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**Experiences of accessing the
Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant
in South Africa**

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Abstract

The South African government introduced the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant in April/May of 2020 in response to the socio-economic hardship related to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is the fastest big roll out and biggest fast rollout of a social protection cash transfer in Africa thus far. This paper explores the experiences of 41, poor, formally unemployed South African citizens who were eligible to receive the SRD grant. Primarily, data suggests that the majority of the sample was able to successfully receive the SRD grant. Secondly, material and technocratic barriers presented challenges which needed to be navigated in order to receive the cash transfer. Thirdly, technical challenges systematically excluded some of the poor from accessing the SRD grant, despite the intention to serve the poor during a time of crisis. Challenges to accessing the SRD grant are similar to those reported when accessing various other social grants in South Africa (such as the Child Support Grant). These challenges include lack of identity documents and needing to travel long distances. This paper argues that material, technocratic and technical challenges which hinder access to the SRD grant are political. Overall, the SRD grant can be understood as a success in that it was able to serve millions of poor South Africans relatively quickly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

In March of 2020 Europe began to grapple with the overwhelming effects of the first wave of Covid-19. In anticipation of this, the South African government declared a national state of disaster and the country entered complete lockdown on the 26th of March 2020. This extension of state power confined all citizens to their households with only ‘essential services’ permitted to operate and only those employed in these essential sectors permitted to move around for work purposes. In line with international Covid-19 responses, the South African government claimed that these initiatives to ‘flatten the curve’ of infections were ‘following the science’.

During lockdown the government announced “unprecedented” emergency social protection reforms (Seekings, 2020). Prior to lockdown, policy decision making processes in relation to social assistance would involve non-state organisations and a social cluster of government ministers. Lockdown introduced a significant deviation in how this legislative reform process would normally occur. Major reforms to tax-financed social assistance during lockdown became less transparent, and decisions were made by the newly formed National Command Council (Seekings, 2020). Although there was a centralisation of decision making within the presidency, civil society played a major role in applying pressure on the presidency to act in the best interest of those most vulnerable.

This extended control over the economy and society, over and above the public health response initiatives, occurred in a highly inequitable context of rising unemployment rates. With approximately 14 million South Africans already living in poverty (defined as less than ZAR18.34 per person per day), the socio-economic consequences of a nation-wide lockdown only worsened poverty and inequality. Throughout the pandemic, data on employment trends have varied; however, several sources suggest that by the end of 2020 2 million people had experienced job loss (Statistics South Africa, 2021). One survey (NIDS-CRAM) found that 47% of respondent households reported that they had run out of money to buy food in April 2020. While improvements of about 1 million job recoveries were recorded at the beginning of 2021, employment rates are still devastatingly low and levels of hunger have remained problematic.

To mitigate the effects of loss of jobs and income, especially for those most vulnerable, the South African government announced a package of emergency reforms including the introduction of a special Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant. Initially introduced for a period of 6 months (from May until October 2020), the ZAR350 per month cash transfer was later extended by three months (to January 2021), then again until April 2021. Due to the prolonged economic impact of the pandemic and of social unrest in the provinces of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal during July of 2021, the government reintroduced the SRD grant on 25 June 2021 after a two-month break. The second round of the grant was from August 2021 until March 2022 (extended later for a further twelve months, to March 2023).

Although purported to be ‘following the science’, Natrass and Seekings (2022) argue that these planning directives have borrowed from the legitimacy of science in order to “justify projects of expanded government control over the economy and health sector”. They explain how the employment of scientific and technocratic expertise has allowed for projects of state expansion which reach beyond the immediate governance of Covid-19 economic and health responses. In relation to the SRD grant, we can come to see how extended powers of regulation embedded in the state’s response to Covid-19 has facilitated further

powers of surveillance through the digital administration of a new target population, a population which has previously been neglected when it comes to government's administrative capacity. From a Foucauldian perspective, the administration of a new target population allows the government to impose power over the poor through bureaucratic mechanisms (Gibbs et al., 2018). Through the SRD grant the state now 'recognises' applicants in a new manner (as opposed to job creation policy initiatives which previously targeted this specific population) and is able to 'see' and assert control through bureaucracy.

Gibbs et al. (2018) remind us that states are not monolithic entities that therefore cannot achieve the entirety of their vision or control over a population. These larger projects of state expansion, as well as the more direct response towards Covid-19, have lacked capacity to fulfil their purposes. Civil society and the private sector have stepped in to shoulder the burden of many Covid-19 impacts, not only through charging the government with failures but also practically by fulfilling the poverty alleviation needs of many citizens. Difficulties in lateral coordination between various government departments caused delays in the rollout of emergency relief programs, while further criticism has been geared towards allegations of corruption, inadequate financial management and poor leadership capabilities. Although the nature of these criticisms have long existed within democratic South Africa, the mechanisms in which these projects are being designed and justified are now, more than ever, relying to a very large extent on the legitimacy of scientific and technocratic expertise.

2. The SRD grant

Social protection programs became a priority throughout the world to mitigate the social and economic effects of Covid-19, with over 190 countries employing social protection measures in response to Covid-19 (Gentlini et al., 2020). Of these initiatives, 271 offered targeted cash transfer programmes in 131 countries. The global shift towards a greater reliance on social protection measures, especially targeted cash transfers, during the Covid-19 pandemic has occurred alongside an accelerated use of technologies and digitisation in social grant machinery. In its response to the pandemic and in line with 'international best practice' the South African government has relied to a large extent on social protection. Working with the country's existing social protection framework the government introduced social grant reforms in the form of benefit increases for existing social grants, and extended the reach of social assistance through the introduction of the SRD grant (Seekings, 2020).

The introduction of the SRD grant reflects the centrality of social grants to both poverty mitigation legislation and citizenship in South Africa. This reliance on social protection, and more specifically social grant payments, stems from South Africa's social grant system introduced in the early 1900s. Within the realm of

social protection policies in South Africa, some have proven less fruitful in their delivery, such as housing, job creation and land redistribution. Social grant payments, on the other hand, have cemented themselves as the government's central poverty alleviation strategy (Torkelson, 2020). Given the history of racial segregation under the apartheid regime, social grant claimants are recognised as embedded in this historical trajectory and between complex collective identities (Plagerson, Harpham & Kielmann, 2012). Under the new constitutional dispensation, South Africa has conceptualised social protection as a mechanism in which to “enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised” (Plagerson, Harpham & Kielmann, 2012:969). Here citizenship and access to social protection has been intimately intertwined with social, economic and political rights. In practice the ruling party of South Africa (African National Congress) has displayed ambivalence (at times even hostility) towards social grants.

The Department of Social Development (DSD) is responsible for tax-financed social assistance in South Africa. Under this umbrella, the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) is responsible for the administration of social grants. As part of this administration, DSD and SASSA rely on SOCPEN, which dates to the 1980s, as the digital administration system for the administration, application and delivery of social grants. In 2018 the South African government commissioned the South African Post Office (SAPO) as the public entity responsible for the payment of social grants. This followed from a problematic relationship with Net1, the private entity responsible for the payment of social grants between 2012 and 2018 (Torkelson, 2020). Prior to the commissioning of Net1, grant payments were administered provincially. SAPO administered grants through the banking division of Postbank. The arrangement between SASSA and SAPO was operational for about a year before the Covid-19 pandemic broke out.

Significant changes to the grant system occurred during the pandemic. Existing literature indicates that SASSA was already struggling with limited administrative capacity before the pandemic. For example, SASSA was unable to renew foster care grants timeously and this resulted in the DSD being ordered by courts to repeatedly roll over foster care grants (Seekings, 2020). There was a greater reliance on various kinds of documentation as a requirement for means testing during the application and verification process. This included identity documentation, birth certificates, health certificates, etc. About 2 million children have been excluded from the Child Support Grant due to missing documentation, even though they are eligible (Seekings, 2020; Gibbs et al., 2018). Gibbs et al. (2018) expands on this by highlighting the complexity of pre-pandemic social grant application processes. Over and above the need to source multiple documents required for means-tested purposes, the process of applying itself was reported to be highly complex and time consuming. Specific challenges within this process which have excluded the vulnerable from accessing social grants

include long distances to SASSA offices, the cost of travelling to these offices as well as long queues outside of SASSA office and SAPO branches (Gibbs et al. 2018). Post offices often run out of cash for grant payments (Torkelson, 2020). Qualitative data has shown a historical exclusion among families and partners which intersects with lack of knowledge about social grant systems as well as a lack of emotional and practical support for applicants (Gibbs et al, 2018, Torkelson, 2021). What is important to note here is the paradox of the pre-existing (pre-Covid) social welfare system in South Africa. While grants were targeted towards individuals who fell outside the parameters of the economy (children, caretakers, the elderly and those with disabilities), these grants were often the main source of income for families and households (Torkelson, 2020). In the context of high unemployment rates, this essentially has historically set an expectation by the government on grant recipients to care for kin through individual social entitlements.

The government expanded on the pre-existing social grant system and introduced new emergency programmes. These programmes were to be initiated through an allocated budget of ZAR50 billion to support those most vulnerable to the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic (Seekings, 2020). Of this ZAR50 billion, ZAR30 billion was administered towards topping up or extending pre-existing social grants, and an additional ZAR1.8 billion was allocated to the extension of the Care Dependency Grant and the Temporary Disability Grant until December 2020 because the state could not process renewals under lockdown (South African Social Security Agency, 2021). This allowed for the remaining ZAR18.2 billion to be allocated to a new emergency programme, the SRD grant. The SRD grant aimed to prevent and alleviate extreme poverty for those vulnerable in the country who are not yet (directly) benefiting from the already established social protection measures. One major critique of the SRD grant is that the amount is not linked to any objective measure of poverty. Falling well below the national food poverty line of ZAR585 per person per month, the SRD grant sits at ZAR350 per month.

The SRD grant can be paid to people over the age of 18 and below the age of 60, who are South African citizens, permanent residents or refugees registered with Home Affairs, and who are resident within the borders of South Africa. To be eligible, people must be unemployed and not receiving any other income. People are ineligible if they receive any other social grant, any unemployment insurance benefit (UIF) (including the emergency UIF introduced in 2020) or are eligible for UIF benefits, a stipend from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme or any other form of government support in response to Covid-19. They are also ineligible if they are resident in a government-subsidised institution. Public information dissemination about grant application processes was done through Presidential announcements (broadcast on television) and by SASSA via various

local and national communication channels. This was supplemented by efforts from volunteers, civil society organisations and local government networks.

Innovation within the existing social grant machinery was intentionally designed to limit social interaction by facilitating two core functions of social protection: recognition of beneficiaries and assigning their respective entitlements. The existing grant system was clearly incapable of delivering the SRD grant to millions of new recipients in a timely manner. Taking these factors into account, South Africa's first automated application system for social grants was designed. This automated system was able to account for the new cohort of 18-59 year-olds and incorporate verification checks against other government databases (Unemployment Insurance Fund, National Student Financial Aid Scheme, South African Revenue Service) (Gronbach, Megannon & Seekings, 2022). The grant application system was novel in so far as it was South Africa's first digitised grant application system. This was made possible through the waiving of the requirement for a SASSA official to be present during grant application. Three electronic modes of application were made possible: a USSD¹-based system, a WhatsApp channel, and a website/email address. It is important to note that only the USSD-based system was freely accessible, while airtime or data was required for both other modes of application. Between May and November 2020, 9,537,077 applications were submitted, with 67.6% approved. There were 67.9% male applicants. While 80% used USSD channels to apply, 12.5% used WhatsApp, 7.4% used the SASSA website and 0.1% used the emailing channel (Gronbach, Megannon & Seekings, 2022). In addition to this, changes to verification processes and payment systems occurred.

In August 2020, a means test to verify applicants' income through commercial banks was further incorporated into the verification checks, with this potentially becoming a monthly re-assessment to verify grantees' income status. Secondly, the implementation of a payment system was under pressure to deliver payments in a timely manner and, in line with global trends, the employment of mobile technologies was encouraged. Compared to other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa was lagging in the development of mobile technologies for cash transfers. Gronbach (2020) details the pre-Covid adoption of 22 mobile payment systems throughout different sub-Saharan African social grant programs. This shift in mobile money technologies was accelerated throughout the region during the pandemic and included Namibia's once-off 'Covid-19 grant', Togo's Novissi programme and Madagascar's Tosika Fameno cash transfer (Gronbach, 2021). Having previously been proposed in 2018, mobile money technologies for grant payments have still never been adopted by South Africa, and tentative inclusion of such for the SRD grant was announced. Despite this proposed inclusion, unsuccessful private sector negotiations and National Treasury regulations

¹ Unstructured Supplementary Service Data

rendered this venture unsuccessful. It appears that mobile money technologies have not been utilized for the purpose of the SRD grant. Instead, the three existing payment channels were used; payments through Postbank (which administered existing social grants), private bank account payments and cash collection of grants at post offices. SAPO, and the corresponding banking branch Postbank, has further solidified its position within the social grant machinery through the SRD grant as it became the sole paymaster for social grants with potentially 6 million new individuals as clients (Gronbach, Megannon & Seekings, 2022). National Treasury verified the banking details of those who opted for personal bank account payments. Collection of grants in cash at post offices was understood by the state as the least desired option but resulted in being the most utilized option by grant recipients. SASSA reported that around 70% of SRD grant beneficiaries received their pay-out via the Post Office (South African Social Security Agency, 2021).

As a landmark for social protection in South Africa, the SRD grant would be the first grant awarded to working-age adults without any work requirements and for their own use. The SRD grant is the most substantial move by the government towards a basic income grant in so far as it was the first grant to target those who are unemployed and of working age, for their own use. The Minister of Social Development has stated that the department is looking at the SRD grant as a “baseline” to introduce a basic income grant over the next several years (BusinessTech, 2022). This aligns with the argument proposed by Natrass and Seekings (2022) who argue that Covid-19 planning directives have borrowed from the legitimacy of scientific and technocratic expertise, and are allowing for projects of state expansion which reach beyond the immediate governance of Covid-19 economic response.

In this case the SRD grant can be understood as an opportunity in which the state took advantage of the Covid-19 crisis in order to facilitate the extension of the social grant machinery. In doing so the government achieved a degree of state expansion through the project by means of enhanced regulatory powers (by means of control) and surveillance (through the datafication of those eligible). The expansion of the social grant system occurred in the context of strong opposition within the ruling party. What is more interesting here is the termination of the SRD grant in 2021 and its reintroduction until 2023. Key to this reintroduction was massive economic disruption in parts of the country. Although the significance of the SRD grant in relation to state regulation and surveillance remains undetermined, the significance of large-scale economic disruption appears meaningful.

In line with global responses to Covid-19, the South African government was able to employ its pre-existing social protection network in order to combat the devastating social and economic impacts of the pandemic. Following the

democratic government's vision of poverty alleviation, the SRD grant was able to incorporate a novel population into the fold of social protection by extending social grants to the potentially employable. This significant incorporation relieves pressure off the expected practise of sharing existing social grant entitlements between families and households, and reinvigorates conversations about the introduction of a basic income grant.

3. Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of personal experiences of the SRD grant, forty-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted between July and October 2021 in urban Khayelitsha, Cape Town (21) and around rural Mount-Frere, Eastern Cape (20). Khayelitsha is a partially informal township on the edge of the metropolitan Cape Town in the Western Cape province of South Africa and serves as the urban location of our sample. Our rural component of the sample was conducted in several villages near Mount Frere in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Those who met the eligibility criteria for the SRD grant were recruited by means of community-based sampling with the help of a locally-resident research assistant. This approach was chosen as an effective sampling technique due to limitations on social interaction resulting from Covid-19 lockdown regulations. Most participants in the urban sub-sample were recruited from Site-C which is a long-established area within Khayelitsha. The rural sample was dispersed throughout different villages. Within the broader group of those who met the SRD grant eligibility criteria, three specific groups of participants were identified: (1) people who had successfully applied for the SRD grant, (2) people who applied for the SRD grant but whose application was unsuccessful, and (3) people who did not apply for the SRD grant but were eligible. Participants were interviewed in relation to the first round of the SRD grant. The proportion of participants within each group were 88%, 7%, 5%, respectively. Participants were between the ages of nineteen and fifty-nine years old. With close to 70% of all grant beneficiaries being men (Senona, Torkelson & Zembe-Mkabile, 2021), it was expected that most participants would be men, however a slighter higher percentage (54%) of participants were women.

Senona, Torkelson and Zembe-Mkabile (2021) (for the Black Sash) conducted similar research between September and November 2020. A key difference between the Black Sash Report and this research relates to how individuals were sampled. The Black Sash Report sample appears to have been comprised of individuals who were identified by advice offices who were working in communities to assist with social grant applications. The members of the Black Sash sample were more likely to have been experiencing problems with accessing the grant. In this way, the sample is comprised of aggrieved applicants which may be more useful for illuminating the more serious problems that were experienced.

In contrast, the community-based sample in Khayelitsha and Mount Frere was not limited to aggrieved applicants and was therefore able to illuminate more routine and ‘typical’ experiences. The DSD and SASSA commissioned a rapid assessment of the implementation and utilisation of the special Covid-19 Grant (Department of Social Development, 2021). By employing a mixed methods approach the DSD was able to draw on data collected during the application and verification process to identify key aspects for investigation early on during the introduction of the grant. Significant in this assessment is that the DSD held focus group discussions with those who were eligible but did not apply. Similar to the community-based sample in Khayelitsha and Mount Frere, this was limited in the number of people identified in this group. The DSD, in partnership with community-based organisations, sampled this group through approaching working-aged men seeking informal labour on the side of the road. This convenient sample does not account for the experiences of women in this position.

Interviews for the purpose of this research were conducted in-person and predominantly outdoors in order to observe Covid-19 social distancing regulations. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in either English or isiXhosa, and then translated and transcribed. Transcripts were accompanied by field notes from the primary researcher. Consent was obtained verbally and participants have been assigned pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. Key themes which were focused on included SRD grant experiences, forms of income, household resource allocation and attitudes towards grants.

4. Findings

4.1 Covid-19, poverty and hunger

Reflecting over the past year, participants’ experience of job loss was similar across the board. Most of the sample earned their livelihood from labour intensive positions in the informal sector and all participants experienced loss of income because of national Covid-19 lockdown regulations. Francis and Valodia (2020) estimate 5 million people in South Africa were employed within the informal sector before the Covid-19 pandemic. It is estimated that 1.5 million informal sector workers lost their livelihoods between 2019 and 2020. Comparing this to the 840 000 job losses in the formal sector, Skinner et al. (2021:4) highlight “informal job losses were far greater than formal job losses”. Embedded in unregulated and unprotected roles, the experiences of job loss were epitomised by lack of employment rights. Lethabo (53) was informally employed as a domestic worker for five years and, at the onset of lockdown, she lost her job. Attempting to secure income security she approached the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union. Through negotiations her employer agreed to pay her R11 000. However, the lack of enforcement of regulation in informal work left

her unprotected to a large degree: “the wife said that they would start paying in January they never did, I tried calling them, they never answered. They [the union] called the man, the man never answered any calls”. Experiences of losing livelihoods due to Covid-19 lockdown regulations, with no employment regulation, occurred throughout the sample. This finding is political by nature because it emerges at the intersection of pre-existing government economic policies which have failed to transform the economic landscape of South Africa. Individuals in the sample who lost jobs, and were not protected by regulation during the pandemic, experienced this at the intersection of a pre-existing lack of economic transformation in relation to job creation and work place regulation enforcement. Our participants recorded low levels of livelihood recovery in the latter half of 2021, and relied mainly on the SRD grant. This could be because people who expected to return to work were less likely to apply for the grant, or our sample did not include people who had returned to work at the time. Nevertheless, this contradicts the varied employment data which indicates that there was some form of employment recovery in 2021. These findings, combined with various employment statistics during the pandemic, suggest that further research is needed to uncover the full extent of employment disruption throughout all sectors in South Africa.

The context in which the SRD grant was designed and implemented is characterised by loss of livelihoods, and the government proposed the grant in a manner in which it may skilfully and effectively solve Covid-19 related socio-economic problems. Masiero and Das (2019, 929) remind us that, through the datafication of application processes, the grant is “conceived as a technical fix to an existing problem, [and] thus acquires an inherently political role”. Gibbs et al. (2018:1821) expand on the political nature of technical solutions for social problems by explaining how “the process of form filling, providing identity and being ‘recognised’ by the state is a way for them to ‘see’ and assert control over citizens”. The employment of bureaucracy as a means to solve Covid-19 socio-economic problems inherently expands on the political power of the state. Designed to alleviate extreme poverty, the SRD grant was a means to ensure the bare minimum, according to the state. This research finds that poverty and hunger was a motivating factor for undertaking an SRD application. David (21) understood the grant as a means to “buy food and toiletries, so that we won’t go to bed with an empty stomach”. Substantiated by Bandile (60) who intended to purchase “sugar, washing soap and other smalls things while waiting on the salary for my wife”.

As part of this design to alleviate extreme poverty, large scale efforts notifying the population of government lockdown regulations, as well as social protection efforts, occurred. Most of the urban sample became aware of the SRD grant through national broadcasting platforms, whilst the rural sample relied mainly on

word of mouth. This is supported by the Department of Social Development who found that the main source of information about the SRD grant was television and radio (2021). This highlights the relative success of the SRD grant; information dissemination was widespread, with individuals in urban and rural environments having access to information about the introduction of the SRD grant. However, the partial reliance on word of mouth in cases where direct government communication did not reach could be charged with systematically excluding those who are in more remote locations with little access to technology. This introduction of the SRD grant was met with caution, many waiting until others had received the grant, “First of all, I thought it was like fraud or something, because you must do it online and you don’t know these websites are hackers and all those stuff”, Andiswa (21) elaborates on the collective sense of doubt. Being the first grant in South Africa to have a fully automated application system, these sentiments and historic fragilities need to be critically considered for those aspects of social protection which are digital. More than likely, online applications will be adopted for regular grant applications in the future. This is presumed on the basis of an online application system for regular grants being trialled previously, as well as the requirement for a SASSA official to be present during the application process being dropped.

4.2 Experiences of the application process

The utility of the SRD grant design becomes more apparent through experiences of the application process. Within our sample, more than half applied via the USSD code and almost all participants in our rural sample utilised the USSD application mode. This mirrors overall trends, with 80% of all applicants utilizing the USSD mode of application (Gronbach, Megannon & Seekings, 2022). Participants who applied themselves through mobile channels found the process quite efficient and empowering, thus contributing to the success of the SRD grant. Application processes entailed potential beneficiaries supplying online their name and surname, ID number or Department of Home Affairs Refugee permit number, gender, disability, mobile number and home address. Applicants who opted for private bank payments needed to supply their bank account details (South African Social Security Agency, 2021). This experience, of conceptualising the newly digitized bureaucratic process as empowering, highlights not only how the state is ‘seeing’ grant applicants and potentially ‘recognizing’ them as citizens, but also that grant applicants themselves are exercising their agency to claim socio-economic rights. Although Andiswa was sceptical at first, she describes her experience of applying “fast if you do it on the phone. Everything was settled and they said I should wait for messages to see if it is approved”. However, lack of digital literacy, connectivity or smart devices left some participants reliant on others during their application process. Conceptualised as a material barrier, lack of access to connectivity or smart devices therefore presented a challenge in the application process which applicants needed to navigate. These participants had

to entrust others (mainly other family members) with their personal information and often were not given the option to participate in the application process themselves. In such cases, applicants were disempowered because they had to give their personal information and identity documents to someone else, and they were often not involved in important decisions, such as payment method. This highlights the complex political landscape of social protection in South Africa. Not only is there a relationship between the state and applicants, but through ‘recognising’ applicants as citizens (who are marginalised) this relationship extends to the multiple networks of association held between applicants and their community. The extended relationship between the state, the applicant and their community is rooted in the failure to transform racial injustices stemming from apartheid. Here the struggle to actualise one’s socio-economic rights intersects with economic marginalisation and a lack of economic and educational transformation allowing all citizens to participate in technological advancements. This is illustrated by Tumi (22) whose friend completed her application process, “No I did not get any options during my application and I remember at that time some people were saying they got paid via bank and my approval only said I must go to the Post Office”.

Another compounding problem and exclusion error with application processes was the lack of internet connectivity, data and airtime. As shown above, a large majority of the rural sample utilized the USSD application mode, thus highlighting the lack of internet connectivity in remote areas of South Africa. In a bid to navigate such material barriers, participants had to purchase data or airtime, while others in the urban sample had to risk social distancing measures and travel to local internet hotspots. These were explained as free internet hotspots which are installed in ‘Spaza shops’ (informal convenience shops) around the area. Eric (52) had his son to go to their local Spaza shop and connect to the *Ikeja Network* which is a South African-based free community internet hotspot localised only in informal settlements around the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces. This highlights not only that Eric lacked connectivity; he had to rely on family members due to his lack of digital literacy. Alternatively, participants overcame the lack of data and airtime through the use of the MOYA app. MOYA, another South African based tech company offering private services which overcome exclusion errors, is a data free app that allows potential beneficiaries to apply online and receive updates of their application status online. However, SASSA criticised the practice as they described the use of the app for SRD grant purposes as “fake” and urged all applicants to only use official SASSA channels for applications (Bhengu, 2021). The tech-based company reported over one million people accessing the SRD website daily through the app (Bhengu, 2021). Attempts to navigate material barriers, such as lack of digital literacy and connectivity, rendered our participants at risk of contracting Covid-19 by entering public spaces, by sharing personal information with other people and through the

use of unauthorised digital platforms. This highlights compounding social and economic challenges faced by applicants, and the obstacles they must navigate to avoid extreme poverty during a time of national lockdown measures and high numbers of Covid-19 cases in the population. Moreover, these alternative avenues were not accessible to the rural population, thereby excluding them further. It can therefore be understood that material barriers stemming from socio-economic challenges are embedded in a complex intersection of political, social and economic marginalisation. A context specific form of marginalisation is rooted in the history of apartheid, which the democratic government has failed to transform.

Through instances where people were unable to utilize these alternatives, we come to see the third category of our sample, namely people who did not apply for the SRD grant but were eligible. Here, technical challenges systematically excluded some of the poor from accessing the SRD grant. In their *Rapid Assessment of the Implementation and Utilisation of the Special Covid-19 Grant*, the Department of Social Development (2021) found that lack of smartphones for application purposes and lack of identity documents were the main contributing factors for why people who were eligible did not apply. These findings are similar to mine, whereby Rethabile (52) was living in the rural Eastern Cape when the SRD grant was first introduced. She lacked digital literacy skills and connectivity access, therefore was reliant on those around her. Her husband, who was her only form of financial support, passed away in 2020. After months of asking others who had applied for themselves to help her, she eventually gave up and did not submit an application. Support organisations and programmes had also failed to reach her, thus illustrating the limited scope of these networks and the lack of formal support for applications by SASSA. Only one participant in our entire sample referred to such formal avenues of support. Although eligible, factors such as digital (in)experience, lockdown regulations and loss of family members rendered Rethabile incapable of completing an application. This highlights the exclusionary aspects of the application process, occurring during a time of compounding socio-economic stress for those who are potential beneficiaries. The SRD grant was designed to alleviate extreme poverty, but Rethabile's experience showcases not only the need to expand formal services which support application processes, but also downward social and economic mobility experienced through failure to submit an application. During extreme Covid-19 related socio-economic circumstances, Rethabile had to relocate to Khayelitsha and has no form of livelihood or financial support, explaining that she now relies on neighbours for food and often goes hungry as they cannot support her every day. As argued by Senona, Torkelson and Zembe-Mkabile (2021:19), "the lack of connectivity, airtime, data and digital literacy posed challenges for applicants", and this is also true in the case of many of our participants' experiences when applying for the SRD grant. The larger promises of socio-economic rights enshrined in the constitution are therefore eroded through the mundane daily operations of a fragile

bureaucratic technological solution, due to a lack of social, political and economic transformation.

4.3 Application outcomes

We investigated application outcomes, as part of the design and practice of the SRD grant process, by following various material barriers and systematic exclusions embedded in social, political and economic marginalisation. Speaking to the overall success of the SRD grant, 88% of the sample had successful application outcomes. The proportion of successful applicants in relation to all applicants in this sample is of course higher than 88% as the sample included those who never applied. This proportion is also much higher than the proportion nationally. Although most outcomes were successful, timeliness of the outcome result, notification of the outcome and the need to appeal was diverse. Participants who applied for the grant almost immediately after it was announced received their outcome notification within twenty-four hours of applying. However, other participants waited between one week to almost three months for their outcome notification. This is attributed to delays with the SASSA system and lack of connectivity to follow up on an application status. Pumi (28) highlights the inconsistency of application outcome notifications, “After I have submitted my application I waited for my response for a long time. I asked others that I applied with them and they told me that they were approved and even received payment.” Pumi, and others in the urban sample, relied on Ikeja Networks and the MOYA App to enquire her outcome status. By utilising data-free channels, Pumi’s experience illustrates challenges faced when an outcome notification is delayed; however, these options were inaccessible to our rural sample and many had to pay for transport to travel to post offices and follow up on their application status. Although entering a new phase of the application process (application outcome), material barriers of access to technology persist. Furthermore, this phase of the application process introduces long distances to travel and cost of traveling as a material barrier. Gibbs et al. (2018) reported that material barriers relating to cost and distance of travelling in order to claim cash transfers is a typical barrier experienced by claimants for various other grants in South Africa.

Utilising the Ikeja Network, Pumi’s application result read as “pending”. After SRD payments were completed in April 2021 Pumi’s disappointment was overwhelming, “This year when SASSA stopped paying this grant, someone told me to get on the app called ‘UMoya’ to check why my application was not successful. That app ‘UMoya’ asked me for my identity document number, then it started from my first months of application until SASSA stopped giving out these R350, showing me that I have IRP5 and UIF that is why it was pending.” What is more, it has been reported that around 70% of overall applications which were rejected during the verification process by early June were a result of outdated and incorrect UIF data (BusinessTech, 2020). This is an example of

another technical challenge systematically excluding some of the poor from accessing the SRD grant. This bureaucratic failure is rooted in the political failure of the government to ensure lateral coordination between different departments. The MOYA app provided Pumi with information as to why her application was ‘pending’; had she received a notification or further explanation from SASSA earlier she could have appealed it. Five per cent of the participants appealed their outcome. However, participants who chose not to appeal explained that the effort it would take to appeal would not be worth it and stated the inefficacy of these systems. 59% of respondents in the DSD report stated that they had not been given a reason as to why their application was unsuccessful; furthermore 81% of those who were able to obtain justification for their rejection argued that they did not agree with the reasoning behind it (Department of Social Development, 2021). Maqhina (2020) expands on the problematic appeals process, in that electronic notifications informing applicants of rejection were not supplemented with reasons as to why applications were unsuccessful. Furthermore, applicants had 15 days in which to appeal and this could only be done via email. Re-submissions would then be assessed by SASSA with applicants only having 30 days in which to complete their re-submitted application. The challenges presented during the appeals process symbolise a failure by the government to ‘recognise’ applicants as active citizens, therefore systematically excluding individuals from accessing their rights. The severity of the barriers presented during the appeals process prevents some citizens from exercising their agency in relation to the state, and therefore can be charged as political in so far as some individuals are barred from claiming their rights.

4.4 Payment processes

Moving towards the second functionality presented by the digitization of social protection, the ability to assign entitlements to beneficiaries is explored through the payment process of the SRD grant. Of the successful applications in this sample, almost all actually received grant pay-outs, with three quarters receiving their grants via the post office and one quarter via banks, leading to the overall achievement of the SRD grant. Inconsistent payments, travel costs and corruption at post offices were key issues here. Payment inconsistencies were present for both modes of payment; varying amounts paid each month, not receiving all payments, and payment date changes were predominant. For many urban participants, the first payment received would be two months’ worth of the grant (2 x R350) because of delays in application or outcome notification. This differed in the rural setting as participants had less access to post offices and banks and would therefore cash out their grant less frequently than the urban sample. Examples of payment inconsistencies include Thabisa (59) who waited for three months for her application outcome, “I was not happy because I was expecting R700 or R1050 because it took so long [application approval] but I only get R350 for the first payment of August.” Contrasting this, Busi (33) experienced

inconsistent commercial bank payments which amounted to more than the prescribed grant amounts, “It (her first payment) was R750, then on my second month it was R1050 and the rest of the months it was R350, the last payment it was R700”. When asked if there were any months which she did not collect her grant she replied, “No, I think it was my luck because I was collecting every month and I never skipped any month”. Payment amount inconsistencies were explained as disadvantaging beneficiaries as they were not able to plan ahead financially. Moreover, leakage in SASSA’s payment system could have driven up overall expenditure on the programme. This indicates that the design of the payment process was not accurate and reliable. The Auditor General would pick up on cases such as this. Moreover, the substantial differences between urban and rural claimants’ experiences of the payment process lead to the argument made by Gibbs et al. (2018:1828) whereby material and technical barriers are “fundamentally about larger political and economic processes” which are understood as “embedded in a complex intersection of economic, political and social marginalisation”. Here, socio-economic differences between rural and urban spaces, which are rooted in the legacy of apartheid, are charged with a lack of substantial transformation therefore hindering the ability of citizens to exercising agency in their relation to the state.

Payment date inconsistencies were a common experience for beneficiaries at both post offices and commercial banks, and compounds with travel costs. This was especially problematic for beneficiaries collecting their grants at the post office. David’s experience illustrates the nuances of payment inconsistencies and compounding socio-economic problems in urban or rural areas of South Africa. When David first received his grant, he was living in rural Eastern Cape Province, before relocating to Khayelitsha where he would receive his grants in the Western Cape Province. While in the Eastern Cape, David would pay R50 to travel long distances to the post office. He explains further,

We used to wake up at 2 o’clock in the morning, and when we get there, there are already people who slept there the day before. We will wait and queue and the post office will only open at 8 in the morning. And I will receive the money at three in the afternoon when they are closing. And the line will still be full at that time and people are pushing through one another, and they are fighting and sometimes the system would shut down or slow down at times when you are already in front of the line, they will tell you to go home and come back the next day or night as well sleep in line and not go home, because you need the money.

Participants from our rural sample reported spending between R50 and R160 for return trips to post offices. Adding to this, our rural sample would often have to

return to the post office several times due to lack of network at the post office, or to a limited number of people being served per day. In these cases, participants would either have to pay for accommodation or travel home and pay for transportation the next day. In comparison to rural areas, David said of urban areas,

There is a big difference. Firstly, here in Cape Town I didn't have to wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning, secondly I wake up and walk and there would be a line and I would wait. There won't be a car that I would have to pay I will walk with my two own feet and I will get exactly the R350 and come back home with that exact amount.

The payment stage of the SRD grant process introduces the material barrier of street level bureaucrats hindering access to cash transfers and the technocratic barrier relating to a lack of identification documentation. Gibbs et al. (2018) reported these to be typical barriers experienced by individuals accessing various other grants in South Africa. These barriers intersect with previously mentioned barriers relating to distance and cost of transportation, creating a web of challenges which claimants must navigate. Predominantly experienced by our rural sample, corruption at post offices by officials and security guards created further barriers to inclusion. Mpilo (25) explains that after waiting for hours at the post office, "They asked us to leave ID copies and come back tomorrow without telling us the money is available or not. When we came back the following day, they said there is no money". The following month he decided to go to a different post office, "What a shock when I arrived I was told that your money was available, but it was withdrawn on the same date I was asked to leave ID copy in Mount Frere post office". This report indicates that post office officials are finding illegal routes to take entitlements. Furthermore, Majola (2020) as well as our participants reported organised corruption within the queues outside post offices, whereby security guards and non-grant beneficiaries hold spaces and demand payment of up to R50 for beneficiaries to access the post office. Corruption was mainly encountered by beneficiaries who only had birth certificates and not identity documents. This compounding problem intersects with travel cost burdens, as parents of those with only birth certificates had to be present in order to receive their grant, therefore doubling travel costs. Buhle (22) elaborates, "They give us the numbers while we were in the line, then we go to make copies of our IDs and birth because if you don't have ID you produce your birth certificate and your parent ID. Even your parent should be there when you going to collect your money." However, this was not the case for everyone, Funeka (20) was unable to receive her grant money as her mother had passed away and her grandmother had a different surname, "It would require a representative since I don't have an ID. And I told them everyone who can be my representative are very far." Other beneficiaries in her position were taken advantage of, as Nskosi

(21) explains, “I found out that there is a connection for a person who works inside the post office and she helped me”, with only a birth certificate and without a family representative. He explained that, “I didn’t go to collect my money monthly and when I went, I received one thousand rand and some odds. Then I had to pay her two hundred rand in order to help me.” Corruption at post offices exacerbates the challenges a beneficiary faces, with these acts rendering the beneficiary in debt due to illegal routes and burdensome costs. As is shown, inconsistent payments, material barriers and street level bureaucrats, embedded in larger political, economic and social structures, place SRD beneficiaries at further risk of poverty, hunger and exposure to Covid-19. Such avenues of downward social and economic mobility not only impact beneficiaries, but also households and family members due to the complex historical embeddedness of individuals and their associated communities.

4.5 Grants, households and family settings

Overall, and despite the various challenges, the SRD grant did contribute to alleviating extreme poverty within households and family settings of beneficiaries. Between 91 and 99% of approved applicants received their grants (Köhler & Bhorat, 2021). Seekings (2020) reported that within the first six months of the grant, about 40% of the population benefited from the grant when considering the grant as a household income. This was supported by 53% of beneficiaries who reported that grant money was pooled together with other household incomes for household consumption means (Department of Social Development, 2021). The common experience of grant usage was for immediate household needs such as food, toiletries and electricity; for example, “I bought ingredients for stew, there were days were we would run out of food and when the day comes for me to go and get my grant, I would buy potatoes. With my first payment I bought potatoes, 10kg rice and we were able to eat something with my family.” The Department of Social Development (2021) reported that 93% of beneficiaries reported using grant money for food, with the electricity coming in second at 32%. Many of the households within our sample were receiving multiple grants and grant money would often flow between extended urban and rural family settings. Some cases allowed beneficiaries to enhance their future prospects, for example Andiswa (21) was able to prepare for college and future job opportunities by purchasing professional clothing, while Sibusiso (22) was able to move out of his parents’ home into informal housing by himself. Many young beneficiaries shared these sentiments and would refer to the grant as an opportunity to invest in themselves. Reports of spending the grant on unproductive activities such as alcohol or drugs were referred to in other people’s behaviour but never directly reported. The importance of the SRD grant during times of extended national lockdowns, expanding unemployment rates and compounding social and economic circumstances is paramount. Senona, Torkelson and Zembe-Mkabile (2021:5) argued that this, however, must be

understood within the context of “the R350 amount not being linked to an objective measure of poverty”, rendering the designed amount less than the food poverty line.

Overall, attitudes towards the grant were positive. Participants contextualised their optimism towards the grant in relation to the declining employment opportunities they face. The Department of Social Development (2021) reported that 80% of respondents stated that the grant made a positive impact in their lives and those of their household members. Many of them stated their preference for secure employment instead of a reliance on grants to secure a livelihood. Within this argument was specific mention of high rates of youth unemployment. Parallel to the preference for secure employment was mention of the SRD grant amount not being able to fulfil the basic needs of individuals and households. Although it can be seen that the grant positively contributed to daily needs of beneficiaries, Senona, Torkelson and Zembe-Mkabile (2021:5) argue that “the grant was insufficient to alleviate the multiple hardships that individuals and households encountered on a day-to-day basis, exacerbated by the pandemic”. These multiple hardships are rooted in larger economic and political processes which have created barriers to access, and brought about systematic exclusions. These processes have historically created an intersection of economic, social and political marginalisation spanning across generations, and persist due to a failure of transformation.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In March of 2020 the world began to take various forms of action to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic with social protection programs becoming a global priority, the South African government declared a national state of disaster, and the country entered lockdown. This extended control over the economy and society occurred in a highly inequitable context of rising unemployment rates. Included in the state’s emergency relief reforms was the introduction of a special Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant. The expansion of power through the government’s Covid-19 response borrowed from the legitimacy of science and technocratic expertise in order to enact projects which reach beyond the immediate governance of Covid-19 economic and health impacts (Nattrass & Seekings, 2022). The SRD grant in this instance allowed for extended powers of regulation and surveillance through the digital administration of a new target population, namely a population which has previously been neglected when it comes to government’s administrative capacity. As a landmark for social protection in South Africa, the SRD grant would be the first grant awarded to working-age adults without any work requirements and for their own use. The grant application system was also novel in so far as it was South Africa’s first automated application system for social grants.

Overall, I argue that the SRD grant can be understood as a success as it was able to serve millions of poor South Africans relatively quickly. The embeddedness of claimants in wider networks of collective identities and communities meant that the SRD grant extended well beyond the individual during a time of crisis. Many of the households within this sample were receiving multiple grants, and grant money would often flow between extended urban and rural family settings. What is more, the SRD grant is evidenced to reach beyond crisis aversion to enable some beneficiaries to enhance their future prospects. Not only was the actual receipt of the cash transfer a success, but various stages within the process of receiving the SRD grant also deserve recognition. These findings align with broader conceptualisations of social protection which “highlight the role of social protection in enhancing the social status and rights of the marginalised” (Plagerson, Harpham & Kielmann, 2012:969). What is more, information dissemination was evidenced to be largely successful, with no reports of individuals not accessing information about the grant. Application processes were reported to empower individuals, and were effected with ease, thus allowing grant applicants to exercise agency to claim socio-economic rights. Additionally, information regarding outcome results was efficient and timely. These promising findings lend credit to the adaptations made to the pre-existing social grant machinery which was employed alongside the new innovations which adopted digital technologies in place of old pre-digital technologies. What is more, the participants reported that their experience of the SRD grant was positive, while at the same time contextualising their optimism in relation to the economic climate of declining employment rates. Understanding the introduction of the SRD grant in the larger history of South Africa, it is argued that the incorporation of a new cohort of grant beneficiaries allows for an enhanced inclusion into the political, social and economic life in South Africa that extends beyond notions of legal citizenship. Cash transfers in this regard translate “basic constitutional rights into de facto lived experience(s) of ordinary people” (Plagerson, Harpham & Kielmann, 2012:979). As an arm of South African social protection measures to combat the socio-economic hardship of Covid-19, the SRD grant is a means in which the economically vulnerable can access the political world through the context of bureaucracy, administration and service delivery.

Although the grant is argued to be relatively successful, material and technocratic barriers presented challenges which were navigated by participants in order to receive their cash transfers. Barriers were identified as a lack of access to connectivity or smart devices, lack of digital literacy, hostile or unhelpful street level bureaucrats, long distances to travel to (and then long waits at) post offices for information regarding application status and collection of grants, high costs of traveling, and lack of identification documentation. Many times these barriers would intersect with one another, compounding the challenges needing to be navigated by individuals. The navigation of these barriers resulted in various

outcomes, which included attitudes of disempowerment, lack of agency during decision making processes, sharing of personal information, utilisation of unauthorised digital platforms, and exposure to Covid-19. The majority of the sample navigated these barriers through their personal and familial networks, which highlights the complex political landscape of social protection in South Africa. Not only is there a relationship between the state and applicants, but through ‘recognising’ applicants as citizens (who are marginalised) this relationship extends to the multiple networks of association held between applicants and their community. The extended relationship between the state, the applicant and their community is rooted in the failure to transform racial injustices stemming from apartheid, as “definitions of citizenship are embedded in different historical trajectories and complex demarcations between individual and collective identities” (Plagerson, Harpham & Kielmann, 2012:970). The struggle to actualise one’s socio-economic rights intersects with economic marginalisation and a lack of economic and educational transformation allowing all citizens to participate in technological advancements. The intersection between marginalisation and a lack of political transformation was even more localised for participants in rural areas.

Although most barriers were overcome by participants through various mechanisms, there were technical challenges which systematically excluded some of the poor from accessing the SRD grant, despite the intention for the grant to serve the poor during a crisis. This paper found that the partial reliance on word of mouth, in cases where direct government communication did not reach, could be charged with systematically excluding those who were in more remote locations with little access to information dissemination channels. The greater reliance on technology for application purposes (when compared to other grants) led to systematic exclusions in cases where there was a lack of smartphones, digital literacy skills and connectivity access for application purposes. Furthermore, lack of identity documents rendered some individuals excluded from collecting their cash transfer. Gibbs et al. (2018:1829) support this notion of exclusion through documentation by arguing that “access to documentation and therefore grants is not purely a technical issue, but rooted in wider economic and political institutions”. False rejection outcomes due to outdated and incorrect government databases was a prominent exclusion barrier. This bureaucratic failure is rooted in the political failure of the government to ensure lateral coordination between different departments. It is argued that barriers to access and systematic exclusion in relation to the SRD grant are aligned with Gibbs et al. (2018:1828), whereby they are “fundamentally about larger political and economic processes” which are understood as “embedded in a complex intersection of economic, political and social marginalisation”. These processes have historically created an intersection of marginalisation spanning across generations, and persist due to a failure of transformation. This finding is political

by nature because it emerges at the intersection of pre-existing government social and economic policies which have failed to transform the economic landscape of South Africa, originating from an era of pre-democratic racial segregation.

From the onset, individuals in the sample who engaged with the process of applying for the SRD grant had experienced job loss and were not protected by regulation during the pandemic; this was experienced at the intersection of a pre-existing lack of economic transformation in relation to job creation and workplace regulation enforcement. The majority of the sample stated their preference for secure employment instead of a reliance on grants to secure a livelihood, thus highlighting the need and want for greater economic transformation in South Africa. Furthermore, socio-economic differences between rural and urban spaces, which are rooted in the legacy of apartheid, are charged with a lack of substantial social and economic transformation, and therefore hindering the ability of citizens to exercising agency in their relation to the state when accessing social grants. This highlights compounding social and economic challenges faced by applicants, and the obstacles they must navigate to avoid extreme poverty during a time of national lockdown measures and high numbers of Covid-19 cases in the population. Many alternative avenues to navigate challenges were not accessible to the rural population, therefore excluding them further. The severity of the barriers presented during the appeals process prevents citizens from exercising their agency in relation to the state, and therefore can be charged as political in so far as individuals are barred from claiming their rights. As is shown, inconsistent payments, material barriers and street level bureaucrats, embedded in larger political, economic and social structures, place SRD beneficiaries at further risk of poverty, hunger and exposure to Covid-19. Such avenues of downward social and economic mobility not only impact beneficiaries, but also households and family members due to the complex historical embeddedness of individuals and their associated communities.

As a relatively successful, large-scale introduction of a cash transfer, the SRD grant has proven to enhance the immediate and future prospects of a new cohort of individuals throughout South Africa. Further investigation is needed in relation to individuals who are eligible for the SRD grant, but did not apply. This would illuminate the more severe forms of systematic exclusion. Furthermore, as an extension of research on access to social grants in South Africa, I argue that additional research is needed in relation to barriers which are specific to the SRD grant. SRD grant-specific barriers are mainly attributed to the use of new technical systems in the application and verification processes, which will be a key area of literature moving forward. Although introduced during a time of crisis, it is important to critically examine the mechanisms through which the grant was actualised. Masiero and Das (2019:929) remind us that, through the datafication of application processes, the grant is “conceived as a technical fix to an existing

problem, [and] thus acquires an inherently political role”. Gibbs et al. (2018:1821) expand on the political nature of technical solutions for social problems by explaining how bureaucratic processes, like the experience of applying for the SRD grant, allow the state power over of who is recognised and in what capacity they are recognised, and in turn can assert power on the population through this process. The employment of bureaucracy as a means to solve Covid-19 socio-economic problems inherently expands the political power of the state. However, the larger promises of socio-economic rights enshrined in the constitution become dependent on the mundane daily operations of a fragile bureaucratic technological solution, due to a lack of social, political and economic transformation.

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Regional and international factors: How do regional and international organisations affect the conduct of elections, the operation of political institutions, the maintenance of order and the making of public policy?

The consequences for public policy: What determines or informs public policy-making and implementation? To what extent do public policies reflect the will of the citizenry? Our primary focus is on social protection or welfare policy, through the new **Zola Skweyiya African Social Policy Initiative**. We also study development and labour market policies.

We address these questions through data collection (including both quantitative and qualitative data, through large-scale surveys, interviews and, where appropriate, archival research) by both teams of researchers and individual researchers. We hold regular seminars (or webinars) and workshops. We collaborate with researchers elsewhere in Africa and further afield.