

# Policy Brief

## Lessons on South Africa's Social Protection Response to Covid-19

### Summary

South Africa stands out for its social protection response to Covid-19, especially regarding the expansion of programmes, number of beneficiaries and benefit amount. At the height of the pandemic, the government introduced the emergency Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant was introduced for over 10 million unemployed adults and informal workers through a digitised system. Despite successes in expanding the grant system, digitisation of the system presented challenges and led to exclusion errors. An alternative to the country's school feeding scheme, the National School Nutrition Programme which regularly fed around 10 million children, could not be found.

### Key messages

- **South Africa expanded the reach of social grants** with unprecedented speed – this was made possible by digitisation of the application and payment system.
- Although the new Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant was implemented with unprecedented speed, the need to create a new digitised system meant that the SRD programme was **not implemented until after people had been in lockdown for around two months without a source of income.**
- Challenges with the digitisation of the programme meant some **people were unable to apply** due to exclusion errors.
- The school feeding scheme, which fed around 10 million children every day outside of lockdown, **also experienced challenges.**

South Africa's social protection response stands out as one of the broader social protection responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, expanding both vertically (in terms of benefit size) and horizontally (in terms of new beneficiaries).

Implemented in May 2020, the SRD was available to all individuals experiencing unemployment who were not already in receipt of another grant. However, women receiving the Child Support Grant (CSG) on behalf of a child were originally excluded from receiving the SRD. Although the CSG was for the child and not the caregiver, the SRD's initial regulations excluded all people already in receipt of an existing social grant. This meant that women or caregivers receiving the CSG on behalf of a child were considered grant recipients and therefore excluded from applying for the SRD. In the first round of the SRD grant (May 2020–April 2021), there were 6 million beneficiaries in total.<sup>1</sup> Largely due to the exclusion of caregivers receiving the CSG, 67.9 per cent of SRD beneficiaries were men and 32.1 per cent were women.<sup>2</sup> In the second round (August 2021–March 2022), 14 million applications were received and 8.3 million were approved.<sup>3</sup>

After being cancelled in April 2021, the SRD was reintroduced in the following August in response to riots that broke out in July in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces, triggered by the imprisonment of former president Jacob Zuma. As President Cyril Ramaphosa and the governing African National Congress prepared for the 2024 general election, it was essential to ensure that they could be seen to have minimised the impact of the strict national lockdown in response to the pandemic, as well as the violent unrest that affected the country.

**“Although the creation of the digital system was successful, it struggled with exclusion errors.”**

In May 2020, a 'top-up' of R300 (US\$16) was introduced for all children receiving the CSG (reaching around 12.78 million beneficiaries).<sup>4</sup> After one month, this was replaced with a 'caregiver allowance' of R500 (US\$27) (reaching around 7.2 million beneficiaries). All caregivers in receipt of the CSG were eligible for the allowance. The Old Age Pension, Disability Grant, Foster Care Grant, Care Dependency Grant, and War Veteran's Grant were all topped up by R250 (US\$14). All grant top-ups ended in October 2020.

Prior to Covid-19, applications for social grants could only be made in person at one of the many South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) offices around the country. Payments were then either distributed directly into the applicant's bank account or picked up at a paypoint. SASSA decided very early on in the pandemic that it would be impossible to introduce a new grant through paper applications and opted to create a digitised system.

Although the creation of the digital system was successful, it struggled with exclusion errors. The application system was only available in English, required an active SIM card, and required access to the internet or a cellular service (which was not always possible in rural areas). Although one government study found that most recipients found the application process accessible,<sup>5</sup> research conducted by non-governmental bodies has found different results, highlighting the challenges applicants faced.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gronbach, Seekings and Megannon (2022)

<sup>2</sup> Government of South Africa (2021)

<sup>3</sup> Gronbach et al. (2022)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Government of South Africa (2021)

<sup>6</sup> Senona, Torkelson and Zemba-Mkabile (2021)

While South Africa's expansion of social grants was widely welcomed both within and beyond the country, the government performed less well when it came to school feeding. South Africa's school feeding scheme regularly fed 10 million children daily.<sup>7</sup> Due to the closure of schools, the feeding scheme was put on

hold and no adequate alternatives were put in place. Civil society, including community-based organisations, stepped in to ensure distribution of food parcels. However, it is estimated that only between one fifth and one tenth of what was needed was distributed.<sup>8</sup> This represented a significant failure by the government.

<sup>7</sup> Gronbach *et al.* (2022) 'Social protection in the Covid-19 Pandemic'.

<sup>8</sup> Seekings, J. (2020)

## Policy recommendations

- Outreach and in-person applications should accompany digitisation of the grant application and payment system, especially in rural areas where connectivity is weak.
- The digital system must be made more accessible, including translation into all official South African languages.
- Future interventions in the social grant system must pay close attention to the gendered dynamics such interventions might create.
- Steps must be taken to ensure that there are ready alternatives to the school feeding scheme in case of future school closures.

**“Civil society stepped in to ensure distribution of food parcels. However, it is estimated that only between one fifth and one tenth of what was needed was distributed.”**

### Further reading

Government of South Africa (2021) [The Rapid Assessment of the Implementation and Utilisation of the Special Covid-19 SRD Grant](#), July, Department of Social Development

Gronbach, L.; Seekings, J. and Megannon, V. (2022) *Social Protection in the Covid-19 Pandemic: Lessons from South Africa*, CGD Policy Paper 252, Washington, DC: Center for Global Development (CGD)

Institute for Economic Justice (2021) [Vulnerabilities and Policy Priorities for South Africa's Covid-19 Third Wave](#), South Africa's Covid-19 Response Policy Brief Series, Brief 3

Seekings, J. (2020) *Report on Social Grants and Feeding Schemes Under the Covid-19 Lockdown in South Africa*, Affidavit in SA Childcare (Pty) Ltd and others vs Minister of Social Development and others, case no. 36962/2020, in the High Court of South Africa, Gauteng Division (Pretoria), September

Senona, E.; Torkelson, E. and Zemba-Mkabile, W. (2021) *Social Protection in a Time of Covid: Lessons for Basic Income Support*, Cape Town: Black Sash

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### Suggested citation

Hallink, C. and Lenhardt, A. (2023) 'Lessons on South Africa's Social Protection Response to Covid-19', CPAN Policy Brief 6, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

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DOI: [10.19088/CPAN.2023.006](https://doi.org/10.19088/CPAN.2023.006)