



# What we can learn from the COVID-19 grant

The hunger and poverty crisis that the social relief of distress grant aimed to alleviate was exacerbated by COVID-19, but it existed long before the pandemic. The introduction of the grant provided a basis on which to assess the role that expanded permanent social security – such as a targeted basic income grant – could play in assisting people in South Africa. A Black Sash report, based on research conducted in partnership with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), highlighted the critical role that the grant played in keeping vulnerable South Africans afloat. It also underscored the current administration challenges that limit the effectiveness of grants, and how these might be overcome. By **Andrea Teagle**

**H**ow was the R350 COVID-19 social relief of distress grant experienced? For one recipient, “[It] has brought that little difference [...] I am able to buy the basics [but] I could not buy soap [or] washing powder”. Another recipient said, “there is no such [thing] as ‘little money’... Imagine not having money to even buy sanitary pads; you have to ask. Imagine those who do not have anyone to ask. I really appreciate it.”

These statements from participants in a recent Black Sash-commissioned case study on the COVID-19 social relief of distress grant encapsulate one of the core findings of the underlying research, that the grant – introduced in May 2020 – has been critical but insufficient. From the evidence of its effectiveness comes a call to introduce a permanent social grant for working-age adults who previously could not access social protection. From the evidence of its limitations, Benita Moolman, the programme manager of the [Global Citizenship Programme](#) at the University of Cape Town, argued at the report launch in May 2022 for a broader conceptualisation of social equity in South Africa.

In the report, titled [It's a Lifeline but it's Not Enough](#), the Black Sash calls for the state to consider a permanent system of basic income support. This would include people aged between 18 and 59, with little or no income, who were previously excluded from the social assistance system.

The recommendation is seen as an incremental step towards a basic income grant. The current grant is due to expire in March 2023.

## Basic social protection

The report combines an analysis of the social grant policy framework, regulatory and delivery mechanisms, and a case study of social relief of distress grant applicants during 2021 and early 2022. The case study, led by the HSRC's Candice Groenewald, included 6 men and 13 women across the working-age spectrum of 18 to 56, who were interviewed telephonically. Their stories revealed what Groenewald referred to as “the inevitability of hardship” during the pandemic.

Five of the interviewees were unemployed at the start of the pandemic; by the time of the study, this number had shot up to twelve. The accounts from those receiving the grant highlight the importance of social protection for the working-age population, with 10 of the 13 agreeing that it really helped.

The researchers observed that South Africa's permanent social grants are insufficient to alleviate hunger. Rachel Bukasa, the National Director of the Black Sash, noted that the basic poverty line is R624, while the child support grant is R420. Due to elevated youth unemployment, and the racialised, gendered nature of poverty, poor black women and young people remain particularly under-protected.

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Gaps in social protection partly stem from the policy having been inherited from the apartheid era, when it was designed for the minority white population. Thandiwe Matthews of the University of the Witwatersrand explained that, during apartheid, access to social assistance was predicated on the idea of a male worker in full-time formal employment, while women were presumed to be caregivers. Today, unemployed women (and men) of working age still do not have access to permanent social assistance in their own right.

Under new regulations that came into effect on 23 April 2022, the eligibility threshold for the social relief of distress grant was lowered from R624 to R350 – such that, if an applicant has above that amount in their bank account, regardless of where that money came from, they are automatically disqualified. Black Sash argues that, rather than phase out the grant, the government should convert it to a permanent form of basic income support, as ‘one element of a broader social protection floor, in order to realise a more just and equitable society in South Africa’. Extended social protection should also extend to food security, health, housing and psychosocial support.

One way to extend social protection would be to find ways of targeting collectives in addition to providing grants to individuals. For example, Moolman said, hairdressers and fruit and vegetable sellers in the informal sector tend to be poor, black women. How can we develop policies on that level to protect these collectives?

### **‘Pillar to post’ phenomenon**

The study participants described how the R350 grant quickly dwindled in the face of various collection obstacles. On arriving at the Post Office collection points, many were confronted with snaking queues that barely moved

throughout the day. Those who couldn’t wait might pay a placeholder R50 to stand there for them, and there were reports of recipients bribing security guards to let them jump the queue. Sometimes, grant releases were deferred, and applicants went home empty-handed to face another day of transport costs and long waits.

Some participants instead chose to accept bank charges (reportedly R7 to R10) to have the money transferred directly to their bank accounts. Only two of the recipients reported using SASSA gold cards, which can be used to withdraw cash at particular outlets.

Some participants reported having difficulties with the application process, with data costs and connection issues featuring prominently. Others described what Groenewald referred to as the “pillar to post phenomenon” – being sent to different departments for the required documents and information. Two study participants had their applications rejected because of outdated information on the social grant database indicating, incorrectly, that they were receiving [Unemployment Insurance Fund](#) benefits.

The Black Sash is advocating for a one-stop shop for social grant applicants to streamline the process and remove administrative obstacles to social protection, Moolman said.

#### **Author:**

Andrea Teagle, science writer in the HSRC’s Impact Centre [ateagle@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:ateagle@hsrc.ac.za)

#### **Researcher:**

Dr Candice Groenewald, chief research specialist in the HSRC’s Human and Social Capabilities division [cgroenewald@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:cgroenewald@hsrc.ac.za)



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