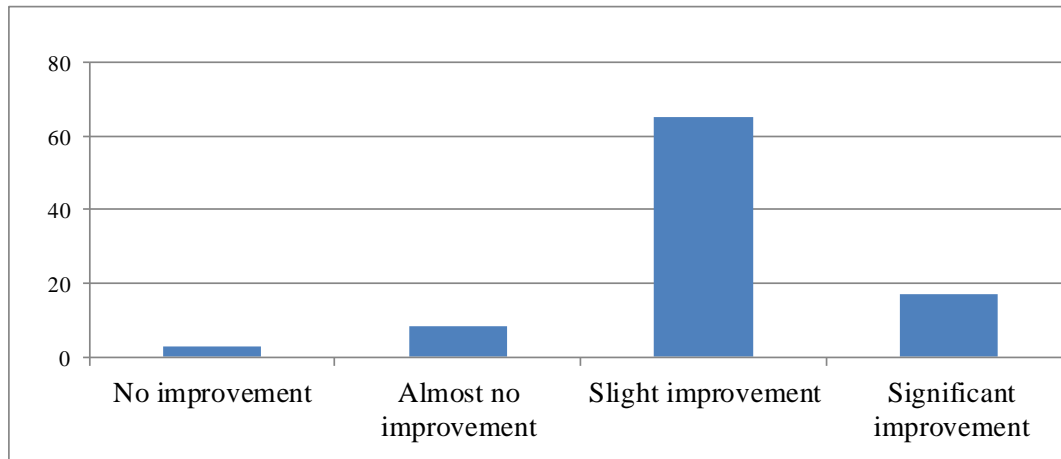


Fig. 9. The respondents' viewpoints on the improvement of their families' welfare as a result of socio-contractual relations (as a percentage of the surveyed)

If one takes as a basis the family's monthly average income (per person), which the surveyed indicated during the survey, and compares it with the official subsistence level in the Perm Krai, only 72 families managed to overcome the threshold of absolute poverty, i.e. their monthly per capita income exceeds or is equal to the officially defined subsistence minimum in the Perm Krai. This number accounts for 7% of all participants of socio-contractual relations who were surveyed in the Perm Krai. Income generated by other 34 families is close to the boundary of the subsistence minimum, although it is below this mark (3% of the surveyed, roughly 10% of the total). However, it should

be borne in mind that in this case, the respondents can willingly deny their unofficial income to keep the status of the poor family and to have the right to get funds for this reason. The participation in socio-contractual relations helped some families find new sources of income. Private subsidiary farming (nearly 40% of the respondents), cattle selling (14.4%), provision of services (11.5%) and wages (9.5%) were mentioned most often (Figure 10). This can be explained by the fact that the project is in high demand in rural areas where conditions for agricultural activities are favorable.

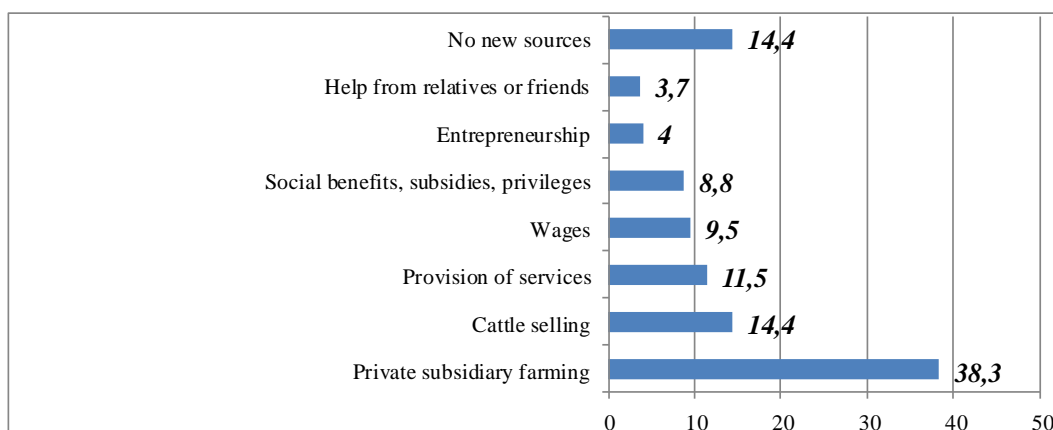


Fig. 10. New sources of income that the respondents found via social contracts (as a percentage of the respondents; it was allowed to give several answers to a question)

The consumption of medical, educational, and home improvement services increased, and this is also part of the main areas of socio-contractual relations. However, overall, the situation surrounding services is the least favorable. Consumption tends to go down, especially this concerns

organized holiday-making (tourist excursion, sanatorium, recreational, cultural and entertainment services).



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Accordingly, the most positive tendencies related to changes in consumption concern food, clothing, healthcare, educational and home improvement areas.

Assessing the quality of social assistance provided by state social security bodies on the basis of social contracts, the study's participants gave quite high average estimates (4.7). A higher mark was given to "specialists' politeness and correctness in the course of communication" (4.79). Slightly lower assessment was given to "the availability of options to choose plans for the execution of the social contract" (4.63). The surveyed pointed to any violations, difficulties or sanctions imposed on them in the course of socio-contractual relations on very rare occasions. Fifty-three participants said that their families were late to provide reports on the execution of contracts, 13 mentioned sanctions mainly in the form of warnings or conversations.

Some patterns, which are confirmed by statistical methods and that characterize peculiarities of socio-contractual relations with poor families in the Perm Krai, were identified. Specifically, there are far more men than women among the respondents who own vehicles, residential facilities and garages. This is so because men more often perform work and provide services related to the use of vehicles, buy garages and vehicles. This category of families tends to live in cities and has a much higher level of education. Moreover, often, this group has no minors so their burden related to dependents is lower. More often they pointed out that they were provided with assistance based on social contracts earlier, i.e. some time has already passed after the beginning of their participation in the program.

It is also important that families that believe that social contracts helped them improve their welfare are more often connected to this category, i.e. possess these resources, especially vehicles. The possession of this group of assets also correlates with the generation of new sources of income due to entrepreneurship and services provided to other people. Furthermore, over the past twelve months, the consumption of some food items (potatoes, milk), goods (hygienic items, perfume and cosmetics, clothing and footwear for kids, linen, blankets, curtains, carpets) and services (medical, educational and hairdressing) has increased. A connection was also found with the higher assessment of the family's financial situation, higher positive self-identification in terms of the welfare of the environment and life satisfaction, as a whole.

When analyzing the data obtained in the course of the study, we identified some other tendencies related to the efficiency of social contracts. Specifically, during the survey, the participants answered the question on whether or not the provision of social benefits via social contracts helped them improve their welfare. As a result, answers given by the families, which found new sources of income from private subsidiary farming and the provision of services, correlate with the opinion that the social contract improved the financial situation of their families. It is interesting that the negative tendency related to education was identified among goals pursued via the social contract. In this case, respondents more often noted that they failed to improve the

welfare of their families.

The respondents, who said that social contracts had helped them, more often gave higher marks for most aspects of assistance based on social contracts on the part of social security bodies. Overall, there is a correlation between families' acknowledgement that social contracts helped them and the much better financial situation, including compared with the environment, and greater life satisfaction.

As a result of the correlation analysis, we found that more time passes after the participation in social contracts, respondents' dependent approach gets deeper, and fewer people think that the participation in social contracts helped them improve their welfare. The same category of the surveyed tended to give a much worse assessment of "fairness of conditions offered and of decisions taken by professionals" in the course of the social contract. This was likely driven by the disappearance of some illusions that the social contract will immediately help get out of poverty and weaker activity of people themselves, which can be a sign of their dependent attitude. However, the same factor of the much earlier participation in the social contract is related to the appearance as a new source of income of wages, cattle selling, and services provided to other people.

The mechanism of socio-contractual relations is based on the technology of the social contract, which is signed between poor families and professionals from social security bodies. As part of the contract, a family takes gradual measures aimed to achieve planned results within the clearly defined period of time. Set goals vary depending on a family's needs and resources and should help overcome poverty. Cooperation, activity, control of results, and targeted one-time payments to a family allow the state to save funds and to encourage independence of the poor to develop skills and acquire resources required to improve their welfare. Main areas of the contracts are the search for work, professional training and additional professional education, conduct of individual entrepreneurial activities, performance of private subsidiary farming activities, and purchase of equipment. The study results allow us to conclude that the social contract improves families' welfare, their financial situation, and the level of consumption of food, goods, and services. The respondents point out that the effect of the social contract is not as high as it could be. Not all participants of social contracts are able to overcome poverty immediately although there are noticeable positive changes. In addition, families are now able to use healthcare, educational, and home improvement services more often. It has been established that the expiration date of the social contract plays a significant role: families that participated in the program earlier rarely believe that they managed to improve their welfare. The conducted survey and interviews allow us to conclude that it is necessary to develop recommendations, the introduction of which might result in higher efficiency of the mechanism of socio-contractual relations with poor families [24].



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