



# Paradoxes of Social Grants in South Africa: The Case of COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant



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## ABSTRACT

South Africa is largely a welfare state because of its extensive social welfare grants. Almost half of the South African population benefits from social welfare grants. Through a literature review analysis, this paper focused on the special COVID-19 grant, also known as the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant. The paper analysed technical reports, working papers from reputable institutions and journal articles on social grants in South Africa. The analysis revealed that social grants in general enable the beneficiaries to access basic needs such as food and clothing; improve living standards; and alleviate poverty. The analysis also showed that the COVID-19 grants reached the previously unreached segment of the population, provided funds for seeking employment; supported childcare; and enhanced digital skills. The provision of SRD was found to be plagued with corruption, lack of capacity of administrative units, and emerging dependence. There is high support for extending and sustaining the grant, while other sources decry the potential of the grant to promote unproductive behaviour among young people, who should be actively involved in the labour market. The paper recommends an objective evaluation of the SRD grant to counter unpleasant socio-economic spillovers and promote the intended purpose. This paper contributes to the scholarship on remedial and developmental welfare in South Africa, with possible lessons for other welfare states globally.

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## INTRODUCTION

South Africa has an extensive social security system like no other country on the African continent. The country is applauded for its comprehensive social security system, characterised by various social grants and programmes to protect and cushion its citizenry from the severe impact of socioeconomic ills, and ill health.<sup>1</sup> Over the last decades, South Africa has been administering a raft of welfare grants that inter alia include,

<sup>1</sup> Stefan Granlund and Tessa Hochfeld, “‘That Child Support Grant Gives Me Powers’ – Exploring Social and Relational Aspects of Cash Transfers in South Africa in Times of Livelihood Change,” *The Journal of Development Studies* 56, no. 6 (June 2, 2020): 1230–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2019.1650170>; N. Noyoo, “South Africa’s Social Policy Response to COVID-19: Relief Measures in an Unequal Society,” *Covid-19 Social Policy Response Series*, 21, 2021; Chibuikem Charles Nnaeme, “‘The Community Comes to Life’: How Social Grants Enable Participation in the Local Economy and Possible Effect on Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery in Soweto South Africa,” *Forum for Development Studies* 49, no. 3 (September 2, 2022): 493–510, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2022.2085167>; Leila Patel, Viwe Dikoko, and Jade Archer, “Social Grants, Livelihoods and Poverty Responses of Social Grant Beneficiaries in South Africa,” *University of Johannesburg, Centre for Development in Africa*, 2023; Olalekan Seyi Olawuyi and Abbyssinia Mushunje, “Welfare Distributional Impact of Special Distress Relief Grant in Eastern Cape Province of South Africa: Evidence from 2021 General Household Survey,” *African Journal of Business and Economic Research* 18, no. 2 (June 18, 2023): 131–51, <https://doi.org/10.31920/1750-4562/2023/v18n2a7>.

child support grants, old age pension grants, disability grants, and war veteran grants among others. With the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, and its concomitant impacts on social, economic, psychological and health dimensions of life, the government introduced the social and economic relief packages, among others, the SRD grant.<sup>2</sup> Statistically, the grant programme enrolled 10.9 million unemployed citizens, adding to more than 18.6 million other social grant beneficiaries.<sup>3</sup> With the introduction of SRD, the population of South Africans under social safety programmes rose to about 29 million, against a population of approximately 61.4 million.<sup>4</sup>

Irrefutably, social grants and welfare schemes generally enable a greater segment of the South African population to afford basic needs such as food, clothes, personal hygiene, and medications to mention but a few.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, Statistics South Africa illustrates that the family and children take the lion's share of the social welfare budget through social grants.<sup>6</sup> This is because, with every R100 spent by the government on welfare, R42 goes to family and child grants, R41 goes to old age, R16 for sickness and disability, and R1 goes to social distress relief such as COVID-19 and other disasters. According to Wessels, the Child Support Grant is notably one of the most developmental and progressive grants as demonstrated by an upward trajectory from 20,000 beneficiaries in 1998 to over 15 million in 2023.<sup>7</sup> This shows that social grants can be a successful policy instrument for addressing various social needs in a country. Nonetheless, grave concerns about the continued growing numbers of beneficiaries as well as the continuation of the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant post-COVID-19 pandemic abound. The question of their sustainability amid the declining economic position of the country is a constant concern for many researchers and policy analysts.

Arguably, these concerns are sparked by the economic woes and the country's dwindling resources, with some scholars perceiving the government's generosity in social grants as a political mask for underperformance.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, from this point of view, political expediency is a critical factor in the administration of social grants in South Africa. Perhaps, this is why the popularity of social grants in South Africa has been criticized by professionals across the divide as avenues of the ruling party accruing political loyalty and cover-up for its failures to deliver jobs, and other transformative services to the public.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Madisa and Amashabalala note that the ruling African National Congress (ANC) boasts that almost 50% of the population is 100% dependent on social grants. Moreover, they highlight that the president affirmed that South Africa is the only country in Africa that is giving grants to almost half of its population every month.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Graham, Sadie, Patel and Seekings note that since the 2009 general election, scholars and political analysts have significantly been speculating on the electoral power of the over 16 million social grant beneficiaries.<sup>11</sup> This speculation corroborates the controversial issuance of food parcels before and during elections and the literature indicating that grant provision has some influence on how

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Khambule, "The Effects of COVID-19 on the South African Informal Economy: Limits and Pitfalls of Government's Response," *Loyola Journal of Social Sciences* 34, no. 1 (2020): 95–109; Republic of South Africa, "Social Grants to Increase, Social Relief of Distress Grant to Stay until 2024," South Africa News Agency, March 22, 2023, <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/social-grants-increase-social-relief-distress-grant-stay-until-2024>; Sheunesu Zhou et al., "Government Social Protection and Households' Welfare during the Covid-19 Pandemic in South Africa," *Journal of Business and Socio-Economic Development* 3, no. 4 (September 19, 2023): 308–21, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBSED-04-2022-0044>.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Social Development, "Annual Report 2021/2022, Republic of South Africa," 2022, <https://portal.dsd.gov.za/DSD-AR/>; K. Madisa and M. Amashabalala, "Half of South Africa's Population Is 100% Dependent on State Welfare," Sowetan Live, January 6, 2023, <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2023-01-06-half-of-south-africas-population-are-100-dependent-on-state-welfare/>.

<sup>4</sup> Madisa and Amashabalala, "Half of South Africa's Population Is 100% Dependent on State Welfare"; Statistics South Africa, "P0318 - General Household Survey (GHS), 2022. Republic of South Africa," 2023, [https://www.statssa.gov.za/?page\\_id=1856&PPN=P0318&SCH=73619](https://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1856&PPN=P0318&SCH=73619).

<sup>5</sup> Elsabé Wessels and Lesley Wood, "Fostering Teachers' Experiences of Well-Being: A Participatory Action Learning and Action Research Approach," *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. 1 (2019); Patel, Dikoko, and Archer, "Social Grants, Livelihoods and Poverty Responses of Social Grant Beneficiaries in South Africa."

<sup>6</sup> Republic of South Africa, "COVID-19 Social Grant Extended until 2025," 2023, <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/covid-19-social-grant-extended-until-2025>.

<sup>7</sup> J.S. Wessels, "A Policy Instrument to Relieve Child Poverty: The Case of the Child Support Grant in South Africa," in *Public Administration Challenges - Cases from Africa*, ed. J.S. Wessels, T. Potgieter, and T. Naidoo (Cape Town: Juta, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Madisa and Amashabalala, "Half of South Africa's Population Is 100% Dependent on State Welfare."

<sup>9</sup> Victoria Graham, Yolanda Sadie, and Leila Patel, "Social Grants, Food Parcels and Voting Behaviour: A Case Study of Three South African Communities," *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 91, no. 1 (2016): 106–35.

<sup>10</sup> Madisa and Amashabalala, "Half of South Africa's Population Is 100% Dependent on State Welfare."

<sup>11</sup> Graham, Sadie, and Patel, "Social Grants, Food Parcels and Voting Behaviour: A Case Study of Three South African Communities"; J. Seekings, "Social Grants and Voting in South Africa" (Cape Town, May 2019).

people vote.<sup>12</sup> With the 2024 general elections looming, the extension of the COVID-19 social grant arguably attracts such sentiments, despite the good intentions and objectives it may have. Therefore, this paper focuses on examining the paradoxes within the social grants in South Africa to provide insights and lessons for social service providers to avert negative spillovers of a well-intended social welfare programme.

South Africa can be regarded as a welfare state, compared to its African peers. This is because it provides for the welfare of the citizens through various grants that even rich countries may not afford. Despite the capacity of social grants to alleviate poverty, lessen inequality, promote financial inclusion, spur economic activities, and provide basic needs, the sustainability of these grant programmes is of critical concern. Researchers and policy commentators hypothesise that the costs of some of these grants supersede the benefits or the desired outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the possible unproductive behavioural outcomes such as dependency syndrome,<sup>14</sup> youth apathy, misuse of the grant money by the youths (through drugs and alcoholism),<sup>15</sup> corruption (Some grants have become conduits of embezzling public funds and misuse of public resources),<sup>16</sup> and a lack of water-tight policies to implement the welfare programmes undermine the efficiency and effectiveness of these grants.<sup>17</sup>

A survey by an Afrobarometer showed that 76% of South Africans believe that the poor should receive grants from the state, and 67% believe that it is the state's responsibility, rather than the families' duty to support the poor.<sup>18</sup> Arguably, this is faulty thinking that is likely to lead to dependence behaviours and families abdicating their social support roles to the state. This is a serious social deficit emanating from the provisions of social welfare programmes. This is more glaring as 59% of South Africans believe that reliance on grants can demotivate recipients from looking for work.<sup>19</sup> It is against this background, that this paper examines the paradoxes of social grants in South Africa, focusing on the SRD grant. This is important because there is a dearth of literature on SRD grants in South Africa, with much of the literature being from institutional working papers and government reports. The analysis of these grants and programmes is significant in informing the government and significant others of the various dimensions of welfare interventions in South Africa.

### ***An Overview of Social Grants in South Africa***

South Africa is a welfare state characterised by various social grants for different categories of beneficiaries. According to Patel, Dikoko and Archer, the regular social grant with the most beneficiaries is the Child Support Grant (CSG) with approximately thirteen million recipients, the Old Age Pension (OAP) with 3.7 million and the Disability Grant (DG) with about a million beneficiaries.<sup>20</sup> The other remaining grants include foster care, care dependency grants for caregivers caring for children with disabilities, the grant-in-aid for the care of a person who needs regular care by another person, and the war veteran grant to mention, but a few. According to the Department of Social Development, the government of South Africa swiftly introduced a special COVID-19 SRD grant of R350, in 2020, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>21</sup> The DSD reports show that more men (67.9%) were approved for the grant as compared to women (32.1%). By the year 2022, the grant value for the OAP, the DG, and the care dependency grant was R1 990 per

<sup>12</sup> Seekings, "Social Grants and Voting in South Africa."

<sup>13</sup> Khambule, "The Effects of COVID-19 on the South African Informal Economy: Limits and Pitfalls of Government's Response"; Noyoo, "South Africa's Social Policy Response to COVID-19: Relief Measures in an Unequal Society"; Erin Torkelson, "Deserving and Undeserving Welfare States: Cash Transfers and Hegemonic Struggles in South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 48, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 43–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2022.2004772>.

<sup>14</sup> M. Moosa and J. Patel, "South Africans Support Social Grants but Say Work at Any Wage Beats Unemployment" (The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, South Africa, May 26, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Prudence Thobile Zikhali, "Social Grants and Poverty Alleviation in South Africa: Addressing Dependency Attitude and Behaviour," *Gender and Behaviour* 19, no. 2 (2021): 17854–63.

<sup>16</sup> V. Megannon, "Experiences of Accessing the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant in South Africa" (Cape Town, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Beauty Zindi and Elvin Shava, "Confronting the Monster": Exploring the Implementation of Social Protection Measures Amid COVID-19 in South Africa," in *Exploring the Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, ed. U. Randa and J. Govender (Apple Academic Press, 2022), 3–19; J. Mudau and T. Madzivhandila, "COVID-19 in South Africa: Corruption in the Running of the State Affairs," *African Journal in Education & Transformation (AJET)* 2, no. 1 (2022); Monicca Thulisile Bhuda, Thabang Motswaledi, and Phemelo Marumo, "Moral Decay, Government, and Looting in South Africa during COVID-19.," *African Journal of Development Studies* 13 (2023).

<sup>18</sup> Moosa and Patel, "South Africans Support Social Grants but Say Work at Any Wage Beats Unemployment."

<sup>19</sup> Moosa and Patel, "South Africans Support Social Grants but Say Work at Any Wage Beats Unemployment."

<sup>20</sup> Patel, Dikoko, and Archer, "Social Grants, Livelihoods and Poverty Responses of Social Grant Beneficiaries in South Africa."

<sup>21</sup> Department of Social Development, *The Rapid Assessment of the Implementation and Utilisation of the Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant* (Republic of South Africa, 2021).

month, the foster care grant was R1 070; the grant-in-aid was R480 and the CSG was R480 per child.<sup>22</sup> To access any of the grants, one must meet the eligibility criteria such as level of income, health conditions, and age among others.<sup>23</sup> Generally, all grants are paid monthly through banks and other financial partners. However, there is no statutory prescription on the usage of the monies received.

Literature on social grants in South Africa indicates various uses of the grant money such as being seed money for micro-enterprises, growing and sustaining businesses, maintaining cash flows, supporting consumption, investing in saving local schemes, improving the general household welfare, alleviating poverty, a mechanism for wealth distribution, and financial inclusion.<sup>24</sup> According to Trafford and Swartz, appropriate social protection interventions can contribute to breaking the cyclical relationship between poverty and disability and may improve social inclusion. In addition, The World Bank affirms that an effective social assistance system reduces poverty and inequality rates.<sup>25</sup> Thus, cash transfer programmes have positive and important outcomes on a wide range of human aspects such as nutrition and food security, attaining skills, healthcare, labour supply, and other livelihoods. However, against this background, the official expanded unemployment rate in South Africa continues to increase. For instance, in the first quarter of 2020, it rose from 39.7% to 44.4% in the second quarter of 2021 (during the high spike of COVID-19).<sup>26</sup> This high rate of unemployment led the government to announce and implement the special COVID-19 SRD grant of R350 every month for six months,<sup>27</sup> but it has been extended until March 2025, a move that will cost the government R34 billion.<sup>28</sup>

Initially, the SRD grant was intended to be a temporary relief for persons who had lost jobs and incomes due to COVID-19-related regulations such as lockdowns and retrenchments, to meet their personal and family needs.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps, the continued extension of the grant is an indication that the country has not surmounted the socio-economic challenges caused by the pandemic and its concomitant impact on human life. Notably, the government's approach to the extension of this grant seems to be systematic, with the first extension being implemented in October 2020, then in January 2021, followed by August 2021 to March 2022, then March 2022 to March 2023, and the recent one to up to 2025.<sup>30</sup> Considering the current rate of unemployment in South Africa and the anticipated increase, the SRD grants will possibly continue to attract more beneficiaries. Consequently, more pressure will be exerted on government resources, as well as human resources to support this programme. Arguably, it might also become difficult for the government to end this grant programme without protests from the beneficiaries, with the prevailing calls to make the grant permanent.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is significant for the government to be decisive in its intentions regarding the SRD grant post-COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>22</sup> Patel, Dikoko, and Archer, "Social Grants, Livelihoods and Poverty Responses of Social Grant Beneficiaries in South Africa."

<sup>23</sup> Zara Trafford and Leslie Swartz, "The Care Dependency Grant for Children with Disabilities in South Africa: Perspectives from Implementation Officials," *Development Southern Africa* 40, no. 2 (March 4, 2023): 259–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2021.1981250>.

<sup>24</sup> Chibuikem C. Nnaeme, Leila Patel, and Sophie Plagerson, "How Cash Transfers Enable Agency through Livelihoods in South Africa," *World Development* 131 (July 2020), 104956, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.104956>; Leila Patel and Eleanor Ross, "Connecting Cash Transfers with Care for Better Child and Family Well-Being: Evidence from a Qualitative Evaluation in South Africa," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 39, no. 2 (2022): 195–207; Talent Zwane, Mduduzi Biyase, and September Rooderick, "Assessing the Impact of Social Grants on Household Welfare Using Propensity Score Matching Approach," *International Journal of Development Issues*, July 5, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJDI-01-2022-0024>; Patel, Dikoko, and Archer, "Social Grants, Livelihoods and Poverty Responses of Social Grant Beneficiaries in South Africa"; Odile Mackett, "Social Grants as a Tool for Poverty Reduction in South Africa? A Longitudinal Analysis Using the NIDS Survey.," *African Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2020), <http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v19/v19i1a13pdf>; Maya Goldman et al., "Simulation of Options to Replace the Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant and Close the Poverty Gap at the Food Poverty Line" (WIDER Working Paper, 2021); Megannon, "Experiences of Accessing the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant in South Africa"; Ken Miyajima, *The Link Between Social Grant and Employment in South Africa* (International Monetary Fund, 2023); Trafford and Swartz, "The Care Dependency Grant for Children with Disabilities in South Africa: Perspectives from Implementation Officials."

<sup>25</sup> The World Bank, "South Africa: A New Social Assistance Assessment Aims to Help Strengthen Policies and Programs for the Poor .," *Press Release* (Pretoria, 2021).

<sup>26</sup> J. Mathebula, T. Fish, and S. Masvaure, "Should the COVID-19 Lockdown Social Relief of Distress Grant Be Made Permanent?" (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Republic of South Africa, "Social Grants to Increase, Social Relief of Distress Grant to Stay until 2024."

<sup>28</sup> Republic of South Africa, "COVID-19 Social Grant Extended until 2025."

<sup>29</sup> Department of Social Development, *The Rapid Assessment of the Implementation and Utilisation of the Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant*.

<sup>30</sup> Republic of South Africa, "COVID-19 Social Grant Extended until 2025."

<sup>31</sup> Patel, Dikoko, and Archer, "Social Grants, Livelihoods and Poverty Responses of Social Grant Beneficiaries in South Africa."

## METHODOLOGY

To understand the multifaceted dimensions and impacts of welfare programmes, different research approaches and methods such as quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods could be used.<sup>32</sup> This paper adopted a literature review analysis, a sub-method of qualitative research to examine the dimensions of social grants, with close attention to the SRD grant introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The literature search lacked research publications looking critically at the outcomes of the SRD in the country. Hence this paper sought to address that gap by examining the good and the bad of SRD and provide insightful lessons to the significant stakeholders. However, there is a plethora of literature on COVID-19 and other social grants in South Africa, thus providing adequate information to conduct a rich discourse analysis on the subject matter. Literature review provides a platform for critical analysis and understanding of social issues from multiple lenses in social settings. This was useful in this paper because it entails the health, social, economic, and political dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic and social grants in South Africa.

The paper utilised journal articles published in the English language, mostly from the South African context. The articles used quantitative, qualitative, and review methods. These multiple methods provide confidence that the analysis in this paper is balanced, verifiable, and reliable. The articles and reports from credible organizations and government websites were searched using the following words and statements; social grants, social relief of distress, COVID-19 grant, challenges and benefits of social grants, beneficiaries of social grants, etc. The databases searched include the Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The journal articles published between the years 2020 and 2023 were utilised. The COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak during the years 2020 and 2021 but began to cede in 2022. However, the impact continues to linger in various contexts of human development. The findings of the study were analysed thematically and discussed to enhance further understanding of the subject.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Generally, welfare programmes have both positive and possible negative outcomes. In this section, those outcomes are presented to illustrate the paradoxes of the Social Relief of Distress Grant in South Africa.

### The Benefits of Social Relief of Distress Grant

#### ***a. SRD grant supported job searching post-COVID-19 pandemic***

South Africa has a high rate of unemployment and poverty. This means that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, some segments of the population were already in distress and vulnerable situations that were worsened by the economic impact of COVID-19. This implies that the SRD grant did not only address the vulnerabilities caused by COVID-19, but also pre-COVID-19 socio-economic vulnerabilities.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the SRD grant benefitted both the then and also, the COVID-19-related unemployed persons. Using the money from this grant, literature indicates that some of the money was used to seek work.<sup>34</sup> This includes using the money for transport costs, internet café costs, and buying mobile data among others. Therefore, the grant facilitated a possible transition from unemployment to rejoining work or seeking new opportunities post-COVID-19 pandemic.

#### ***b. Sustaining and promoting food security and nutrition***

The main objective of social welfare programmes is to provide and promote access to basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. With the COVID-19-related regulations that affected most informal workers,

<sup>32</sup> J.W. Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative & Mixed Methods Approach*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd, 2014); M. Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide for Small-Scale Social Research Projects* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2014); Q.M. Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. Integrating Theory and Practices*, 4th ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Mathebula, Fish, and Masvaure, "Should the COVID-19 Lockdown Social Relief of Distress Grant Be Made Permanent?"

<sup>34</sup> Zikhali, "Social Grants and Poverty Alleviation in South Africa: Addressing Dependency Attitude and Behaviour"; Seyi Olawuyi and Mushunje, "Welfare Distributional Impact of Special Distress Relief Grant in Eastern Cape Province of South Africa: Evidence from 2021 General Household Survey"; Zhou et al., "Government Social Protection and Households' Welfare during the Covid-19 Pandemic in South Africa."

SRD became pivotal in household food security and nutritional needs.<sup>35</sup> This is because the SRD grant became the main source of income to buy food items for households that did not have any other form of a grant or formal employment. According to Mazenda, Masiya and Mandiyanike, the SRD intervention was necessary to cushion households against income-induced food insecurity.<sup>36</sup> This means that in the absence of the grant, there could be a state of misery and starvation for households that depended on day-to-day wages earned from informal economic activities, which were hampered by COVID-19. Furthermore, the SRD grant augmented such incomes of households with meagre sources of income to meet their basic needs consistently. Additionally, the literature indicates that the SRD grant afforded households other requisite basic items such as clothing, toiletries, electricity, and medication.<sup>37</sup> These findings indeed indicate the critical role played by this grant in the country.

### **c. SRD grant supported early child development and care**

The implementation of lockdown regulation in South Africa culminated in the closure of schools. Alternatively, there was an introduction to online learning.<sup>38</sup> Online learning was to be supported by the internet, which many South Africans are not connected to. Therefore, the SRD grant provided income that was used for buying internet data for online learning and accessing learning materials for children. Moreover, with the formal schools being closed, the SRD grant provided additional income that could cater for some expenses of Early Childhood Development services when the parents or the caregivers engaged in other economic activities to boost the household income.<sup>39</sup>

### **d. SRD grant promoted well-being and human dignity**

Eclectic literature indicates that properly managed welfare programmes and social grants are instruments of empowerment and social progression.<sup>40</sup> Irrespective of the category of social grants, when beneficiaries afford or access basic services such as food, clothing, shelter, and medication, they attain some psychologically optimal function. Managing social distress is important for one's psychosocial well-being, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when everyone was worried about their health, and safety. Literature on the importance of SRD indicates that it promoted women's hygiene and dignity, by enabling them to afford basic toiletries and sanitary towels.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, this helped preserve the self-esteem of many women and girls, because the menstrual cycle can be stressful.

According to Köhler and Bhorat, the COVID-19 grant is relatively pro-poor because those who live in the poorest households experience a more successful application than those from the wealthiest households.<sup>42</sup> The expansiveness of the SRD depicts a sense of inclusivity in that the selection criteria favoured most of the vulnerable groups in South Africa. The qualifying criteria required one to be 18 years

<sup>35</sup> Seyi Olawuyi and Mushunje, "Welfare Distributional Impact of Special Distress Relief Grant in Eastern Cape Province of South Africa: Evidence from 2021 General Household Survey."

<sup>36</sup> Adriano Mazenda, Tyanai Masiya, and David Mandiyanike, "The Effectiveness of the COVID-19 Economic and Social Relief Package as a Poverty Alleviation Strategy in South Africa," in *Socioeconomic Dynamics of the COVID-19 Crisis. Contributions to Economics.*, ed. N. Faghih and A. Forouharfar (Cham: Springer, 2022), 215–30, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89996-7\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89996-7_10).

<sup>37</sup> T. Köhler and H. Bhorat, "COVID-19, Social Protection, and the Labour Market in South Africa: Are Social Grants Being Targeted at the Most Vulnerable?" (Cape Town, August 2020); Mackett, "Social Grants as a Tool for Poverty Reduction in South Africa? A Longitudinal Analysis Using the NIDS Survey."; L. Gronbach, J. Seekings, and V. Megannon, "Social Protection in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from South Africa" ( Washington DC, February 2022); Seyi Olawuyi and Mushunje, "Welfare Distributional Impact of Special Distress Relief Grant in Eastern Cape Province of South Africa: Evidence from 2021 General Household Survey."

<sup>38</sup> Robert Mutemi Kajiita, Thanduxolo Nomngcoyiya, and Simon Murote Kang'ethe, "The 'Revolution' on Teaching and Learning: Implications of Covid-19 on Social Work Education in Institutions of Higher Learning in Africa," *African Journal of Social Work* 10, no. 3 (2020): 25–33.

<sup>39</sup> Lucy Jamieson and Lorraine van Blerk, "Responding to COVID-19 in South Africa – Social Solidarity and Social Assistance," *Children's Geographies* 20, no. 4 (July 4, 2022): 427–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2021.1924359>; Patel and Ross, "Connecting Cash Transfers with Care for Better Child and Family Well-Being: Evidence from a Qualitative Evaluation in South Africa"; Patel, Dikoko, and Archer, "Social Grants, Livelihoods and Poverty Responses of Social Grant Beneficiaries in South Africa."

<sup>40</sup> Granlund and Hochfeld, "That Child Support Grant Gives Me Powers' – Exploring Social and Relational Aspects of Cash Transfers in South Africa in Times of Livelihood Change"; Nnaeme, Patel, and Plagerson, "How Cash Transfers Enable Agency through Livelihoods in South Africa"; Nnaeme, "The Community Comes to Life': How Social Grants Enable Participation in the Local Economy and Possible Effect on Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery in Soweto South Africa."

<sup>41</sup> Köhler and Bhorat, "COVID-19, Social Protection, and the Labour Market in South Africa: Are Social Grants Being Targeted at the Most Vulnerable?"

<sup>42</sup> T. Köhler and H. Bhorat, "Social Assistance during South Africa's National Lock-Down: Examining the COVID-19 Grant, Changes to the Child Support Grant, and Post-October Policy Options" (Cape Town, October 2020).

old (the majority of unemployed South Africans are youths) and below the age of 60, South African citizens, permanent residents or refugees registered with Home Affairs, and who are resident within the borders of South Africa, must be unemployed, and not receiving any other income.<sup>43</sup> Looking at these criteria, there is no doubt that the grant was as inclusive as possible, and by so doing, promoted the human dignity of South African residents (not only citizens), but all those who were and became vulnerable due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### ***e. SRD grant and digital literacy***

The application for the SRD grants was done electronically with the help of a mobile code, or internet.<sup>44</sup> The digital technology systems in the application, verification, and payment process, have been perceived as a precursor for the advent of digital welfare in South Africa due to the success of the special COVID-19 grant administration.<sup>45</sup> However, the lack of connectivity and affordability of data as well as clear communication on payment outlets are notable challenges of the electronic administration of this grant. Moreover, as noted by Megannon, the digital technical challenges systematically excluded some of the poor and uneducated from accessing the SRD grant, yet they were the main target groups during the pandemic.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, the frequent interaction with the technology during the administration of this grant promoted knowledge and skills in digital technology among the beneficiaries and the service providers.

#### **The Paradox of SRD Grants**

##### ***a. The state's incapacity to adequately administer the grant***

According to Seeking, the administration of the COVID-19 special grant was severely delayed by the lack of the state's capacity to implement the new set of programmes.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, the prospective benefits fell far short of what was promised. The key administrative bodies, that is the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) and the National Department of Social Development leadership and capacity have been questioned about achieving the objective of social grants in general.<sup>48</sup> The high number of applicants for SRD grants exposed glaring administrative and skills gaps in these bodies, hence sparking concerns about the effectiveness and efficiency of the grants.

##### ***b. The SRD grant is inadequate***

The government and technical reports acknowledge the necessity of the SRD grant in South Africa.<sup>49</sup> However, the literature also indicates a glaring inadequacy of the grant in alleviating poverty and other social ills. For instance, Megannon highlights that despite the SRD grant aiming to prevent and alleviate extreme poverty for the most vulnerable and those not benefiting directly from the already established social protection measures, the amount is not linked to any objective readdress of poverty.<sup>50</sup> This is because the amount of R350 falls below the national food poverty line of ZAR585 per person per month.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, the literature indicates that the need for more money was attributed to the increased food needs because of children being housebound; loss of school meals for children; individuals and families being unable to rely on traditional reciprocity networks for borrowing money and food; and increases in

<sup>43</sup> Department of Social Development, *The Rapid Assessment of the Implementation and Utilisation of the Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant*.

<sup>44</sup> Department of Social Development, *The Rapid Assessment of the Implementation and Utilisation of the Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant*; Zikhali, "Social Grants and Poverty Alleviation in South Africa: Addressing Dependency Attitude and Behaviour."

<sup>45</sup> Gronbach, Seekings, and Megannon, "Social Protection in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from South Africa."

<sup>46</sup> Gronbach, Seekings, and Megannon, "Social Protection in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from South Africa."

<sup>47</sup> J. Seeking, "Bold Promises, Constrained Capacity, Stumbling Delivery: The Expansion of Social Protection in Response to the Covid-19 Lockdown in South Africa" (Cape Town, July 2020).

<sup>48</sup> Seekings, "Bold Promises, Constrained Capacity, Stumbling Delivery: The Expansion of Social Protection in Response to the Covid-19 Lockdown in South Africa"; Mazenda, Masiya, and Mandiyanike, "The Effectiveness of the COVID-19 Economic and Social Relief Package as a Poverty Alleviation Strategy in South Africa."

<sup>49</sup> Department of Social Development, *The Rapid Assessment of the Implementation and Utilisation of the Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant*; Department of Social Development, "Annual Report 2021/2022, Republic of South Africa"; The World Bank, "South Africa: A New Social Assistance Assessment Aims to Help Strengthen Policies and Programs for the Poor ."

<sup>50</sup> Megannon, "Experiences of Accessing the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant in South Africa."

<sup>51</sup> Megannon, "Experiences of Accessing the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant in South Africa."

food prices.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps, this is why in the year 2024, proposals have been made to increase social grants as follows: the old age grant from R1985 to R2085; war veterans grant from R2005 to R2105; disability grants to R2085; the foster care grant to R1125; Care dependency grants to R2085; and Child support grants to R505.<sup>53</sup>

### c. Shades of corruption in administering the SRD grant

According to Megannon, SRD grant beneficiaries have regularly complained of inconsistent payments, and corruption at points of payment.<sup>54</sup> The inconsistencies in payments are characterised by varying amounts among the beneficiaries, and payment date changes have been serious concerns for the beneficiaries. Some beneficiaries have reported to have received more money than expected for a particular month, and abrupt change in another indicating possible irregularities. Moreover, Devereux notes that setting up new temporary social assistance programmes was slow and susceptible to targeting errors and corruption, hence undermining the rights and privileges of those deserving the social assistance.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, Torkelson<sup>56</sup> reports that social assistance is marred with unclear demarcation of deserving and undeserving beneficiaries, a glaring challenge encountered during the administration of SRD grants in South Africa.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Bhuda, Motswaledi, Marumo, Mudau and Madzivhandila note that the financial responses to COVID-19 in South Africa exposed the moral decay and the appetite to loot and embezzle public resources.<sup>58</sup> This points to aspects of malpractices in recruiting the beneficiaries and diverting the allocated resources to personal gains. This stifles the objectives of welfare programmes towards ameliorating suffering among the indigent.

## DISCUSSION

Social grants are such an important social security safety net in South Africa, a country characterised by poverty, inequality, and high levels of unemployment. Nonetheless, social grants have their positives and negatives as indicated in this paper. This paper focused on SRD grants to examine and understand the dynamics informing its introduction and possible outcomes. The paper has established that SRD grants had among others the following benefits: supported job searching and economic activities; food security; childcare and development; promoted well-being and human dignity; and promoted digital literacy. To the contrary and paradoxically, the SRD grant was marred with corruption; the incapacity of the state agencies to effectively administer the grant; and the unproductive behaviour of beneficiaries (youth apathy, dependence, laziness, misuse of the grant money etc.). As indicated in other studies, social grants in South Africa are significant in improving the standard of living for the indigent and are the main source of income and relief for low-income households.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, social welfare grants in South Africa are pro-poor especially those targeting children, the elderly, and people living with disabilities. Moreover, the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant is perceived to be people-centric for it covers individuals who were vulnerable pre-pandemic and during the pandemic.<sup>60</sup>

However, as much as South Africa is applaudable for such an extensive social welfare programme financially, its economic transformation and emancipation remain to be desired. Arguably, this is because

<sup>52</sup> Margaret S. Winchester, Brian King, and Andrea Rishworth, "'It's Not Enough': Local Experiences of Social Grants, Economic Precarity, and Health Inequity in Mpumalanga, South Africa," *Wellbeing, Space and Society* 2 (2021): 100044, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2021.100044>.

<sup>53</sup> Republic of South Africa, "Social Grants to Increase, Social Relief of Distress Grant to Stay until 2024."

<sup>54</sup> Megannon, "Experiences of Accessing the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant in South Africa."

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Devereux, "Social Protection Responses to COVID-19 in Africa," *Global Social Policy* 21, no. 3 (December 1, 2021): 421–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680181211021260>.

<sup>56</sup> Torkelson, E. (2022). Deserving and undeserving welfare States: Cash transfers and hegemonic struggles in South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 48(1), 43–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2022.2004772>.

<sup>57</sup> Torkelson, "Deserving and Undeserving Welfare States: Cash Transfers and Hegemonic Struggles in South Africa."

<sup>58</sup> Bhuda, Motswaledi, and Marumo, "Moral Decay, Government, and Looting in South Africa during COVID-19."; Mudau and Madzivhandila, "COVID-19 in South Africa: Corruption in the Running of the State Affairs."

<sup>59</sup> Köhler and Bhorat, "COVID-19, Social Protection, and the Labour Market in South Africa: Are Social Grants Being Targeted at the Most Vulnerable?"; Köhler and Bhorat, "Social Assistance during South Africa's National Lock-Down: Examining the COVID-19 Grant, Changes to the Child Support Grant, and Post-October Policy Options"; Mark Ellison et al., "A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Effectiveness of Prison Education in Reducing Recidivism and Increasing Employment," *Probation Journal* 64, no. 2 (2017): 108–28.

<sup>60</sup> H. Bhorat, M. Oosthuizen, and B. Stanwix, "Social Assistance amidst the Covid-19 Epidemic in South Africa: An Impact Assessment," July 2020; Gronbach, Seekings, and Megannon, "Social Protection in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from South Africa."



high indices of poverty, unemployment and inequality persist, begging the question of the effectiveness of these social grants, as well as their sustainability. This is especially true with the additional and continuation of the SRD grant, which seems that the objective is not yet clear post-COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>61</sup> According to Bhorat et al., social assistance meant to mitigate the consequences of COVID-19 should not be perceived as a standard poverty reduction strategy, but just a temporal financial coping response to mitigate the income shocks for the vulnerable and severely affected by the pandemic.<sup>62</sup> Literature alludes that the pandemic-induced grant has added more pressure on the government's financial and human resources.<sup>63</sup> According to Gronbach, Seekings, and Megannon,<sup>64</sup> during the COVID-19 pandemic, the South African government adopted a cash-based relief approach through unemployment benefits for formal sector workers and cash transfers to vulnerable individuals such as informal workers, and those not benefiting from the existing grants. This ambitious drive reached more than 30 million South Africans, who experienced or were vulnerable or expressed social distress during the pandemic.

Against this background, research indicates that South Africans prefer being employed even with low pay than not having a job at all.<sup>65</sup> This shows that the inability of the government and the private sectors to create adequate job opportunities is causing the widening of welfare programmes in South Africa. A study by Moosa and Patel highlighted that South Africans would prefer an economy with low wages and low unemployment over one with high wages and high unemployment.<sup>66</sup> From a human development perspective, having more people employed would contribute to lessening income disparities in the country and reducing dependence on state safety nets. Currently, South Africa is regarded as a very unequal country because of the differences in income indices and wealth accumulation between the poor and the rich. Irrefutably, inequality is one of the reasons why social grants are widely distributed and supported across the country, despite concerns about possible outcomes that may demotivate recipients from looking for work. Moreover, this analysis revealed that social grants can result in unprecedented outcomes such as youth apathy, dependence syndrome, drug abuse and alcoholism, and weakening family social responsibilities. These findings corroborate Moosa and Patel's study which found faulty beliefs among South Africans that it is the government's responsibility to help the poor.<sup>67</sup> Perceiving the government as being responsible for all the woes of the poor is likely to make people fail to take the initiative in finding solutions besetting themselves, and their families.

However, a study by Seekings indicates a different view where 53% of the respondents intimated that physically able adults should work for the money they receive from the state.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the SRD grants provisioned to physically able adults should not be perceived as a permanent income solution for them. Alternatively, the state could modify the grant into a form of work-related wages, such as cleaning the townships and providing security in communities and government facilities among others to instil work ethics. This would bring the dignity associated with working and attaining skills that can propel the beneficiaries to other forms of formal employment. Receiving grants for physically and mentally abled people may attract some form of stigma from the community and the beneficiaries' peers. This points to the gaps in social welfare systems in the country, which the World Bank identified as limited support to working-age adults and informal workers in particular; weak integration across programmes and government agencies; and the system's limited ability to address household needs comprehensively.<sup>69</sup> The World Bank reported that the country's social cash transfers are not fully and strategically integrated with other support services to help recipient households and individuals exit poverty. Therefore, for the SRD grant to have a transformative difference in the country and address issues of unemployment, poverty and inequality, a strategic integration framework needs to be in place. Such a framework should clearly outline

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<sup>61</sup> Gronbach, Seekings, and Megannon, "Social Protection in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from South Africa."

<sup>62</sup> Bhorat, Oosthuizen, and Stanwix, "Social Assistance amidst the Covid-19 Epidemic in South Africa: An Impact Assessment ."

<sup>63</sup> Moosa, M. & Patel, J. (2020). South Africans support social grants but say work at any wage beats unemployment. [Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 364 | 26 May 2020], The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, South Africa.

<sup>64</sup> Gronbach, L., Seekings, J. & Megannon, V. (2022). Social protection in the COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons from South Africa. [CGD Policy Paper 252 February 2022]. Center for Global Development. Washington DC.

<sup>65</sup> Gronbach, Seekings, and Megannon, "Social Protection in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from South Africa."

<sup>66</sup> Moosa and Patel, "South Africans Support Social Grants but Say Work at Any Wage Beats Unemployment."

<sup>67</sup> Moosa and Patel, "South Africans Support Social Grants but Say Work at Any Wage Beats Unemployment."

<sup>68</sup> Seekings, "Social Grants and Voting in South Africa ."

<sup>69</sup> The World Bank, "South Africa: A New Social Assistance Assessment Aims to Help Strengthen Policies and Programs for the Poor ."

tangible outcomes such as the acquisition of skills, social connectedness, psychological and social emancipation, and entrepreneurial and enterprise development. This would be useful in tackling negative behaviour outcomes of social grants such as apathy, dependence and reluctance to seek employment.

The findings also indicate that the provision of social grants has a component of political expediency. However, according to Seekings, despite social grants being paid to many South Africans, they do not determine the enduring loyalties to the ruling party or accredit the overall performance of the government.<sup>70</sup> On the contrary, these researchers argue that the provision of certain social grants could have a political impact, especially when the recipients perceive it as life-changing or as the only source of their livelihood. This is likely to happen when the other political parties dissent and threaten to withdraw such benefits upon assuming power. Therefore, even though there is a lack of clear significant scientific evidence between the provision of social grants and political loyalty and expediency in South Africa, experiential knowledge of political strategies, this assertion bears some truth. This thinking is subjective to the extension of SRD grants to 2025, after the 2024 general elections in South Africa.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

This paper recommends a strategic integration of social grants such as SRD with work-related activities to develop and promote skill development and transfer, enterprise development, and socioeconomic emancipatory programmes. The social service providers such as social workers should closely monitor the behavioural outcomes of the beneficiaries of these grants to ensure the intended purpose is met.

## **CONCLUSION**

Social welfare in South Africa manifests a paradox. This paper attempted to illustrate these paradoxes. Firstly, South Africa is applaudable for running the most extensive social welfare programmes in Africa, where almost half of the population benefits from various forms of social grants. The paper established that most of the literature agrees that social grants in South Africa are instrumental in alleviating poverty, improving the standards of living, and addressing inequality. Moreover, the decision to introduce the SRD grant has been overwhelmingly supported by various sources, because of the relief it brought to households during the pandemic. To the contrary, however, the continuation of the SRD grant is contested with the proponents advocating for its permanency to cushion the effects of high unemployment and poverty, while the antagonists argue against its sustainability, the cost to the government, negative behaviour outcomes such as youth apathy, and dependence syndrome. This implies that despite the good intentions of welfare programmes in South Africa, the dwindling economy against a growing dependent population is a concern for sustainability and unproductive social behaviour. This is thought-provoking when the objectives of the social grants and other welfare programmes are still premised on approaches to providing basic needs such as food and clothing, which are non-productive in nature. The high number of people without the requisite skills and training for employability deems the prospects of reducing the population under safety nets, alleviating poverty, and lessening inequality, and unemployment in the country.

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Robert M Kajiita did the conceptualization, and the preparing of the entire manuscript. Simon M Kang'ethe did the conceptualization and editing of the manuscript.

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<sup>70</sup> Seekings, "Social Grants and Voting in South Africa ."

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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