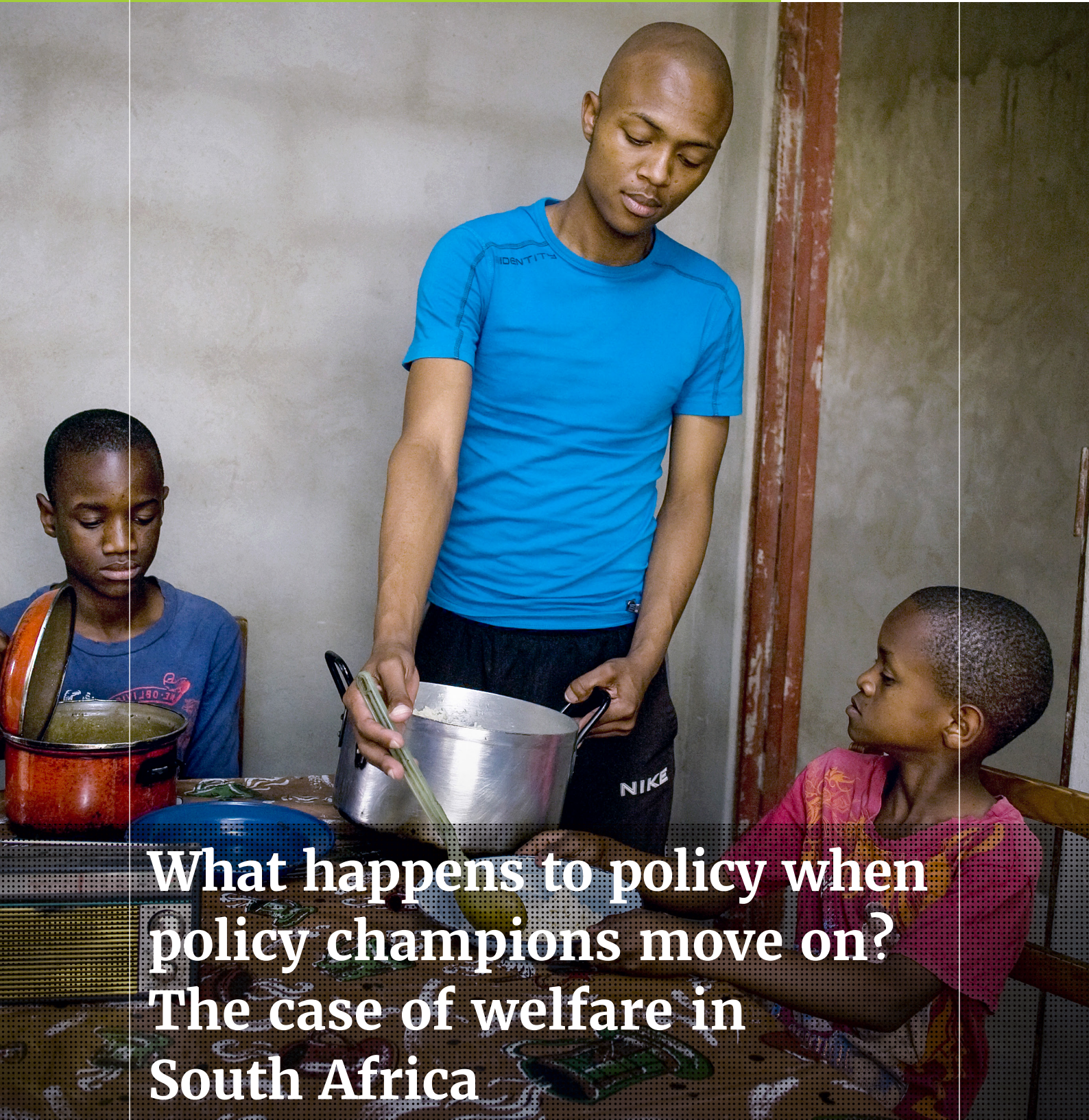


RESEARCH BRIEFING  
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MAKING ALL  
VOICES COUNT

WHEN DOES THE STATE LISTEN?

A GRAND CHALLENGE  
FOR DEVELOPMENT



# What happens to policy when policy champions move on? The case of welfare in South Africa

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## Further reading

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Darko, T. (2016) *How does government responsiveness come about? The politics of accountability in Ghana's National Health Insurance Scheme*, Brighton: IDS

Katera, L. (2016) *Why is it so hard for non-state actors to be heard? Inside Tanzania's education policies*, Brighton: IDS

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Salome, N. (2016) *Has Kenya's ICT revolution triggered more citizen participation?*, Brighton: IDS

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## When does the state listen?

Communication between the state and citizens is an essential element for an equal and just society. Growing social inequalities, lack of proper public services, and denial of basic human rights all act to widen existing communication gaps. Key to bridging these gaps is ensuring not only that citizen voices are heard, but also that states have the capacity and incentive to listen and respond. As much of the literature on accountability focuses on citizen voices, a group of researchers from Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania – in collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies – decided to look at state responsiveness. Trying to find instances of accountable governance, when the state is responsive to citizen voice, this team of researchers interviewed key actors across the state–citizen spectrum who had been involved in landmark social justice policy processes during major junctures of democratisation in these four countries. Calling their research project *When Does the State Listen?* (Loureiro *et al.* 2016), they examined when and how the state listened, and to which actors; and why, at times, it chose not to listen.

The researchers identified three types of juncture when the state listened:

- (1) ‘hearing’ moments, when the state engaged with citizen voices but did not change the way it acted;
- (2) ‘consultation’ moments, when it engaged with citizen voices through two-way dialogue, resulting in one-sided action;
- and (3) ‘concertation’ moments, when coalitions between reform-

minded officials and politicians and organised citizen voices engaged in two-way dialogue and action for accountable governance. They witnessed concertation moments when state and non-state actors shared a sense of urgency and a common goal, despite different understandings of accountable governance. But they also found that states often reverted to consulting or hearing, as concertation moments are arduous and temporary, and part of larger, ever-changing policy processes.

In this brief, Aalia Cassim refers to the role of policy champions in driving the 1997 reform of South Africa’s welfare policy, which established a grant system that today covers about 16 million recipients. She goes on to discuss the effect of their departure: although the reform that they pushed through conceptualised a ‘developmental’ welfare approach which favoured empowerment of poor South Africans, their departure meant that key advocates for the implementation of this approach were lost. When champions move on, they take with them their expertise, networking abilities, and persistence. They leave behind a vacuum of voices and ears, meaning that fewer people talk and fewer people listen.

## Policy champions and the 1997 White Paper for Social Welfare

While South Africa’s welfare network is large compared to most other developing countries, inequality remains persistently



high and many people live in poverty without adequate care. South Africa's welfare budget favours social assistance in the form of cash transfers, and the welfare net is a consistent 4% of gross domestic product; its importance in alleviating poverty cannot be overstated. Evidence suggests that the Department for Social Development's (DSD) flagship grant, the Child Support Grant (CSG), has had a significant effect on

improving early childhood nutrition (Agüero, Carter and Woolard 2006) and is correlated with improved performance of school-going children, as well as an increase in household food consumption and the motivation of the primary caregiver (Coetzee 2013).

However, the original vision for social welfare that was developed during the onset of South Africa's new democracy



Foster child grant application by a 20-year-old foster parent.

*When champions move on, they take with them their expertise, networking abilities and persistence. They leave behind a vacuum of voices and ears, meaning that fewer people talk and fewer people listen.*

was one that extended beyond merely keeping the poor above the breadline with cash transfers; rather, it was a vision of developing communities and empowering the poor to thrive, thus weakening their dependence on government transfers (see Box 1, page 6). This vision was driven by a few key individuals involved in the politics of social welfare at the time: South Africa's welfare policy champions.

A policy champion (or entrepreneur, or advocate) is someone – often a charismatic individual – who has a pet policy that they nurture for years, waiting for a window of opportunity to open so that they can suggest their policy as the solution to a pressing problem (Kingdon 2002). The policy often becomes credible because a sufficient amount of resources and time have been dedicated to its formulation. Policy champions can be part of government – as elected officials or bureaucrats – or represent civil society interest groups or research organisations; their key feature is their willingness to invest resources in the hope of a future return.

Roberts and King (1991) identify six common actions policy champions take on: (1) advocate new ideas and develop proposals; (2) define and reframe problems; (3) specify policy alternatives; (4) broker ideas among the many policy actors; (5) mobilise public opinion; and (6) help set the decision-making agenda. In other words, they introduce, translate and implement innovative ideas into practice. Regardless of geography, successful policy champions exhibit three common characteristics (Kingdon 2002): (1) they have a voice that is heard – because they are considered experts, or are able to speak for others, or are in an authoritative decision-making position; (2) they can access networks – through political connections and/or negotiating skills; and (3) they are persistent.

The policy champions in this case were Francie Lund (Chairperson of the Lund Committee on Child and Family Support, which the first post-apartheid government appointed to undertake a critical appraisal of the existing welfare system), Geraldine Fraser Moleketi (Minister of Welfare) and Leila Patel (Director-General of Welfare). Both Lund and Patel had extensive

experience in academia prior to their involvement with the Department of Welfare, and had trained as social workers earlier in their careers. Moleketi, on the other hand, had limited involvement in welfare but was involved in the African National Congress, particularly in coordinating the South African Communist Party, which was part of the Tripartite Alliance that formed the government after

the 1994 elections. Lund, Moleketi and Patel were involved in the conceptualisation and implementation of progressive policies, including the CSG. Through coordinating the joint efforts of government and civil society, they drove through reforms that were based on the developmental social welfare blueprint laid out in the 1997 *White Paper for Social Welfare* (Republic of South Africa 1997).

**Box 1****The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997)**

In the transition from apartheid to a democratic government, South Africa faced significant challenges in terms of extreme poverty, high inequality and a weak economy. The 1997 White Paper delineated an approach to addressing these challenges. It acknowledged that government alone would be incapable of developing communities to do away with poverty and income equality, and emphasised the need for civil society to facilitate much of the necessary change. The paper outlined key aspects of the social welfare context, a policy framework for a social welfare strategy, systems for implementing that strategy, and a list of relevant legislation. Its focus was on vulnerable groups, including the disabled, women and children.

**The development of the Child Support Grant**

Since the early 1900s, social grants have always been part of South Africa's welfare system. Under apartheid, a State Maintenance Grant (SMG) was provided, but very few of the recipients were non-white. Protagonists for changes in welfare such as Francie Lund and Leila Patel, alongside a host of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (the Black Sash, the National Rural Women's

Movement, the National Committee for the Rights of Children, among others), envisioned and pursued a de-racialised welfare programme that would reduce poverty and income inequality. In 1994 the new government appointed the Lund Committee, which ultimately made a strong case for replacing the SMG with the CSG, and assisted the Department of Welfare in conceptualising and implementing the new grant (see Box 2, page 7).



**Box 2****An edited extract from Francie Lund's book *Changing Social Policy*, on presenting the CSG to the government**

The Lund Committee's Report was handed to the Ministers and Members of Executive Councils meeting in early September 1996. Its recommendations were presented at a Cabinet meeting on 5 March 1997, which I was asked to attend. I was in Cape Town at the time, working with the Black Sash on strategic planning about their future role in advocating for social grants.

We were swept into the imposing Cabinet meeting room. Deputy President Thabo Mbeki was in the chair, flanked by both familiar and unfamiliar faces of ministers and their deputies. We were presented with and had immediately to answer an extensive list of tough questions from Cabinet members.

Later that day, back at the Black Sash workshop, I received a phone call saying that Cabinet had accepted the main recommendations. The Black Sash's reaction was initially one of horror, and they started drawing up a press release expressing outrage at the phasing out of the SMG. For people in welfare and in welfare rights, this was the end of an era and not yet a new one.

I went for a walk with Jillian Nicholson, a friend who had been a leader in the Black Sash for many years. She asked how long I estimated it would take to get the planning, design, legislation and regulations in place so that the first applications would be taken. Based on my knowledge of social security reform in other countries, I said: "Four years, if we are very lucky." One year later, on 1 April 1998, the first applications for the CSG were taken. Nine years later, in April 2007, it was received by the primary caregivers of some eight million children.

The CSG was the first tool to de-racialise the welfare system and support all those in need. It is means-tested, and was at the time intended to provide support to poorer mothers until their children were seven years old. The CSG was commended by

experts in the field for being an incredibly progressive and well thought-out policy. The Minister at the time championed the CSG policy before Parliament, convincing politicians that this drastic shift was indeed the best way forward.

*While the actors that championed the developmental approach to social welfare envisioned that this joint effort would continue into the future, [...] momentum around this type of social welfare decreased when they each left.*

Several authors (e.g. Van der Berg and Bredenkamp 2002) advocated extending the CSG to include older children, supported by findings on child poverty from the 1995 national household survey which showed that the proportion of children living in poverty exceeded those of the elderly and the unemployed. The CSG has been subsequently extended more than once, and now includes children up to the age of 18. The current debate around the CSG is centred on extending the qualifying age of the grant to 21. The present Minister of Social Development, Bathabile Dlamini, suggested that this would allow 18- to 21-year-olds to complete their studies “and enhance their chances of being economically active”(Pressly 2015).

Today, the swollen grant system commands 90% of the welfare budget. Leibbrandt *et al.* (2010) provide evidence that many households in receipt of grants would not be “sustainable economic units” without it, and that a social security net of this size and magnitude has held back dramatic increases in poverty over the last 20 years.

### **What happens when policy champions move on?**

Some of the key actors in the 1990s social welfare policy landscape were social workers. In part this was due to a political paradigm shift which meant that, for a brief period, practitioners as well as experts were consulted to build policy. Other drivers of social policy change in this era included significant community-level research, analysis of budgets, community activism and actors in government who recognised the need for both national economic growth and citizen wellbeing.

The White Paper that emerged from this convergence of factors saw welfare as not being limited to social work in its traditional form, but as part of a cross-departmental collaboration that dealt with poverty alleviation, income redistribution and inclusive growth. Although the White Paper’s emphasis on social development is often praised, its ambiguity on the practicalities of how this was to be achieved by providers of social services left many critical (Kang’ethe 2014).



Thanks to this brief opening up of policy processes in the 1990s, a diverse mix of civil society participants, practitioners and academics was able to strongly influence and motivate the new welfare policy. But the constant presence and pressure of such actors are required to ensure that implementation does not part with the urgency, sentiment, ideology and vigour employed when the policy was first conceived. While the actors that championed the developmental approach to social

welfare envisioned that this joint effort would continue into the future, based on the ideals explained in the White Paper, momentum around this type of social welfare decreased when they each left, shortly after the paper was passed. This meant that a number of key people and organisations that were previously driving the changes the White Paper demanded were no longer part of the public welfare sector, leaving gaps in both vision and technical expertise in the then Department of Welfare (now the DSD).



Members of the Black Sash movement, a non-violent white women's resistance organisation, demonstrating in the streets of Mmabatho against apartheid.

The White Paper committed government to developmental social welfare, which required designing programmes and policies that would empower welfare recipients to climb out of poverty traps and improve their standard of living, as opposed to fostering a dependency on state. Comprehending the enormity of this task, government identified community-based grassroots programmes that would support the transformation (Lund 2008). But such changes require significant technical and managerial support, as well as a broader understanding of the welfare landscape.

In 1994, the welfare department had included technical experts with a social work background and strong foundations in the theory and practice of welfare, who had also consulted welfare experts to develop the new policies. This approach changed after their departure, eventually leading to the current situation, where the DSD collects little data and conducts only limited research to understand the impact of welfare. As such, social grants are in a constant state of flux with contentious debates arising around the age of grant recipients, the type of grant that should be received, the sustainability of the system, and the funding of broader welfare services. The poor are vulnerable to these fluctuations.

After the policy champions left, the DSD focused almost exclusively on rolling out the CSG. While this has had a significant role in poverty reduction, it has not been aligned or fortified with policies for reducing income inequality. Such policies are not the responsibility of the DSD alone, also requiring

for example a focus on employment generating and high-quality education. However, the provision of grants to the poor by the DSD led to other government departments putting their pro-poor policies on the back burner. The focus on grants also meant that other types of welfare – including developmental services – received less attention within the DSD. Non-CSG welfare services became under-funded, and the focus on moving people out of the welfare system diminished.

### **The current context of social welfare policy**

At present, welfare services are treatment-based; they do not actively seek to cause structural changes. They are provided by social workers and other staff employed by either the government or NGOs. Although the number of poor people receiving grants has increased steadily, social services have not increased in parallel, and those provided by NGOs are largely underfunded (Gray and Lombard 2008).

The outcomes of the poor funding of the system includes a shortage of social workers, chiefly as a result of insufficient remuneration (Kang'ethe 2014); many have left the profession and sometimes the country in search of better opportunities. There is a backlog of casework for government social workers, and perhaps as a result millions of people are falling through the cracks of the system (Patel 2008). Many NGO social workers have left to work for the government because of relatively high public sector salaries, leaving a number of NGOs unable to retain trained practitioners. Social

*Although the concept of participatory democracy was a strong theme in the 1997 White Paper and the 2013 talks about active citizenship, the avenues that exist for this require significant organisation and motivation.*

workers, particularly those operating in rural areas, often lack the required transportation, sound infrastructure and other resources needed to apply their craft to those in need of it. There have also been many glitches in the scholarships awarded by the government to people wishing to study social work, either due to lack of funding or lack of incentive (Lombard 2008; Bak 2004). Thus the capacity and infrastructure to achieve the goals of developmental social work are not in place.

The NGO welfare sector has been in a state of flux since the transition to democracy, when the interests of various communities, ethnic groups and organisations involved in welfare diverged. A shortage of funds and lack of central leadership led to the deconstruction of the NGO welfare sector and the erosion of the social capital built around its functioning. While the government replaced some of the NGOs in terms of welfare service delivery, the bulk remained the responsibility of the NGO sector. The new activities that NGOs had to take up included lobbying and monitoring government on behalf of citizens, but they often lacked the skills and experience this

demanded (von Holdt 2002). The NGO welfare sector today is far less organised than it was in the 1990s, particularly since the political environment no longer demands the organisation that was required to build the mass unity needed to fight against an oppressive regime.

The nature of social welfare policy-making has also changed, and is now exclusively focused at a high level. The nature of the policy champion has also shifted, from an individual who is an expert in their field to one who has the most political pull. NGOs often feel that social policy is disengaged from what is actually required by communities in terms of welfare, while the government argues that NGOs are too disorganised to play a role in budget processes. While local government might facilitate the conversation between community NGOs and the higher levels of government, it does not play a formal role in the welfare sector. Although the concept of participatory democracy was a strong theme in the 1997 White Paper and the 2013 talks about active citizenship, the avenues that exist for this require significant organisation and motivation. NGOs in the welfare sector



find themselves in the difficult situation of requiring funding from government to provide welfare services, but also advocating for changes to the current fiscal practices of the DSD.

## Implications for policy and practice

### Funding the welfare state

In order to provide adequate funding to the sector, the administration's different branches must understand social welfare needs. In particular the National Treasury, the funders of the welfare system, need to understand the quantity of different types of services required, so that the system can be well targeted. But the process of collecting the information needed to build this understanding must be run by the DSD.

The perception from other government departments is that the DSD does not have a clear vision of the scale of the services it is required to provide and is overwhelmed in terms of its obligations to a society that urgently requires welfare. They have also noted that it is difficult for a government department to perform where there is limited monitoring and evaluation. This begs the question of whether a department can run efficiently without data on the quantity and quality of the services it provides. However, even if there was adequate information, politics ultimately determines which services are funded. Social grants are often seen as a 'vote-catching' tool, so government is unlikely to move resources away from this to other areas that require funding.

### Possible policy overhaul?

Implementing a developmental welfare system today would require a policy overhaul led by the DSD. While the administrative capacity and infrastructure of the welfare system is well established today, technical expertise and innovation remains limited. In addition, the window of opportunity to change policy that existed 20 years ago is no longer open in the same way. While South Africa's social welfare system has produced a number of positive outcomes through social grants, there is a lack of government urgency to change it. The urgency of 20 years ago was to move from a racialised to an inclusive grant system, and this was done very well. Today's urgency – of too many people dependent on cash transfers, and limited income mobility for poor households – is less well recognised, even though it has a number of dire socio-economic impacts. The critical success factors of policies such as the CSG included the credibility of leadership, diversity of expertise among those driving the change, practical experience, a robust evidence-based approach to policy-making, and strong administrative capacity (Patel 2014). The DSD leadership today is far less consultative, and academia works independently from government, often criticising from afar.

The White Paper is currently being reviewed by a committee under Professor Vivienne Taylor of the School of Social Development at the University of Cape Town, with a particular focus on institutional and capacity

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constraints within the DSD. Ideally, the review should provide practical guidelines to the implementation of welfare services, in a resource-constrained environment, that facilitate both long- and short-term social development.

The review is certainly an opportunity to bring in expertise that can facilitate policy change. Experts have suggested that we move away from a polarised, ‘treatment-based’ welfare system to one driven by communities that are empowered and able to help themselves. One of the policy champions of the late 1990s has suggested that this is critical to strengthen the social network of support for households and communities that would prevent so many children being in the care system in the first place (Patel, Knijn and van Wel 2015). However, this is unlikely without determined leadership and an evidence-based approach to policy-making.

Academics have provided evidence that the grant system has indeed been critical to reducing poverty, but that more is

needed in the form of structural change to advance poverty alleviation and promote wealth accumulation among the poor. In addition, lessons from policy champions of the past suggest that there is significant knowledge that comes from grassroots organisations, which need to be actively included in both the formulation and implementation of social development policy. This engagement is also required in order to effectively channel state resources to NGOs.

## Conclusion

Successful policy champions have three characteristics: (1) they have a voice that is heard; (2) they can access networks; and (3) they are persistent. When they move on, they take with them their voice – in the South African case, their expertise and ability to speak for others; their negotiating skills – in our case, crucial to ensure the availability of sufficient resources for the policy to be implemented effectively; and their persistence – crucial to maintaining their policy’s high visibility and stopping it from losing ground against other emerging priorities.

When policy champions left South Africa's welfare sector, the continued implementation of the White Paper became less effective. Policies like the CSG, which had very detailed implementation plans and dedicated resources, continued to be driven by the most senior people in the department, of whom some were social development experts. But while the CSG is one of South Africa's most successful policies, the White Paper obligated the department to a more holistic plan. Lacking the expertise, practical guidelines, resources, capacity and drivers that motivated this obligation, the developmental model of social welfare remains unimplemented.

Over the past 20 years, policy-makers have been unable to shift from the notion of poverty reduction to inclusive growth that reduces income inequality. Going forward, these policies are critical, not only for the welfare of poor South Africans, but also for the stability of the social order. It is therefore the responsibility of experts and government to engage each other and take chances on innovative solutions that promote pro-poor growth, if they are backed by research and expertise.



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## About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. This Grand Challenge focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The field of technology for Open Government is relatively young and the consortium partners, Hivos, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Ushahidi, are a part of this rapidly developing domain. These institutions have extensive and complementary skills and experience in the field of citizen engagement, government accountability, private sector entrepreneurs, (technical) innovation and research.

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## Research, Evidence and Learning component

The programme's research, evidence and learning contributes to improving performance and practice, and builds an evidence base in the field of citizen voice, government responsiveness, transparency and accountability (T&A) and technology for T&A (Tech4T&A). This component is managed by IDS, a leading global organisation for research, teaching and communication with over 30 years' experience of developing knowledge on governance and citizen participation

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