SOCIAL PROTECTION IN A TIME OF COVID

LESSONS FOR BASIC INCOME SUPPORT

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Acknowledgments

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Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the South African Medical Research Council. Prior to the commencement of each interview, each participant was taken through an informed consent process which entailed the explanation of the purpose of the interview in detail, ensuring that participants understood as far as possible, the aims, objectives and purpose of the study. A consent form was signed by all participants who agreed to take part in the study. All names were fictionalised to protect identities. Thank you all the research participants for making themselves available to be interviewed.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant (Covid-19 SRD) was introduced in South Africa in May 2020 to mitigate the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. It provided for people between 18 and 59 years of age, who had no income nor access to any other form of social assistance. This was an unprecedented moment in the history of social security in South Africa, initiated under enormous pressure in a remarkably short space of time. It drew people who had previously been excluded from the social grant programme, namely those aged 18 to 59 years, into the social protection network, creating a platform for Basic Income Support in the future.

And yet, the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant was not perfect. The R350 amount was not linked to an objective measure of poverty, and fell well below the food poverty line (R585). There were also many challenges of exclusions and inequitable access, particularly for women, foreign nationals, and people living in rural areas. This qualitative study, conducted in all nine provinces, has sought to understand how the Covid-19 SRD Grant was distributed and how people experienced its distribution. We hope these consolidated learnings inform the development and implementation of Basic Income Support in the near future.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Covid-19 SRD Grant was helpful in a context of poverty and hunger. Beneficiaries were able to use the grants for their immediate needs, preventing them from falling into extreme poverty.
- Despite approximately 6 million beneficiaries successfully accessing the Covid-19 SRD Grant, others were excluded as the programme was mired in a number of challenges.
- The online system was inaccessible and exclusionary for those with no digital devices, internet access, and digital literacy.
- Asylum Seekers and Special Permit Holders became eligible for the Covid-19 SRD Grant through the Scalabrini Court order in June 2020. However, after the judgment, SASSA had to build a special digital platform to accommodate their identification numbers, and Home Affairs had to verify their migrant status. These processes excluded them from receiving the Covid-19 SRD Grant immediately. By the end of the 2020 this cohort had not received a single rand.
- Almost 68% of Covid-19 SRD Grant recipients were men. This was due to the high numbers of women (97% of 7.1 million), who received the Child Support Grant, and qualified for a Caregiver's Allowance instead.[1] When the Caregiver Allowance was terminated on 31 October 2020, they did not qualify for the Covid-19 SRD Grant.
- The South African Post Office (SAPO) did not process cash payments efficiently. Branches ran out of cash, their technology often did not work, and long queues were not well-managed. The problem was compounded when those eligible for the Covid-19 SRD Grant crowded the SAPO branches to obtain information on the progress of their applications. SAPO officials could not help them, as the system was entirely automated.
- People residing in rural and peri-urban areas encountered far greater challenges in accessing the grant than those living in urban areas.
- Overall, 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 include hunger, unemployment, poverty, depression, gender-based violence, inadequate access to water and electricity, and environmental crises such as extreme weather, drought, and flooding.

[1] Kohler, T. & Bhorat, H. (2020). Social Assistance During South Africa's National Lockdown: Examining the Covid-19 Grant, Changes to the Child Support Grant, and Post-October Policy Options (Working Paper 202009). Development Policy Research Unit, University of Cape Town. http://www.dpru.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/36/Publications/Working_Papers/DPRU%20WP%20202009.pdf

COVID-19 SRD GRANT APPLICATION PROCESS

- The scale of demand (over 9 million applications by December 2020) for the grant created massive pressure on SASSA systems, including the Call Centre.
- Support provided by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) was crucial in enabling those eligible to apply. NGO and CBO staff and volunteers experienced significant levels of stress, trying to navigate the new system and support applicants.
- Applying for the Covid-19 SRD Grant on digital online platforms was difficult for many applicants. Lack of connectivity – limited or no access to cell phones, computers, cellular networks, data and airtime - made accessing the grant extremely challenging for many people in the poorest areas of South Africa.
- Capturing information on digital systems was challenging for people unfamiliar with keypads and devices.
- All digital systems were set up exclusively in English, making applying very challenging for people not proficient in that language.

COVID-19 SRD GRANT REJECTIONS

- Almost one third of applications were rejected.[2]
- The most common reason for rejection was conflicting information with national government databases. Numerous applicants were rejected because they appeared on outdated UIF, SARS, NSFAS and SASSA (SOCPEN) databases. Applicants were not given the opportunity to provide additional information to substantiate their eligibility. SASSA indicated that it did not have the capacity to review new information.
- Applicants who applied for a NSFAS bursary were rejected regardless of whether the NSFAS bursary was approved or not, or had terminated.
- Applicants who had uncollected UIF benefits (even as low as a couple of rand) were rejected on the basis of having an outstanding balance linked to their ID number.
- Applicants who had submitted an IRP5 years earlier were rejected on the basis of having previously had an income.
- Applicants without IDs could not apply or were rejected from receiving the Covid-19 SRD Grant. Many people struggled to get ID documents due to the closure and/or limited operating hours of the Department of Home Affairs offices during the lockdown. Obtaining a temporary ID was also beyond the financial means of many Covid-19 SRD Grant applicants, which resulted in their grant applications being rejected.

[2] South African Social Security Agency. (2021, 16 April). Third Quarter Performance Report. Portfolio Committee on Social Development, South African Parliament, Cape Town. Also see Page 16, Table 4: Implementation of Covid-19 Relief Measures - Special Covid-19 SRD Grants: Applications Rejected divided by Clients Paid for December.

COVID-19 SRD GRANT APPEALS PROCESS

- The appeal mechanism for rejected grants was only available online, not in person.
- Applicants (or their proxies such as NGOs, CBOs staff and volunteers) were unable to track the progress of their appeals.
- Applicants only had 15 days to make an appeal. This time frame was too short in many cases.
- The appeals process was facilitated by running the application through the same databases which led to the rejection of the initial application. Applications were also checked against all bank accounts associated with the applicants ID number. The appeals process did not allow for additional information to be submitted and assessed by a SASSA official.
- The appeals process often took a long time. Applicants struggled to survive while these processes ran their course.
- Grants were only paid from the date of the appeal, not the date of the initial application.

COVID-19 SRD GRANT PAYMENTS

- In many cases, the time period between applying for the grant and receiving the grant was several months.
- Payments by SASSA had no clear schedule and were experienced by beneficiaries as erratic.
- Applicants who had been approved for Covid-19 Grants were re-assessed on a monthly basis to verify that they had no other income, by checking bank accounts associated with beneficiary ID numbers. Income of any kind would result in the automatic non-payment of the grant for that month. It seems that only those receiving grants in a bank account were checked, not those receiving money in cash at the Post Office.
- SAPO struggled with cash shortages, which meant people were left frustrated and hungry. Across the country there were overwhelming numbers of people queueing outside SAPO branches in the hope of collecting their grant. In many cases people camped outside SAPO branches overnight in the hope of getting to the branch before cash ran out.
- There were many costs associated with the collection of grants. In rural areas, transport to a SAPO branch could be nearly as much as the grant itself. Due to cash flow problems, beneficiaries had to travel to SAPO branches more than once in the hope of being able to collect their money. Some smaller SAPO branches that did not have a PostBank[3] and did not pay Covid-19 SRD Grants, which meant that beneficiaries had to travel to larger branches where this facility was available.
- Beneficiaries' attempts to load banking details onto the SASSA system were often unsuccessful, resulting in people still having to go to SAPO to collect their grants.
- Payments made into bank accounts incurred bank charges, including withdrawal fees, diminishing the value of the grant.

OVERALL IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 SRD GRANT

- Successful applicants were grateful for the grant, but indicated that R350 per month was too little to meet their basic needs. Applicants called for an increase to the grant, and many pitched the appropriate amount at R500. This would be closer to the R585 food poverty line recommended for a basic food basket (at the time of writing this report).
- For unsuccessful applicants, the impact of not receiving the Covid-19 SRD Grant was devastating. These applicants experienced frequent food shortages, hunger, and/or changes to their dietary patterns. Many spoke about skipping meals and food rationing as some of the strategies they employed to cope with hunger and food insecurity.

[3] Postbank South Africa is a government owned bank, operating as a division of the South African Post Office.

Photo: Jeffrey Abrahams/ GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic is a world historical event. This novel coronavirus, to which humans had no prior exposure and no prior immunity, continues to spread globally.

Initially, in the absence of vaccines or effective treatment protocols, the only way to slow the spread of Covid-19 was by imposing national lockdowns on almost all social and economic activities. Such lockdowns disrupted labour markets, putting people out of work, and endangering the livelihoods and income security of billions of people. Even with such aggressive preventative measures, almost two hundred million people have been infected and four million people have died of Covid-19 worldwide. While the virus itself has devastated families and communities, the economic repercussions have been just as devastating and will continue long after the virus is under control.

The economic effects of the pandemic have been felt most acutely by those in the informal economy, a group not likely to be covered by any social security scheme.[4] Governments across the world had to establish or amend their current social security benefits for this cohort, who suddenly found themselves without any means of making an income due to strict lockdowns.

By June 2020, over 190 countries had either planned or introduced social protection measures in response to Covid-19.[5] This included some 271 targeted cash transfer programs in 131 countries as well as 6 universal transfers (5 of which were one-off).[6] The Covid-19 pandemic serves as a reminder that gaps in the coverage of social benefits are starkly revealed at a time of severe social and economic stress, and demonstrate the need for strong social security systems.

1.1 SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

As the coronavirus reached South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa followed international best practice and declared a national disaster on 15 March 2020.[7] One week later, on 21 March 2020, the country went into Stage 5 lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. This meant that people were unable to leave their homes unless they needed to seek medical treatment or worked in an essential service. The economic effects of this lockdown were devastating and far reaching. Almost immediately, 2.2 million people -- or 13% of the workforce -- lost their jobs and many have still not returned to work since March 2020.[8]

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[4] It is important to define the terms of this report. “Social insurance” refers to contributory programs (such as UIF, COIDA, Road Accident Fund, pension and provident fund provisions) and “social assistance” refers to non-contributory social grants (such as CSG, OAP, etc.) and social relief of distress provisions. In the international literature, “social protection” is used to refer to the entire benefits framework, including both social insurance and social assistance. However, in South Africa, it is more common to use “social security” as defined in the South African Constitution, to refer to the entire benefits framework including both social insurance and social assistance. We will follow the South African language in this report.

[5] Gentlini, U., Almenfi, M.B.A., Dale P., Lopez A.V., Munjica Canas, I.V., Cordero, R.E.Q., Zafar, U. (2020). Social Protection and Jobs Responses to Covid-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures (World Bank Publication 149681). World Bank, Washington DC. https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/590531592231143435/social-protection-and-jobs-responses-to-covid-19-a-real-time-review-of-country-measures-june-12-2020

[6] Ibid.

[7] The Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002. This national disaster was subsequently gazetted by the Minister of Cooperative Government and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) on 25 March 2020.

[8] Job losses are for Q2. Statistics South Africa. (2020). Quarterly Labour Force Survey (Report Q2:2020). Statistics South Africa, Pretoria. http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=13652

Informal, casual, low-income and rural workers, particularly women, were most affected by these job losses.[9] By December 2020, official unemployment in South Africa reached 11.1 million people.[10] One in five households experienced hunger during the initial lockdown and continue to do so a year later. In response, on 30 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a Covid-19 Relief Package amounting to R500 billion, of which R50 billion was earmarked for social relief of distress. The Minister of Social Development then issued directions to provide for relief from the economic fallout of Covid-19.[11] SASSA introduced the following combination of new grants and top-ups to existing grants:[12]

Table 1: **Types of Grants Implemented under Covid-19**

Grant	Amount per month	Population	Duration
Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant	R350	Targeted toward unemployed people, with no income, excluded from other grant programs	May 2020 to October 2020 1st Extension: November to January 2021 2nd Extension: February to April 2021: Total Duration: 1 year
Top-Up of Old Age Pension (OAP), Disability Grant (DG), Foster Care Grant (FCG), and Care Dependency Grant	R250	Targeted toward existing grant recipients.	April 2020 - October 2020: 6 months
Top-Up of Child Support Grant (CSG)	R300	Targeted toward existing CSG grant beneficiaries	May 2020: 1 month
Special Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress for Caregivers - also known as the CSG Caregiver Allowance	R500	Targeted toward adults receiving child support grants on behalf of children in their care. This grant was the same amount irrespective of the number of children cared for.	June 2020 - October 2020: 5 months

These grants boosted the incomes of South African individuals and households. By October 2020, at the height of the new grant payment scheme, 70% of the population lived in households benefiting from some form of social grant payment.[13] Additionally, with the new Covid-19 SRD Grant (over 6 million) and Caregivers Allowance (7.1 million) combined, 13.1 million South Africans were provided with at least some means of protecting them from hunger.[14]

Although this was a far-reaching program, the most extensive social protection coverage only lasted for six months. In his State of the Nation Address on 11 February 2021, President Ramaphosa extended the Covid-19 SRD Grant to the end of April, but did not renew the Caregivers Allowance and the Top-ups on all other grants. Additionally, there were a number of groups who were excluded or received only partial benefit from these new and expanded grants.

[9] Spaull, N., et al. (2020). NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Findings. Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town, Cape Town. https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/1.-Spaull-et-al.-NIDS-CRAM-Wave-2-Synthesis-Findings..pdf

[10] Job losses are for Q4. Statistics South Africa. (2020). Quarterly Labour Force Survey (Report Q4:2020). Statistics South Africa, Pretoria. http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02114thQuarter2020.pdf

[11] On 30 March 2020, the Minister of Social Development issued directions to provide for measures necessary to manage Covid-19. The directions apply to all Department of Social Development, South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) and National Development Agency's managed and mandated programmes and projects.

[12] Paragraph 6(h) of the March 2020 directions relates to Social Relief of Distress. It contains four sub-paragraphs (i) – (iv), which articulate how social relief of distress must be provided for the duration of the pandemic. The directions state that Social Relief of Distress must be provided and records how new applications are to be processed and how existing applications will be managed.

[13] Spaull et al. (2021). NIDS-CRAM Wave 3 Synthesis Findings. Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town, Cape Town. https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/1.-Spaull-N.-Daniels-R.-C-et-al.-2021-NIDS-CRAM-Wave-3-Synthesis-Report.pdf

[14] Spaull et al. (2020). NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 Synthesis Findings.

Caregivers Allowance Recipients (CA): The Covid-19 SRD Grant excluded adults who received Child Support Grants on behalf of children. For the first five months of the pandemic, the Caregivers Allowance provided additional income to this population. However, when President Ramaphosa extended the Covid-19 SRD Grant, he did not extend the Caregivers Allowance as well. As a result, caregivers lost a significant source of income, but were ineligible to apply for the Covid-19 SRD Grant because they were listed on SASSA's SOCPEN database as already received CSGs on behalf of children. Over 97% of caregivers are poor women,[15] who were likely to be unemployed or casually employed without UIF benefits. The failure to extend the SRD grant to caregivers amounted to gender discrimination against poor women with children.

Asylum Seekers and Special Permit Holders: The Covid-19 SRD Grant initially excluded asylum seekers and special permit holders from applying. The Scalabrini Institute initiated litigation to ensure foreign nationals with the appropriate documentation were permitted to apply.[16] Before foreign nationals could receive their grants, however, SASSA had to design a new automated system to accommodate their identity numbers, and their permits had to be vetted by the Department of Home Affairs. These delays meant that successful applicants only began receiving their Covid-19 SRD Grants early in 2021. To date, less than 5,000 people have benefitted from an applicant pool of approximately 188,000.[17]

Temporary Disability Grant Recipients (TDG): TDG recipients struggled to extend their grants during Covid-19. Under normal circumstances, recipients would have been reassessed to see whether or not their grants should be renewed. During Covid-19, this reassessment process could not happen and SASSA extended 210,778 temporary disability grants en masse until the end of December 2020. When these grants ended, recipients claimed that they had not been informed that they would need to go for their reassessments. This resulted in long queues at SASSA offices, which were operating on a reduced staff due to Covid-19 protocols. In January the Bellville SASSA office staff called the police to assist them with managing the queues. The police violently sprayed disabled people with water cannons.[18] While the Black Sash advocated for another blanket extension, SASSA promised parliament that they would resolve this issue within three months by the end of March 2021.[19] When these grants expired, TDG recipients could not apply for the Covid-19 SRD Grant because they were registered on SASSA's SOCPEN database as already receiving social grants.

Exclusion through automation: Additionally, many people were excluded from the Covid-19 SRD Grant because the digital application systems were inaccessible to them. The digital systems were necessary to dispense the grant in the context of a pandemic. However, there were many access challenges pertaining to automation, particularly in rural areas. Despite such difficulties, the Department of Social Development has made provision for the increased digitisation of the grant payment system in the 2021/22 financial year.[20] A balance between face-to-face and digital options is necessary to deliver the constitutional mandate of social security to the poorest of the country.

Finally, there was the biggest exclusion of all: **the end of the Covid-19 SRD Grant.** The Covid-19 pandemic is far from over. The state roll-out of vaccinations has just begun and a third wave of the virus is here. And yet, the government saw fit to terminate the Covid-19 SRD Grant on 30 April 2021, one year after its introduction. The millions of people that had been brought into the social security net have been excluded yet again. To this end, this report builds a case for wide-reaching basic income support for those aged 18 to 59 who earn little or no income. This report also recommends that in any future grant program, applicants and recipients must be able to access both digital and face-to-face services from SASSA.

[15] Statistics South Africa. (2013). Gender Statistics South Africa, 2011. Pretoria. http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-10-05/Report-03-10-052011.pdf

[16] Scalabrini Institute. (19 June 2020). Victory in Covid-19 Social Relief Grant Court Case. [Press Release] www.scalabrini.org.za/news/victory-in-covid19-social-relief-grant-court-case

[17] According to Sally Gandar of the Scalabrini Institute, the media has estimated ther to be R700,000 budgeted for asylum seekers and special permit holders. The number of asylum seekers registered with Home Affairs as of 1 January 2020 is 188,000, although some will receive UIF benefits not the Covid-19 SRD Grant. There are also special permit holders from Angola, Zimbabwe and Lesotho, whose numbers fluxtuate considerably. Some special permit holders would have been formally employed and have access to UIF as well.

[18] Black Sash (12 January 2021) "Black Sash Condemns The Use Of Water Cannons To Manage SASSA Crowds" [Press Release] https://www.blacksash.org.za/index.php/media-and-publications/media-statements/695-black-sash-condemns-the-use-of-water-cannons-to-manage-sassa-crowds.

[19] By March 2021.

[20] Department of Social Development. (2021). Budget Vote 19. South African Parliament, Cape Town. http://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/National%20Budget/2021/ene/Vote%2019%20Social%20Development.pdf

CHAPTER 2:
BACKGROUND TO THIS STUDY

At the beginning of Covid-19, the Black Sash began monitoring the Covid-19 SRD Grant application and distribution process, in coordination with our partner organisations, including the Community Advice Office of South Africa (CAOSA) and Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT). Community monitors working in all nine provinces provided the necessary education and support to people applying for the Covid-19 SRD Grant. They were well positioned to monitor the implementation of the Covid-19 SRD Grant, and provide assistance to grant applicants as problems arose. The community monitors helped applicants to make appeals and seek recourse in cases of rejection, fraud, or irregular and erratic payments. The Black Sash presented the issues and learnings identified by these community monitors to SASSA in their regular reports. Through these engagements with SASSA, the Black Sash got clarity on the application, appeals, and distribution processes. This information was fed back to community monitors, who were better able to assist grant applicants and recipients.

In addition to this vital advocacy work with SASSA, the Black Sash designed this research project. The goal of this research was to provide an in-depth account of the implementation of the Covid-19 SRD Grant and the Caregivers Allowance. More specifically, the study seeks to:

1 Assess whether the Covid-19 Grants succeeded in terms of their original objectives, including determining to what extent the grant has changed the lives of beneficiaries,

2 Examine the administrative efficiency and effectiveness of the grant from the perspective of the beneficiary,

3 Enhance the knowledge of and build a case for the introduction of Basic Income Support in South Africa.

Between September and November 2020, the Black Sash interviewed 26 people affected by the Covid-19 SRD Grant every month for three months. Because of the risks of the virus, all interviews were conducted by telephone. Participants included:

- Successful Covid-19 SRD Grant recipients
- Unsuccessful Covid-19 grant applicants
- Caregivers Allowance recipients
- Asylum seekers and Special permit holders

During this same period, interviews were also conducted with 23 experts and interested stakeholders on the Covid-19 SRD Grant program. Participants included:

- Officials from SASSA, DSD, and the National Treasury
- National Development Agency volunteers
- Monitors from the Black Sash CBO partners, Community Advice Office of South Africa, and Social Change Assistance Trust
- Affiliates of the Scalabrini Institute

Forty-nine people were interviewed in total. All names have been changed in accordance with our ethics approval from the Medical Research Council.

CHAPTER 3:
DESIGNING THE COVID-19 SRD GRANT PAYMENT SYSTEM

Table 2: **Legal Framework for Social Relief of Distress**

Qualification Criteria:	Application Process:
A special Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress of R350 per month may be provided for the period indicated herein to distressed individuals who are– i. South African Citizens, Permanent Residents or Refugees registered on the Home Affairs database (which was subsequently amended to include asylum seekers and and migrants with special permits); ii. currently residing within the borders of the Republic of South Africa; iii. above the age of 18; iv. unemployed; v. not receiving any form of income; vi. not receiving any social grant.	An application for Social Relief of Distress grant may be lodged electronically over and above any other available means of lodging such applications. Notification of the outcome of an application for social relief of distress or a social grant may be given by means of an email, an sms or any such other method.

3.1 BUDGET ALLOCATIONS

Once President Ramaphosa announced the Covid-19 Relief Package, SASSA had to design and implement new social grants to reach people who most needed them. While the coronavirus itself was unprecedented, so were the challenges placed before SASSA. Not only did people need new grants, but these grants had to be confined within a very strict budget allocation, and delivered efficiently and safely in the context of a pandemic. In order to stick to the budget, SASSA had to impose restrictive qualification criteria to limit the number of people who could apply for the grant.

Of the R500 billion Covid Relief package, R50 billion was initially earmarked for social security.[21] A total of R41 billion[22] was committed to social assistance grants and most of this amount (approximately R30 billion[23]) went to topping up existing social grants. Most grants were topped up by R250 a month for six months, and a CSG Caregiver Allowance of R500 was introduced for five months. This meant that there was approximately R13 billion remaining for a new Covid-19 SRD Grant. The extension of the Covid-19 SRD Grant post October resulted in an increase of this figure to approximately R15,6 million by 31 December 2020.[24] When the relief package was introduced, there were already 10.4 million people unemployed in South Africa.[25] These were adults between the ages of 18 and 59, who had no possibility of making an income under lockdown.

SASSA did the math. The remaining R13 billion budget allocation was insufficient to provide for the 10.4 million people who needed the grant. It was not large enough to provide these grants at the food poverty line of R585 per month. And, it was not large enough to keep providing grants for the length of the pandemic. SASSA had the impossible task of designing criteria to keep the Covid-19 grant within this budget allocation. To do so, they set the grant amount at R350, far short of the food poverty line, and imposed strict qualification criteria to limit the recipient pool.[26]

In the chart on the left, the qualification criteria states that an eligible applicant should "not receive any form of income." Many of the exclusions implicit within the grant program resulted from this criteria. SASSA checked applications against other government databases, including SOCPEN, UIF, SARS and NSFAS to see if a person was already receiving money from other sources. These databases were often out of date, and did not offer accurate information about those who no longer had an income since the lockdown. Additionally, SASSA checked the bank accounts of grant recipients every month. Any form of income whatsoever would disqualify people from receiving the grant that month. This meant that if a person got a small remittance of R50 from a family member, they were ineligible for the SRD grant that month.

One Government Official (#2) described the situation in this way: "The key reason for the stringent regulations was this thing about how much money we had. Zero income, for example. This 18-59 group, we didn't have a sense of what sort of income levels they had been at, what other means of survival they had, et cetera. And, we had a really small budget, in which we had to fit the most vulnerable people…In fact, we found that, if you put it at the food poverty line at R580, R560, actually, you would exhaust your budget. The number of people below that poverty line was above the allocation that we had." As the statement from the official suggests, it all seemed to come down to budget availability. SASSA felt they had to limit the number of recipients for fear of exceeding the initial R41 billion budget allocated from the Covid Stimulus package.

The remaining R13 billion budget allocation was insufficient to provide for the 10.4 million people who needed the grant. These were adults between the ages of 18 and 59, who had no possibility of making an income under lockdown.

[21] Statement by President Ramaphosa on further economic and social measures in response to the Covid-19 epidemic, 21 April 2020
[22] Interview with National Treasury official, November 2020
[23] South African Social Security Agency. (2021, 16 April). Third Quarter Performance Report. Portfolio Committee on Social Development, South African Parliament, Cape Town, page 12 titled Implementation of Covid-19 Relief Measures – Top Up Grants.
[24] South African Social Security Agency. (2021, 16 April). Third Quarter Performance Report. Portfolio Committee on Social Development, South African Parliament, Cape Town, page 13 titled Implementation of Covid-19 Relief Measures – Special Covid-19 SRD Grants
[25] Quarterly Labour Force Survey Q2, Statistics South Africa, 2020.
[26] With the various grant extensions, these figures did increase. The Budget Vote 19 reflects a spending of R17.9 billion during the 2020/21 financial year on the on Social Relief of Distress grant. Additionally, a further R5.5 billion was earmarked for payments in 2021/2022.

Table 3: **Implementation of Covid-19 Relief Measures - Special Covid-19 SRD Grants**[27]

Objective: Provide social relief of distress to persons experiencing temporary crisis.	
2020/2021 Targets	**Status as at 31 December 2020**
100% of eligible applicants in receipt of COVID-19 special relief grant (R350).	A total of 15.6 billion was paid to eligible applicants to COVID-19 special relief grant (approximately 6 million beneficiaries per month) in receipt. Overall 98% of approved beneficiaries were paid as at end of December 2020 **The payments made as at 30 December 2020 are as follows:** May 2020: 4,423,810 (99.8% of approved applications) June 2020: 5,057,417 (99.91% of approved applications July 2020: 5,565,2 (99.8 of approved applications) August 2020: 5,962,787 (99.81 of approved applications) September 2020: 6,036,457 (99.96 of approved applications) October 2020: 6,112,642 (99.61 % of approved applications) November 2020: 6,017,274 (98.8% of approved applications) December 2020: 5,324,605 (91.61 % of approved applications)

Table 4: **Implementation of Covid-19 Relief Measures - Special Covid-19 SRD Grants**[27]

PROCESS	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC
New Applications Received in month	6,605,445	912,863	827,828	605,070	194,901	211,427	196,026	104,310
Applications Considered for month[1]	6,605,445	7,518,308	8,346,136	8,951,206	9,146,107	9,357,534	9,553,560	9,657,870
Applications Rejected	2,168,545	2,447,674	2,762,109	2,946,594	3,052,897	3,165,296	3,391,958	3,595,197
Applications Approved	4,424,556	5,061,874	5,572,394	5,973,933	6,038,621	6,136,339	6,106,064	5,918,086
Applications in Banking Process	746	4,459	23,526	11,146	2,164	23,697	162,570	922,451
Clients Paid	4,423,810	5,057,417	5,565,222	5,962,787	6,036,457	6,112,642	6,017,274	5,324,605
% of approved paid	99.98%	99.91%	99.8%	99.8%	99.9%	99.6%	97.34%	91.6%

Table 5: **Implementation of Covid-19 Relief Measures - Top Up Grants**[27]

Objective: Provide social relief of distress to persons experiencing temporary crisis.

Planned 2020/2021 Targets

Payment of Covid-19 social grants top-up for May to October 2020 implemented for the following grant types: CSG – R300 per child /R500 per caregiver; and OAG, WVG, DG, FCG, CDG - R250.
Approximately R30 billion was spent on the top-up grants to supplement the incomes of existing social grants recipients during the lockdown period.

Status as at 31 December 2020

	May		June		July		August		September		October		Total	
	Amount	No.	Amount	No.	Amount	No.	Amount	No.	Amount	No.	Amount	No.	Amount	No.
OAG	975 985 750	3 663 943	914 946 000	3 659 784	923 882 750	3 695 531	924 307 500	3 697 226	924 362 000	3 697 438	926 077 750	3 704 311	5 529 545 750	22 118 183
WVG	15 250	61	14 500	58	14 750	59	13 500	54	12 250	49	11 750	47	82 000	328
DG	258 735 500	1 034 942	265 943 750	1 063 775	266 903 500	1 067 614	259 611 000	1 038 444	265 191 250	1 060 765	266 049 250	1 064 197	1 582 434 250	6 329 737
FCG	133 323 250	533 293	133 859 000	535 436	135 474 500	541 898	79 599 000	318 396	84 775 000	339 104	119 510 250	478 041	686 542 000	2 746 168
Combination	5 578 500	22 314	5 732 000	22 928	5 758 000	23 032	5 667 500	22 670	5 792 500	23 170	2 687 500	10 750	31 216 000	124 864
CDG	74 770 250	299 081	76 103 250	304 413	75 051 500	300 206	37 114 000	148 456	37 152 750	148 611	56 414 750	225 659	357 606 500	1 430 426
CSG	3 904 389 600	13 014 632	3 576 770 500	7 153 541	3 588 207 000	7 176 414	3 600 807 000	7 201 614	3 607 595 500	7 215 191	3 611 476 000	7 222 952	21 889 239 600	49 984 324
TOTAL	5 232 792 100	18 568 246	4 973 369 000	12 739 935	4 996 292 000	12 808 754	4 907 113 500	12 426 840	4 924 872 250	12 484 298	4 982 227 250	12 705 957	30 076 666 100	81 734 030

[27] Tables 3 to 5 are sourced from the South African Social Security Agency. (2021, 16 April). Third Quarter Performance Report. Portfolio Committee on Social Development, South African Parliament, Cape Town.

3.2 APPLICATION PLATFORMS

As the qualification criteria were being developed, SASSA also had to design new application and delivery systems for this grant. Ideally, SASSA would have used its existing grant system (SOCPEN) to register and administer these new Covid-19 SRD applications. However, since the 18-59 aged cohort had never before been eligible for social benefits, they were not included in the SOCPEN system. SASSA felt the SOCPEN system could not accommodate new recipients without a lengthy amendment process. Thus, an entirely new administration and management system, specifically for the Covid-19 SRD Grant recipients, was necessary and had to be designed. SASSA sought help from new and existing partners, including GovChat, Vodacom and Prosense. These organisations designed automated application systems to protect people from congregating in queues and potentially transmitting the coronavirus to one another. All of the platforms worked slightly differently. The vast majority of applicants used the USSD platform, rather than the WhatsApp platform or the website. The USSD was reported to be faster and easier to use, and cheaper than the other options.

Table 6: **Application Platforms**

Platform	Designer	# of Users	Description	Beneficiary Experience
USSD	Vodacom	80%	Vodacom already ran a USSD platform for SASSA and expanded this platform to accommodate new Covid-19 SRD Grant applicants. Applicants could apply from their mobile phones by responding to a series of prompts.	This technology was relatively familiar to most applicants and was zero rated (i.e. free) to users. However, because of the short timeframes to insert information on USSD platforms, applications received through this channel were often incomplete or incorrect.
WhatsApp	GovChat offered to design this service for SASSA at no cost.	12.5%	GovChat designed a new platform for grant applicants based on its existing citizen-to-government communication network #Let'sTalk. Applicants could apply from their mobile phones thorugh Chatbot technology.	Users needed to purchase mobile data to access these channels. Most applicants did not have the funds to do so.
Website **Email**	Prosense	7.4% 0.1%	These platforms were set up by a SASSA appointed IT company, which supports SASSA with their biometric solutions.	Users needed to purchase mobile data to access these channels. Most applicants did not have the funds to do so.

3.3 SCALE OF THE DEMAND FOR THE GRANT

Once the system was designed, SASSA used a number of communication channels to inform the public about the Covid-19 grant, which included a description of the grant as well as how to apply for it. At a national level, these included local and national radio stations, print media and social media. At a provincial level, local government networks assisted with communication in local communities. In some areas, volunteers from the National Development Agency (NDA) provided information and support to applicants. Members of civil society, including community partners working with Black Sash, the Social Change Assistance Trust and Community Advice Offices in South Africa, also circulated information and provided support.

From the moment the grant was announced, Black Sash community monitors were overwhelmed with people needing support with the application process. Reports came in from across the country of hundreds of people queueing at community advice offices.

Andiswa, a monitor from KwaZulu Natal, alerted her community to the grant application process through her municipal ward's Facebook page. She wrote a short message to say that her office would be available to assist people struggling to apply. On Monday morning, when she showed up at her office, she said: "I can tell you … the line was hilarious. It shows us, most of the people, the level of unemployment in our communities, and believe you me, most of them were males. 70% of people I was assisting were males. And it shows you the level of poverty in our area. It's too bad."

Kagiso in North West Province, had a similar experience. People queued on the first day for assistance in applying via the USSD or WhatsApp platforms. The following days those same people returned to seek help checking whether or not their applications were approved. Only once they got their money did they stop seeking her help. Describing her typical day, Kagiso shared: "There was 150 people lined up in my office to check their status. We checked for them for two days. Then there came the following day another 80. It's a continuous thing."

CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY MONITOR, EASTERN CAPE

Patricia is a community-based monitor from the Tshatshu Advice Office in Lady Frere. When she heard about the Covid-19 SRD Grant, she applied for it herself and was successful in her application. News travelled swiftly of her success, and her neighbours came from miles around to seek assistance. In the first month, she helped over 40 people apply for the grant using her own cell phone, airtime and data. Over the following months, many more people asked for her help too. By the time of our interview in September, she had helped over 130 people apply. Patricia explained that she had to keep very detailed records about the applications she submitted by her mobile phone. Every time there was a message, she would have to figure out which client the message was for and update them on the status of their grant.

Patricia said that while she enjoyed doing this work, it was burdensome on her personally and financially. She did not have enough airtime and data to deal with all the messages she receives. Patricia said: "I take to my pocket to buy data because this thing of checking status takes more data. I have to buy for myself idata and check the status. I can't say I can't do that. If I say that, they are going to lose hope in me."

Patricia visited SASSA to ask for further support with data. The manager promised to provide these resources, but he has not: "I am waiting for his call." She also asked one of the officials for had sanitiser as well, "they said, they don't have sanitiser, even SASSA. They ran out." Patricia reflected on these government shortages, asking what hope do community organisations have when SASSA does not even have enough supplies for themselves.

3.4 THE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

All of the monitors described how the digital platforms were a challenge for many potential applicants. These systems were meant to be easy-to-use, rapidly scalable, and safe in the context of a pandemic. However, many people who were already stressed by the lockdown and unemployment had to navigate new automated grant application systems. The lack of connectivity, airtime, data and digital literacy posed challenges for applicants. All of these systems were in English and not in applicants' home languages. The messages applicants received were often too complicated to understand. None of the digital application platforms connected recipients to live consultants to help address problems. Most of the Black Sash monitors reported that these application systems were inaccessible to much of the population, especially older people and those living in rural areas. The sudden conversion to a digital rather than face-to-face application system excluded many potential applicants.

As Sizwe, a community monitor from KwaZulu Natal explained, the need to use cell phones and computers was thrust upon a population that did not have smartphones or laptops and was not skilled enough to use such devices for grant applications. Sizwe said: "We are moving to 4IR [4th Industrial Revolution], but people are not ready and the government must move at the same rate as the people… That's not addressing poverty. It's a token for government. They can say 'I've done something for you that month.' This is not the way it should go. There should be a simple system done in the proper way because this system caused a lot of problems to the people."

Despite the problems, the digital platforms did have some benefits. In some areas, SASSA has not always provided dignified service to grant applicants. Many people preferred to interact with a community monitor rather than a SASSA official. For Patricia, from the Eastern Cape, the introduction of a digital application system was positive. Even if people needed her help, she felt it was easier than going to SASSA to apply. She explained: "People from the village, they're afraid of officials in the town, about their behaviour. They don't treat people equally. When they come to my office door, sometimes they do not want to enter because they have bad experiences with officials. I said, 'No, no enter the door, enter the office, I'm born here, I'm your child, don't be afraid of me, talk to me about your problem. Any kind of problem is welcome."

3.5 ENGLISH ONLY

Despite South Africa's eleven official languages, the online application systems were only available in English. For many of the people whom the system was meant to help, English is a second, third or fourth language. Across the country, people came to advice offices and community based organisations for help simply because the messaging was incomprehensible. The SMSs were lengthy and complicated and people worried if they did not understand the nuances of the instruction, they would not get their grant. Patricia, a monitor in the Eastern Cape, explained that most people came to her office for an explanation of the language. "Some understand, some don't, that's why most people came to our offices for the explanation. 'I've received this message, then what does it mean?' You have to explain to the person. Most of the people don't understand if they say it's a 'verification of id [identity document number].' They don't understand what that means. I explain that, 'there's something that doesn't match in your ID, we have to start a fresh.'"

Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

3.6 COST OF APPLYING

The cost of applying for the grant (via WhatsApp, USSD etc) was also frequently unaffordable for people who had no income during this time. Applicants needed access to a phone with sufficient data and airtime to see the process through to conclusion. For many, this was simply a luxury beyond their means, especially during the Stage 5 lockdown, when few were working. The system relied on the assumption that everyone had airtime or some money to purchase it. The design ignored and failed those that did not. The inherent privilege of this assumption excluded people who were the most in need of this grant from even applying. Andiswa, a monitor in KwaZulu Natal, said: "You'll find that the people really deserving to get this money, they don't get this. And for you to be able to get this grant you must have money, you need to have data, you need to have airtime."

CASE STUDY: COVID-19 SRD GRANT RECIPIENT, KWAZULU NATAL

Nosipho is a 35 year old South African woman living in KwaZulu Natal. She lives with her mother and her brother's family, including her brother's wife and daughter. She reached Grade 10 at school and has not had a permanent job in the last 15 years. Prior to Covid-19, she survived doing informal work when there were opportunities. But, lockdown seriously restricted the work she could find. Nosipho said: "In the beginning of lockdown, it was very difficult because a person was unable to look for jobs. It was difficult because we didn't know what we would eat before going to bed. It was difficult because we were sitting around doing nothing, with nothing to do. Everyone was looking at each other because, usually when you leave to look for a job, they knew that you would come with something, but now it has been very difficult."

Nosipho described how her household struggled to get a proper meal at the beginning of lockdown. She and her brother were unemployed, and her mother had a small income through the expanded public works project. The only thing that put food on the table for the whole family in those first few months was the child support grant her brother got for his daughter. The household counted down the days until the child support grant came. "There were times whereby we only cooked in the morning. When you have eaten and had leftover, you will eat the same leftover at night because there was no food for supper. We are staying with my niece, who is four. A four year old child is always hungry. It was very difficult for the child because she also didn't know what was happening."

Nosipho applied as soon as she heard about the Covid-19 SRD Grant. In June, she used her phone to register, and had no trouble with the digital application process. Two weeks later, she got a message requesting her bank details, and in July, the money was deposited into to her account. Even though it went fairly smoothly, there were real, hidden costs of getting the grant. She had to "hustle" to pay for the mobile charges. She could not respond to SASSA's SMS immediately with her bank details because she did not have the money to do so. "Yes, I submitted my details, it took time because I was trying to get money for data because in order to enter your bank details you needed data. So, it took me 5 days to get data and submit bank details."

3.7 DATA ENTRY

Since there was little time to pilot the system, the digital platform was not programmed to make nuanced decisions. Many people experienced challenges when entering information with a mobile phone as there was no flexibility in the system. The application process required all of a person's personal information to correspond exactly with what was on file with the Department of Home Affairs. If there were a few letters missing or wrong, the entire application would be declined. Once declined, the process to reapply was cumbersome and costly, particularly for the unemployed.

CASE STUDY, COMMUNITY MONITOR, KWAZULU NATAL

Sizwe, one of the monitors from KwaZulu Natal, told a story about a client, who had visited an NDA volunteer for assistance with the Covid-19 grant application. Sizwe's client was declined because the NDA volunteer made an administrative error. She entered his first name and ID number, but not his surname. Sizwe tried to help the client reapply, but got a message that the "ID did not match." He gave the client R20 to go see the NDA volunteer so that she could fix her mistake. She was not at her office. Sizwe called the NDA volunteer to find out when she would be available. She said 10:00 on Monday. He gave the client R20 again to visit the NDA volunteer on that day. She still was not at her office. The client had originally applied in May, and had not received any money by October because of these delays.

Sizwe made an example to highlight the dynamics of this case, specifically how a data entry error cost the client dearly. "My name, Ndlovu, maybe the -vu is -va, go to SASSA they will clear you of this mistake. But it's 20km from one point to another to sort out the -vu to -va. And then go back again to get paid after being cleared. All these trips! The cost! It is crucial for a person unemployed. How do I get the money? Loan sharks. First I go to family and friends, but I cannot go back again to ask for another money because they know they will never get it. I don't have the grant and the only way to pay back is from the grant. I have to go ask money from the loan shark, but then don't get the grant to pay it back. Now I am in debt."

Sizwe described how this had a very negative impact on his client. "Psychologically, it seems to me, this person is really suffering because he has been denied the grant. This is a medical process that is causing a mental disturbance. His neighbours are getting money, but he's asking why he's not getting? He brought other clients to me for help. The people he brought to me got money before him. He said, 'to go to Sizwe, he knows how to check." But then, for him, he gets no help, he is not attended. For the family, they will know me as the person always to assist. They ask themselves why not this guy? He thinks maybe he did something wrong. It is so difficult."

3.8 BLACK SASH COMMUNITY MONITORS

The interviews reveal that Black Sash monitors and local community organisations were critical to the roll out of the Covid-19 SRD Grants. The Black Sash hosted an online training and ran a WhatsApp support group for community monitors. These support groups allowed community monitors from around the country to share their learnings about the grant application and appeals process. Patricia from the Eastern Cape said that the Black Sash training was so good, she often advised the SASSA staff in Lady Frere. When she visited SASSA, with her own cases, she found other applicants struggling to access the Covid-19 grant. The SASSA staff referred them to Patricia for assistance. She said, even though "I go there because I have my own [clients'] problems. I leave my problem, and address their problem. SASSA give me more work. My head is aching every time. I'm going to get Grandpa from SASSA. I'm going to tell them."

Community monitors assisted clients in every conceivable way. Difficulties with technology and the application process affected people to varying degrees, but the greatest factor was user confidence. Because people did not trust themselves, they came to the monitors for assistance and support. So while the system set out to eliminate face-to-face applications between SASSA and the population, it ended up off-loading this responsibility onto the Black Sash monitors and other local community support structures. Given the realities of the South African context, the digital system did not achieve its objective. Human assistance was still needed for the social grant application process.

Black Sash monitor bibs.

CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY MONITOR, NORTHERN CAPE

Kagiso from North West explained how tough it was to be a community monitor during this period. He helped people apply with his phone, with their family members' phones, and with their own phones, depending on what resources were available.

"Some of them … I did help apply from scratch. And they were using their phones. Those that didn't have their phones, I would make sure that they use their family [member's] phone. Because it would be difficult for them to get information about their application if they used my phone. But others didn't have a problem using my phone, and every time I get any notification about their application I would make sure that they get it. And we made it a point that if they don't hear from me in about two weeks, they should come see what's the problem and how far is their application is going…Most people that I helped with my cell phone did get their money, because as soon as I received the SMS, I made sure that I delivered the message to them so that they can collect the money. I make it a point: every month end I check if money is been allocated or not. Through online system I check. Even for people with personal details I do check. I just screen grab the message and then I send it to them."

Without trained and digitally literate advisors to assist grantees, the challenges of the system would have prevented many from applying. Kagiso mentioned that he dealt with a number of older people who did not want to use their family member's phones. "Some of them didn't have a trust with their families, they would think that they would not get the SMS on time, or maybe keep it a secret that their application was successful. That was some of the reasons they didn't use their family's contact."

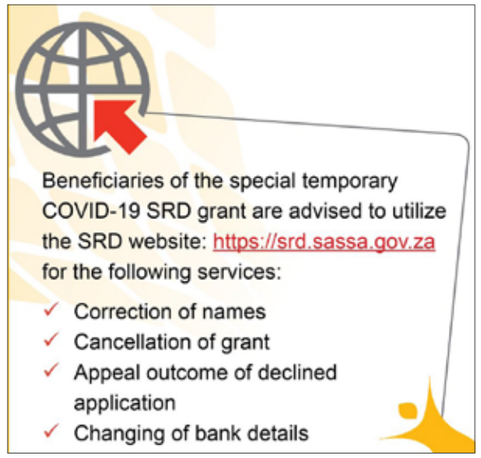
3.9 NDA VOLUNTEERS

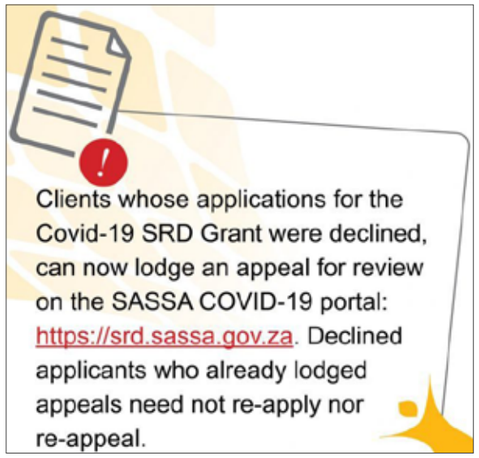
SASSA had anticipated difficulties with the implementation of the grant as well. They worked with the National Development Agency (NDA) to train volunteers across the country to assist with the application process. The use of the NDA volunteers varied from province to province and district to district. Much like the Black Sash monitors, the NDA volunteers were particularly important in rural areas where people were likely to struggle with access to the application platforms for the grant.

As Government Official #3 said: "They assisted with providing support to applicants who were challenged with technology and so on. We're really seeing the value of the volunteers, so much so that we're looking to how we can institutionalise a volunteer programme within SASSA for our normal work. They really did work beyond just helping people access the COVID grant. They also helped us with queue marshalling on pension paydays, making sure people were maintaining the social distancing, and helped us to distribute information. They really were incredibly valuable. They were provided to us by NDA, but in our environment, they were then managed by our regional staff."

Even though the NDA volunteers were very valuable to the roll out of the grant, they often worked in unfavourable conditions with very little support from the NDA. Of the volunteers we interviewed, the majority utilised their own data to help applicants apply for the grant and incurred additional transport costs to reach isolated communities. These extra expenses were difficult to bear because they often received their stipends (of R1,500 a month) two to four weeks late. NDA volunteers endured verbal abuse and occasionally even physical abuse from applicants, who viewed the volunteers as the gatekeepers to the Covid-19 SRD Grant. Nelisiwe, an NDA volunteer, described the challenges in this way: "It's like, at the Post Office, there's a lot of violence. During the queue management part, some people think we are joking when we say, "Move." Then, they become violent with us, forgetting that we are just helping them…. Some people think that we pay out the money. They [SASSA/NDA] want us to be precise by doing our job, but eish, on the other side. It's now the seventh or eighth of October. We were supposed to get paid for the last month already, but it's like ten days and we haven't gotten paid."

CHAPTER 4:
APPLICATIONS RESULTS





4.1 SUCCESSFUL APPLICATIONS

About two thirds of all Covid-19 SRD Grant applicants succeeded in their grant applications. For many of these people, the grant was very helpful during the pandemic, even if it was quite small. Many people who had been unemployed for many years, and had not qualified for any social assistance, were surprised government finally made some financial support available to them. Sophia (below) describes how she was unable to study further nor get a job after she matriculated. It was important to her that government recognised that this was not all her fault and that she was entitled to a small income.

CASE STUDY: COVID-19 GRANT RECIPIENT, EASTERN CAPE

Sophia is 41 years old, and lives with her mother (58), sister (34) and her sister's three children (all under 15), brother (28), and uncle (65). Her sister is responsible for the household because she is employed as a domestic worker and also receives Child Support Grants for the children. Her uncle also shares his Old Age Pension with the household. She feels bad because she has not been able to help support her family. Sophia matriculated in 1998 and registered for an Internal Audit Certificate Course at Walter Sisulu University. Due to financial hardship, she dropped out and has been unemployed since then. She has submitted her CV to many places in Cathcart, without success. She says, "there are no job opportunities there."

In April, Sophia heard about the Covid-19 SRD Grant on Umhlobo Wenene and SABC TV News. She said it was a welcome surprise for her. She was not expecting government to make R350.00 available for people "who live without any income." For so long, she felt, that government did not care about people like her, who had never been employed.

She applied for the Covid-19 SRD Grant in early May by using a friend's cell phone. In early June, she received an approval response on her friend's phone. She received her first payment of R350.00 in July 2020 and a second payment of R700.00 in August 2020, which included back pay for the month of June. Since she has been unemployed for a long time, she appreciated government's support. She felt she would finally be able to share a little of this income with her family.

4.2 REJECTED APPLICATIONS

Unfortunately, one third of all grant applicants were rejected. Monitors found the most common reason for a declined grant application was conflict with different national databases (UIF, SARS or NSFAS). If applicants appeared on certain government lists, they were automatically disqualified — even if these were dated, obsolete or no longer valid. The faulty and outdated systems that SASSA used to make determinations and reject grant applications ended up disadvantaging many eligible applicants. These initial rejections – even if they eventually became acceptances - were huge hurdles for many people who were already struggling because of the economic effects of the pandemic.

Underscoring the difficulties with the databases, Makgadi a community monitor in Limpopo said that widespread long-term unemployment in his area actually worked to the applicants' advantage. The less employment people had, and the less contact they had had with official institutions, like UIF or SARS, the more likely they were to get their grant approved on the first try. This tended to favour younger, rather than older applicants. Makgadi said: "Most of the applications worked well because the [applicants] were 'unemployed.'" People who had never been formally employed were not disadvantaged by the out-of-date databases, and there was a cruel irony of the fact that their lack of employment actually benefited them in this instance.

...the most common reason for a declined grant application was conflict with different national databases (UIF, SARS or NSFAS).

4.2.1 Unemployment Insurance Fund

In our interviews, eligible applicants were often denied access to grants because they were registered with the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) database. Many of the applicants registered with UIF had not been working for the last several years. Some people had specifically chosen not to collect their money from UIF. If they had short term jobs, and only qualified for a little money from UIF, they often chose not to go through the cumbersome bureaucratic process of making a claim. After six months, they were no longer eligible to claim that money, and yet, if that money was associated with their name, they were denied the grant. This eliminated many people who were entitled to the grant, particularly those engaged in temporary or casual work.

A community monitor from Gauteng, Lesedi, described how difficult it was to work with people declined for UIF. When he told people why they had been declined, some would say, "But, I've never worked in my life, how come they can say that?" Others would say, "The last time I worked it was 2012, how come I am registered with UIF." One of Lesedi's clients had not worked since he matriculated and had never been able to contribute to the family budget, yet was rejected because of the UIF. The disappointment of his rejection reverberated throughout his household. His aunt opted not to even try to apply for the grant, despite qualifying, because she felt it was "too stressful. I see many people struggling with the system, when the money doesn't come." This is a major indictment of citizen faith in the grant application system. The out-of-date databases wrongfully disqualified some applicants and discouraged others from applying.

A Western Cape NDA Volunteer had a number of similar cases. She said: "I know of three or four people who were rejected. It showed that maybe they've got UIF or whatsoever. But these are people that didn't even work. They've never worked in their life. So, they can't understand why is it saying that. Especially, we get the youngsters from 18, or 19 years old who are finished with matric. They never, ever worked in their life. But then, they say it's declined."

4.2.2 South African Revenue Service

Similarly, for some applicants, being on the South African Revenue Service (SARS) database led to their grants being rejected. Many eligible applicants were declined because at some point they had received an IRP5 from SARS. As with the UIF database, having an IRP5 on file from previous years does not mean an applicant is currently earning an income.

Andiswa would phone the call center only to be told "You are number 280 or something." She would wait on hold until her airtime ran out. Andiswa explained: "I wait because this client has faith in me. Then, I have to tell them, 'I have tried to assist you. Now you can see my airtime is gone.' Then, I have to give them the SARS number, so they can try for themselves, knowing the same thing will happen to them." Andiswa mentioned that she had at least 8 clients that did not receive their grants because of IRP5. She lamented: "There's nothing we can do. There is nothing we can assist them with."

In one case, when Andiswa did get through to SARS, she learned that years ago, her client had a temporary position as an Independent Electoral Commission worker. After that position ended, she did not have another formal job. She occasionally does small jobs like cleaning or washing. When Andiswa traced the client's IRP5 form, she found out "There is R1.80 in that form. That's it!" Her client was rejected from the Covid-19 SRD Grant because of R1.80.

These database checks eliminated people on the basis that they had once had contact with a formal system. Their name and contact details were embedded within that system. It made no difference, however, whether their IRP5 reflected R1 or R1000. Everyone was declined just for being part of the database.

CASE STUDY, COVID-19 SRD GRANT APPLICANT

A community monitor from Gauteng, Lesedi, was also a grant recipient. He explained his own difficulty with the SARS database. He was initially declined when he applied in May because the SARS database had an IRP5 for him. Lesedi traveled to SARS in Braamfontein at a cost of R60 a return trip. When he arrived, he was told that "No, Lesedi, you are not registered with SARS. We see you have no income." He then wrote an email to Ms. Khoza at stakeholder management at SASSA about his conversation with SARS. Ms. Khosa said, "Lesedi, you are registered." He said, "No check your facts straight. I am not registered and I need this money." It took about two months for Lesedi to be approved.

Because of his own experience, Lesedi is very emotionally affected by clients who are rejected. Lesedi went to visit a client who applied in May, and did not receive anything up until October. He looked her up on the system, and found she also was declined because of the IRP5 from SARS. Lesedi knows her well, and can confirm she is not working. She did odd jobs, selling sweets on the street, but her business ended with lockdown. She has two adult children, who no longer qualify for the CSG, so she did not qualify for the Caregiver Allowance either.

The online system continues to say she was declined because she has another source of income. This raises the question - how does a person prove they have never been employed when a database says otherwise? Lesedi took her to the police station to "make an affidavit," saying she has never worked. It is very embarrassing to go to the police station to tell them you are desperate. He describes her as "very stressed" and says that she calls him frequently and begs him to "please assist." There is very little else he can do. He is concerned that if she is not approved soon, the grant period will end and she will not get anything. She is dependent on other people in her household to provide for her. On this point, Lesedi concludes: "This system seems to save SASSA money."

4.2.3 National Student Financial Aid Scheme

Being on the NSFAS database was an issue that plagued numerous grant applicants. The NSFAS database records everyone who applies for financial aid, not only those who receive it. Much like the UIF and SARS databases, this is patently unfair. Inclusion within the database was the reason for rejection, rather than whether people had received money or not.

Patricia, an Eastern Cape monitor, described a client who had applied for NSFAS. When he applied for the Covid-19 grant this year, he was declined because he was supposedly already "registered for NSFAS." According to Patricia, the client told her: "Yes, but I did apply, but there was never any response from NSFAS. They've never given me any money." Patricia phoned NSFAS on his behalf and was told, "if you applied for NSFAS your name stays there. Either you get NSFAS or doing get NSFAS, still your name stays there. The database keeps your name there and SASSA rejects you."

CASE STUDY, REJECTED COVID-19 SRD GRANTEE

Zakahle (29) lives in a covent with other religious sisters. She is an unemployed student. Her family home is not far away and she has seven other family members who she worries about. Being in the religious order provides for her needs, and the convent deploys her to various tasks, but she was not able to send money home. The convent had its own lockdown, which was even more strict than the national lockdown. This made her feel safe, but she was unable to visit her parents when they tested positive for Covid-19.

Zakahle explains that she did not get the grant immediately, and was initially declined because of NSFAS. "I applied using my own phone, then I was denied. I applied again, and I was declined again. I think it was because I had a scholarship from the University a long time ago. That scholarship has not given out allowances for many years." She was eventually successful in appealing. "I think it took two to three weeks. Then I got a message that said I was accepted. Then I had to wait again for the money to reflect on my side. Still the money did not reflect immediately. I had to put my banking details. So I had to wait another two weeks. It was not that month it started, but I think it was the following month."

Student protesters sing during an assembly with Vice Chancellor Prins Nevhutalu at CPUT's Bellville campus, Photo: Ashleigh Furlong/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

4.2.4 Other Issues

A number of applicants found themselves thwarted for unclear reasons. Some received messages they could not understand. Others got no response at all. When they tried to follow up, they were told various things by officials working at the Post Office or SASSA. Whether it was a glitch or their own confusion, the system was not able to process them and many vulnerable people were left out.

CASE STUDY, REJECTED COVID-19 SRD GRANTEE

Ayanda is 34 years old, educated to grade 5, and lives in Walmer, Port Elizabeth. Before lockdown, he survived by standing at the robots on the main road in search of work. He occasionally got casual work, but never had the security of a long term, permanent position. Ayanda lives with his aunt, his sister's child and his brother's child. The majority of the household income comes from his aunt's pension and his older brother's contributions. Even though his brother does not stay in the same house, he has a permanent position with the Atlas company and sends money to support the family.

Before lockdown, Ayanda used to do "piece jobs" and contributed something to the household kitty. During lockdown, however, all this work ended. No one wanted to pick up a labourer from the street corner because of contagion. Despite continuing to stand on the street corner, Ayanda said, "I did not get any jobs." He applied for the Covid-19 grant, but "did not get it up until now."

Month by month, Ayanda tried to access the Covid-19 grant. In May, he used his phone and the USSD platform to apply. He then waited for the "approval" SMS from SASSA. In June, he went to SAPO to check on his grant. He was told by the clerk that his name was in the system, but there was no money allocated to his name. The SAPO clerk told him to "go home and wait for the SMS" from SASSA. In July, he went to SAPO again to follow-up. He was assisted by the same clerk who told him the same thing. His name was in the system, but there was no money allocated under his name. In August, he "gave up." He hadn't heard from SASSA and he had no hope that he would.

In September, he decided to try one more time. He visited SAPO again and was attended by a different clerk. The clerk informed Ayanda that he never actually qualified for the grant. He said Ayanda's name "was not on the system" and the problem appeared to be "with his ID number." Ayanda asked if the clerk could help him sort out the problem and the clerk said "no." There was no support offered by SAPO, and Ayanda could not go to a SASSA office for assistance. Ayanda went home and resigned himself to not getting a grant.

Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

CHAPTER 5:
REASSESSMENT/APPEALS PROCESS

When applicants were initially rejected for the reasons described above, technically they could appeal the decision and reapply. This did not always work out in practice. Grant applicants struggled to get feedback from SASSA when they had questions about the application process or the status of their applications. Emails sent to SASSA often went unanswered. The SASSA Call Centre was inundated and could not cope with the volume of in-coming calls.

5.1 OFFICIAL PROCESS

SASSA initiated an official appeals system for rejected applicants. There was only a 15 day period for rejected applicants to submit appeals. Given the challenges faced by applicants, and the particular hardships during this time, a 15 day appeals window was far too short for many people to make use of it.

The methods used for appeals were essentially the same as the initial application process. A rejected applicant had to start a new application from scratch, as there was no "reassessment" "or "appeals" item in the menus of the USSD, WhatsApp and SASSA platforms.

After applicants applied for the second time, their appeals underwent the same verifications against government databases – SARS, UIF, NSFAS - as their initial applications. Applicants were not able to upload new supporting documentation alongside their appeals. There were no SASSA staff available to process any additional documentation. The inevitable result was that many potentially eligible applicants were excluded from receiving the grant, based on the fact that the same criteria resulted in their applications being unsuccessful on both occasions that they applied.

Of the appeals considered, SASSA only reviewed the reasons why applicants were initially rejected if their circumstances had changed. For example, if an applicant applied for a grant in May and was rejected because they were on the UIF database, SASSA would check again in October to see if they were still on the UIF database. If the applicant had been removed, then they would qualify for the grant from October, not from May.

The appeals process was unfair because applicants were not given reasons why they were declined. Moreover, after the reassessment, the decision was considered final. Applicants were not allowed to appeal a second time. Unsatisfied applicants could only seek recourse by approaching the courts, which was not a reasonable option for those with limited access to legal services.

This was very frustrating for monitors, who started to suspect it was a money-saving technique on behalf of the government. Lesedi from Gauteng explained this like so:

"Let's say they applied in May, neh? And they were declined. Then they appealed the case in May. Then the case is being accessed for a month, or two months. Then it says they were approved in June. Then they start to pay from June. But, those outstanding months — May — they don't pay. The backpay starts from the date of appeal not the date of application. It is another money-saving scheme within this system."

There was only a 15 day period for rejected applicants to submit appeals. Given the challenges faced by applicants, and the particular hardships during this time, a 15 day appeals window was far too short for many people to make use of it.

5.2 MONITOR INTERVENTION

In some cases, Black Sash monitors and NDA volunteers were drawn in to assist the appeal process. Monitors helped applicants provide additional documents to prove they were not receiving benefits from the UIF or NSFAS, or any other income. Monitors assisted these applicants by directing them to make affidavits at a police station. Monitors then took these affidavits to SASSA and used their personal relationships with SASSA officials to appeal the application decision. In this way, community monitors went way beyond what was possible in the official appeals process. This solution was not available to everyone, only those who were able to access the Black Sash and its community partners.

However, even if applicants were successful in their appeals, the second application process resulted in further delays in the registration process. Though many people were eventually awarded a grant upon reapplication, they struggled to survive for the intervening months. Even when their appeal was approved, they usually missed out on a month or two of payment.

CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY MONITOR, EASTERN CAPE

Patricia, in the Eastern Cape, processed a lot of appeals for people in her area by physically going to SASSA. This made up the vast majority and most difficult part of her work. She regularly checks on the results of her cases online; then she visits SASSA with a long list of applicants who have been declined. She explains: "When I visit SASSA, I have my list to find the printout to give my clients to see what's going on... one [person] has no message from SASSA, the other [person] get message, another person say IRP5, another say UIF."

She learned from SASSA what people need to do to have their cases reconsidered. Usually they are instructed to make an affidavit at the police station. Patricia then would accompany them to the police station and help them make a declaration, such as explaining how long they have been out of work. This is a long, multi-step process and Patricia is one of the only people in her village who is well-connected to SASSA. If not for her, there would be far more confusion and difficulty in accessing the grant. Instead of the exclusively online process, it is her face-to-face contact with SASSA that works, despite the risk of Covid. This defeats the purpose of lockdown, but succeeds in assisting clients.

CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY MONITOR, KWAZULU NATAL

Andiswa struggled to take cases to SASSA because the local office was not accessible during this time. They were not picking up the phone, and not responding to emails. She could not go there in person because it is far from her and an expensive taxi journey. By geographical twist of fate, it is easier and cheaper for Andiswa to travel to the regional office in Durban central, than her local office in Umbumbulu. The regional office, however, will not help her and simply refers her back to the local office. She explains her frustration with this: "I tried to help people twice or thrice to do the UIF. I had to email SASSA, I couldn't go to the local office, because there's no one there, it's very far from us. Our local SASSA office is not accessible. For me, to get to local SASSA office. I have to take a taxi from here to Isipingo, then Isipingo to Umbumbulu. To get to the regional office, I only have to take a taxi from here to town. In town, they would not assist me because they tell me I have to go back to the local office. It's R100 to go to the local one and R38 to go to Durban Central. If the regional one would allow people from our area to access help from them, it would be much easier."

Andiswa stresses that emailing her local office was a "waste of time." They never got back to her. Similarly, calling was also a "waste of time." They did not pick up on the helpline (call centre). She felt as though she was on her own. "It's just up to you to work around and see how you assist. And use all of these available links from CAOSA and Black Sash to see how you can help people. But for a person to rely on SASSA, Hayi, it was impossible."

CHAPTER 6:
PAYMENT ISSUES

6.1 SLOW AND INCONSISTENT PAYMENT

Throughout the country, people struggled with the slowness and inconsistency of the payments. While many grantees received their payments timeously, there were others who had to wait weeks or months before their payments were made. After being approved, grantees often had to wait a long time to get their payment date from SAPO. Payment date changes and delays were frequent. People were so desperate for their grants that they would visit SAPO just to check if their money was available. Sometimes payments were delayed, or skipped a month, while at other times people's grants would suddenly stop. The inconsistency and irregularity of the payments was an acute cause of stress and depression amongst applicants and made them feel uncertain and distrustful.

Andiswa from KZN describes the difficulties of this. She worked with a husband and wife, who had both been approved for Covid-19 grants in May. Three months had passed, and in August, they still had not received an SMS saying that they could collect their money. Several times they had visited the Post Office in person, thinking that perhaps there was a mistake with the messaging service, but their money was not there. The Post Office workers told the couple that the system said their grants were "not available." Andiswa told us: "I tried to call local SASSA, but there was no response. They've been approved for May, June, July, August. They were approved for three months, but they've never received anything. I can imagine if the heads of the household don't have anything, that means the whole family is suffering."

Lebogang, from North West, confirms the inconsistency of the grant payment. Even after her clients were approved, many found payments erratic and unreliable. She had one case of an old man who lived alone in a shack. He had a chronic illness and no source of income. He did not have any nearby family, and his neighbours assisted him to run errands or go to the shop.

Photo: Nokulunga Majola/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

Lebogang helped him to apply for his grant, and he received the first payment, but did not receive anything after that. "We don't know why it stops. When we check his status it says approved, but it doesn't have a pay date. So I sent him to the Post Office and they told him to wait for the payday. We talked to him. He's sad. He's very disappointed in the government, because he can't even work, he's sick."

CASE STUDY: COVID-SRD GRANT RECIPIENT, FREE STATE

Lukhanyo is a 32 year old husband and father, who lives with his wife and their three children in Botshabelo. He was educated through secondary school, but has been unemployed for seven or eight years. He does odd jobs like cleaning people's yards to make money to survive with his family. The pandemic limited his job prospects even further. He said that now, "most people are at home and can do their own gardens, others are now unemployed and can't afford to pay." His wife, Maria, passed grade 10 and is a self-employed hair stylist, who works from home. She receives Child Support Grants for their children and, temporarily, the Caregivers Grant as well. The elder two children are at school (grade 8 and grade 2), but the youngest is only 4 years old and still at home.

After President Ramaphosa announced the Covid-19 Grant, Lukhanyo applied as soon as he could. He used his own cell phone and felt the process was easy and accessible. He is familiar with USSD platforms and he carries his phone with him at all times. He recognised that the process was not so easy for everyone, and began to assist others who were struggling to apply.

SASSA responded after about three days via SMS and told him that his application had been successful. He collects his grant money from the Post Office. He received his first R350 payment in June and he received his second R700 payment in July, which included the back pay for May (the month he initially applied). In August, he didn't receive a grant payment. When he checked online, it said "pending". In September, he checked again and it was still pending. He got three payments and then the grant paused. He could not ascertain the reason why there was a delay. Because of the delay, he had to borrow money from a local mashonisa. This wasn't the first time. Lukhanyo often has to borrow money from mashonisas to get through the month. He says that he mostly "manages" his credit with them, and "does not go over budget or over board." But, as a poor person, even to work, he has to visit the mashonisa. If he gets a job in Bloemfontein or some other area 40-60 km from Botshabelo, he must borrow the money to travel there. When you are poor, it costs money to work. He analyses the insidious practices of moneylenders in this way: "They lend us the money as if they owned us as poor people. We have no choice but to turn to them because the grant is not enough."

6.2 ZERO MEANS TEST

One of the reasons why a Covid-19 SRD Grant suddenly stopped is because the legislative framework stated that people only qualified for the grant if they had "no income."[28] DSD and SASSA interpreted the definition of "no income" in a very narrow sense, meaning grantees could not have any income at all coming into their accounts. In practice, this meant checking the bank accounts of those eligible every month, to see if applicants had other money coming into their accounts. One of the Black Sash monitors had a client who received a remittance from his sister to his account. SASSA checked his account, saw a deposit of R200, and stopped his grant that month.

Overall, this was an impossible restriction to put on poor people, actually discouraging people from seeking other forms of income and assistance. This was particularly painful for people because R350 is already below the food poverty line. The expectation that a grantee would not need more money to cover their expenses for the month was unrealistic.

Additionally, the monthly bank verification was unfair because it only applied to people receiving the Covid-19 SRD Grant in their bank accounts. Those who were receiving their grants in cash from the Post Office were not subject to this extra level of verification.

[28] 09 May 2020, Amendment To The Directions Issued In Terms Of Regulation 4(5) Of the Regulations Made Under Section 27(2) Of The Disaster management Act, 2002 (Act No. 57 Of 2002): Measures To Prevent And Combat The Spread Of Covid-19 Reg3(k) (viii)(cc)(iv,v).

CHAPTER 7:
POST OFFICE

Most grant recipients, who opted to receive their money in cash, were paid through the South African Post Office (SAPO). People also turned to the Post Office for updates on the status of their applications and to see whether or not they had cash available.

After negotiating the hurdles of the application process (and, in some cases, the appeal process), the next issue that grantees experienced was that of payment. While over 6 million applications were eventually approved, payment presented its own set of problems.

Most grant recipients, who opted to receive their money in cash, were paid through the South African Post Office (SAPO). People also turned to the Post Office for updates on the status of their applications and to see whether or not they had cash available. Grant recipients were supposed to wait for an SMS with their payment date. However, such messages were only sent to people who applied with a mobile phone registered in their own name. If they applied using a someone else's phone, they would not be sent an SMS for security reasons. As this was the only way payment dates were communicated, those without devices often sought assistance from Post Office staff, who were ill prepared to help with queries.

An apparent lack of preparation and resources, combined with understaffing, meant that Post Offices were unable to cope with the demands of delivering the grant: service was bad, payments limited, and queues long. Grantees were often obliged to embark on multiple trips as they were turned away or told to return later, as well as travel to different Post Offices in search of payment. Instead of a boon, the grant became an expensive nightmare as the Post Office payment failures led to compounding costs to the grantees. The Service Level Agreement between SASSA and SAPO required a minimum level of efficiency, dignity and safety for grant recipients. In many cases, this was not on offer.

Makgadi, from Limpopo sums this up "The Post Office itself was not ready. The Post Office was not wise to them. Maybe because it was the first time when they get overflowing of the people... They couldn't control the masses. Some they would go there and make a queue, sometimes they go back without even being attended. [You] come and you have to book for the following day, and queue for the following day too. For many the grant was not ready. Sometimes they don't have money for the people... no money...The Post Office were not ready for this project. The Post Office were not ready to accommodate each and everybody in a short period, meaning they were not ready."

7.1 TRANSPORT AND MULTIPLE TRIPS

Transportation was a substantial and often prohibitive cost in receiving the Covid-19 Grant. While this affected people across the country, for those in rural areas the cost of traveling to the nearest Post Office could be as much as the grant itself. Makgadi from Limpopo explains that the R350 grant was futile as the transport costs involved in claiming the money were too high. "For many people must travel long distance. Here, to the farms, there... They must drive. Unfortunately, the grant didn't work for them. Because, for having a driver, a distance of about 70kms to go get R350, is about R350 round trip... the whole grant is gone."

The same was true in the Eastern Cape. Patricia described how she advised people to go every two months to pick up their grant because the cost of transport exceeded R200. Only after two months did people have enough money in their account to pay transport and "do something" (i.e. buy household necessities) with the grant.

Some people found that their nearest Post Office could not pay grants. Sometimes the nearest Post Office did not have a Post Bank to disburse payments or had a very long queue or cash flow problems. For example, the Post Office in Howick could not provide grant payments because they did not have a Post Bank in the branch. Without a banking licence, they could not accept money for grant distribution. Likewise, the Merrivale branch had had a Post Bank but it was recently closed. Residents from Merrivale were sent to Howick, then in Howick they were told they had to travel to Pietermaritzburg. Then, when they would get to Pietermaritzburg, the staff asked "why are you coming to congest us here. You are causing pandemonium." At Pietermaritzburg, the Howick and Merrivale residents were told the office was closed or the system was offline or the queue was too long. People would have to return three or four days in a row to get their grant. As Black Sash monitor Sizwe said: "R350 is nothing for me, if you are going three days, you have utilised R200 or R250 already." Sizwe explained that from Merrivale to Howick is R20, and from Howick to Pietermaritzburg is R50. Then he clarified that Howick to Pietermaritzburg is actually R44. "I say R50 because you can't eat for R6."

Hundreds of unemployed people queued outside the post office in KwaNobuhle, Kariega to collect their special Covid-19 grants in August 2020. Photo: Thamsanqa Mbovane/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

7.2 QUEUES

People would travel long distances to the Post Office the day before Covid-19 SRD grants were scheduled to be paid. If they did not know anyone nearby, they would have to camp on the pavement overnight. Many did not have money for food by the end of the month and stood in line with empty stomachs.

Kagiso from North West described queues as a source of immense frustration. She says, "People would be there from 2:00 am in the morning to queue. And they... the people there, would start helping the R350 grant people after 12:00 pm! Ja, people will stay there for a long time. Imagine coming there from 3:00 am and waiting there for your R350 without food and all those things! I tried to make an appointment to see the manager of Post Office but until now they didn't get back to me. And the security, the security people, they were rude to people. They didn't understand the frustration that people had, because they had stand there for a long time. You get frustration, you get frustrated when you are hungry and tired and all. Standing in the sun for a long time, they are getting frustrated.."

7.3 CASH FLOW PROBLEMS

Paying grants required transferring large amounts of cash to Post Offices across the country. The logistics involved did not always work efficiently, and Post Offices would run out or be short of money for their clients. Post Offices dealt with this difficulty in different ways. Some would pay the first few people the full amount and then turn the rest away, forcing clients to return on another day. Others would share out the cash they did have, paying people partial grants. This led to multiple trips being necessary to receive payment. If grantees travelled long distances, this would mean they had to pay high transportation costs multiple times to get the full value of their grant.

According to Kagiso in the Northern Cape, the Post Office often did not have cash to pay grantees, "they would go to the Post Office and the people at the Post Office would tell them that there is no money for them. But when I check their money, their R350 is out, but they couldn't get their money. And there is this Post Office in Kuruman, the bigger one, they would not even give the people the whole amount. They would give R350 and say, come and get the other R350 another time."

7.4 COSTS OF ACCESS

Numerous grantees reported having to borrow money to access their grant. They would ask their neighbours for help with the transportation costs and then repay them from their grants. This meant that by the time they received their money, that money already had to go to cover other debts. Sizwe from KwaZulu Natal described the case of debts for his clients. "All these trips! The cost! It is crucial for a person [who is] unemployed. How do I get the money? Loan sharks. First I go to family and friends, but I cannot go back again to ask for another money because they know they will never get it. I don't have the grant and the only way to pay back is from the grant. I have to go ask money from the loan shark, but then don't get the grant to pay it back. Now I am in debt."

7.5 DOCUMENT VERIFICATION

A necessary aspect of the application process was establishing and verifying identity. Grantees had to show their IDs when they claimed their payments at the Post Office. Owing to the nationwide closure of Home Affairs Offices under lockdown, for some applicants, this commonplace necessity proved to be an obstacle. If applicants did not have ID documents, they could not apply for nor claim their grants. Having to resort to temporary IDs in the interim meant that grantees, already in dire financial straits, had to pay twice for their identity documents - often an unaffordable double expense.

CASE STUDY

A community monitor from North West, Kagiso, told us the most difficult case she was working on had to do with a young girl without ID. This girl was prevented from receiving her grant because Home Affairs was closed over lockdown. "There was a young girl, she didn't have her ID... we did fill out the application but because she didn't have an ID she didn't get her money. But hopefully now, we can go to Home Affairs and do her ID. Hopefully, she can get her money because she was approved. And it was like hurting, knowing there is money for you but we can't access it because you don't have an ID."

Kagiso explained she had other cases were Post Office bureaucrats did not want to accept temporary ID documents: "And people were difficult at the Post Office, they didn't want to help other people with the temporary IDs, because under lockdown it was the only thing you can access. So sometimes you get someone who understands but tomorrow...ya." Every obstacle has a cost, and for the poor, this can be both futile and unaffordable, "some, like that girl, she didn't want to go and make a temporary ID, knowing after sometime she must go back and spend R140 to make another ID. It's very expensive. It was her first time, she is 18 or 19. She is doing grade 11. This client's money is accruing at the Post Office, but she has no way of accessing it."

CHAPTER 8:
COMMERCIAL BANKS

One of the payment options for grantees was to have their grants paid into their bank accounts. Given the issues with SAPO, many monitors encouraged people to submit their commercial bank details for payment. This should have provided a welcome alternative. But, in many cases this did not work. Monitors cite the failure of SASSA's online system to allow grantees to change their bank details. It seemed the system just wouldn't accept bank account details, and still paid to SAPO, regardless of the bank details having been corrected on the system. For example, Patricia in the Eastern Cape helped 130 clients, only three of whom managed to successfully get paid into their bank account.

Sizwe, from KwaZulu Natal, described this process in detail. He said that every time he tried to convert people to a bank, the link would not work. Even once SASSA had advertised that people could be paid at the banks, it was still difficult to use the USSD or WhatsApp system to enter bank details. "When you first apply, you go through a series of prompts where they tell you what to do and give you a registration number. Once a client is approved, you get another message with a link at the bottom to enter your banking details. That link was not working. It was broken from May to mid-June. After that, the link was active. SASSA was asking people to open bank accounts to diminish the burden on the Post Office. But, even though they were pushing this new payment method, the link would not accept the bank details. They would get a subsequent message saying to collect their grant from the Post Office. Others did not even get such a message. Only one client has successfully gotten paid at the bank."

Monitors cite the failure of SASSA's online system to allow grantees to change their bank details. It seemed the system just wouldn't accept bank account details, and still paid to SAPO, regardless of the bank details having been corrected on the system.

8.1 BANK CHARGES

Although the banks provided another possible payment option, the cost of fees and automatic deductions were hard on grant recipients. Even a seemingly small charge, like R10, makes a substantial dent in a R350 grant. People would rather risk their health in long queues at the Post Office in order to get the full amount than have the convenience of an automatic bank deposit. At the beginning of lockdown, bank charges were suspended for grant beneficiaries. This should have continued for the duration of grant payment.

Because of the difficulties with the banks, Kagiso from North West told us that many people in her area would rather not bother to change their payment method. She attributes this to the possible expenses and fees associated with bank accounts. "Many of them are not interested in the bank. They are saying when you are going to the bank, there will be a R10 missing, so they want the whole R350. They prefer using the Post Office."

Even a seemingly small charge, like R10, makes a substantial dent in a R350 grant. People would rather risk their health in long queues at the Post Office in order to get the full amount than have the convenience of an automatic bank deposit.

8.2 MONEY GOING ELSEWHERE

Even after applicants managed to get the system to accept their bank details, they might still be forced to collect their grant at a SAPO branch. In three provinces, monitors reported successfully using the USSD platform to enter banking details and getting a message in that regard. However, when grants were paid out, recipients who had opted for the money to be paid into a bank account would find their account empty. Grants not paid into bank accounts were automatically transferred to SAPO by SASSA. Instead of receiving the grant in their account, beneficiaries would have to go and collect their money at SAPO.

Kagiso from the North West describes how: "I would just go online and go to changing of details, and then change them online. And then it will say they successfully changed their banking details. And at the end of the day the money doesn't go to their bank account. So, I have raised this in some of the meetings that we have had that even if you change your bank details that money would not go there."

CHAPTER 9: EXCLUSIONS OF SPECIAL POPULATIONS

9.1 CAREGIVERS GRANT

Photo: Jeffrey Abrahams/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

Caregivers of children receiving a Child Support Grant (CSG) were given a CSG top-up of R300 per child in May 2020, followed by a R500 allowance per caregiver from June to October 2020. On the whole, caregivers were appreciative of the additional income and felt that it made a big difference that enabled them to provide for their children and households. However, the grant was experienced very differently depending on the number of children in a household. Caregivers received the same allowance regardless of the number of children in their care. In practice, this meant that caregivers with only one child experienced more than a two-fold increase in their CSG income. However, for caregivers with more than one child, moving from the CSG top-up to the monthly allowance meant they suffered a loss in earnings.

CASE STUDY: CAREGIVER ALLOWANCE RECIPIENT, EASTERN CAPE

Fezeka is 31 years old and lives in Walmer, Port Elizabeth. She receives a Caregivers Allowance for herself and a Child Support Grant for her daughter (age 7). Fezeka is one of the only people we interviewed who mentions that she enjoyed lockdown. She does not like to go out much, and does not have a job, so does not experience it as a big loss in her own life. Because Fezeka only has one child to care for, she is very clear about how their lives improved from the Caregiver Allowance. She describes how she was able to provide healthy food and new clothes for the household. "Yes, there is a difference on my grocery because we adding the other foods that we were no longer buying due to limited budget then."

Additionally, she used to buy her child's clothes from Ackerman's on account. She had to rely on store credit because the regular Child Support Grant only covered their food — not clothing. She had to pay more in the long run for those clothes because of the interest attached. But, it was the only way she could clothe her child. Fezeka said that, while she was receiving the Caregiver Grant, she did not start any new accounts or make new purchases. Instead, she paid extra money on her Ackerman's account to pay off the debts accrued before lockdown. "At Ackerman's I used to pay R100.00 but now I am paying more than before."

An added difficulty was the closure of schools. Many caregivers depended on the school nutrition program to provide two meals per day to their children to supplement small Child Support Grants. When schools closed, so did the school nutrition program, forcing caregivers to spend a greater portion of their grant money on food.

CASE STUDY

Khethiwe is 43 years old and a mother of 2 children. She and her children live in Queenstown, Eastern Cape with her 45 year old sister, and her sister's twin daughters. Khethiwe is educated to grade 11, and prior to lockdown, took in laundry to earn a bit of money. She has never had a formal job since she left school over two decades ago. She survives on the Child Support Grants she receives for her children and, during lockdown, she received the Caregivers Allowance as well. Khethiwe said of the CSG, "that's the only money that helps us make a living." A month can pass, she says "without being called for laundry work. So, I don't know. I just survive with the child support grant." Khethiwe's daily struggles were made more difficult because of the lockdown. No one called her to do their laundry because everyone was too worried about saving money themselves.

Khethiwe's biggest problem during lockdown, was the closure of schools. Prior to lockdown, her children would wake up and go to school. They would eat two meals provided by the school feeding scheme. She only had to use the CSG to provide one meal at home at dinner time. Because of the school meals, the CSG money could stretch further, and Khethiwe and her children could eat a decent evening meal together. During lockdown, her children no longer had access to the meals provided by school. They are teenagers and have healthy appetites. She said, "my children are home with me and they eat a lot. They can even eat five times a day. They mess up things and food." Her usual practices of household budgeting for basic food stuffs had to change because her children were eating more meals at home. Buying additional food ate up the entire Caregivers Grant. From our interviews, it is clear how the Top Up grant, as one lump sum, felt sufficient for people with only one child and meagre for those with two or more.

Even before lockdown, Khethiwe's household was poor. She and her children have gone to bed with empty stomachs and skipped meals. They often experienced household shortages and "got stranded" without essentials "no soap to wash, no toiletries, and no washing powder to wash clothes." Without access to casual work and the school feeding scheme, Khethiwe's family became increasingly precarious. Khethiwe felt tension in the house between her and her sister. "You would get a person looking at your meal on how much food did you dish for yourself." No one had enough to feel satisfied, so there was stress over whether or not one person was taking slightly more than their share.

There were also many caregivers that did not qualify for the grant because they gave birth during the lockdown. This group experienced difficulties applying for the CSG as hospitals ceased birth registrations, and DHA suffered frequent temporary closures. Xoli gave birth to her child in May, at the height of the pandemic. She could not immediately register her baby at the hospital where she gave birth, so she tried to register the baby online, but this did not work. She also lost her ID but could not apply for a new one as the Department of Home Affairs was not accepting new ID applications. In her words: "The other one do not have the birth certificate yet. And, I recently lost my ID book and my learners license. And now the process of getting my other child's birth certificate is on hold. I even tried to apply for his birth certificate online way before I lost mine - I did not win and my child is 6 months now without the identity document."

The biggest trouble with the Caregivers Allowance was its premature termination. The Caregivers Allowance ended in October 2020, while the Covid-19 SRD Grant was extended to January 2021 (and then to April 2021). Caregivers felt this was unfair and unjust, particularly since they were not allowed to apply for the Covid-19 SRD Grant.

Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

CASE STUDY

Aphiwe is 32 years old and receives a Caregiver's Allowance for herself and a Child Support Grant for her daughter (aged 4). She lives with her aunt (43) and two cousins (17 and 12), who both receive CSGs. Prior to Covid, Aphiwe had been unemployed for three years. She tried to find work but was unsuccessful. In order to make ends meet, she does washing. "I do laundry work, sometimes it would end again not knowing what to do. It would become very difficult for me to be able to raise money. We were just surviving. It's was little better though." Lockdown was hard. As she says: "when this difficult time did arrive, it sufficed for gloom to prevail. A lot of things just went bad. We could not even go out to find laundry work in the neighbourhood, so we can augment this little child grant. It just became tough."

Given the difficulties, the government Caregiver Allowance Grant was welcomed. "Yes, we thank the government so much for the money provided to us. I wish it continued without being stopped... The increase helped a lot because as soon as we had gotten it, I was able to go and pay off people's money I had borrowed, not knowing how I was going to pay it off. The rest I was able to pick up there and there and tried again for the children to eat. That food would usually end at least towards month end unlike the way it used to happen...but this Top-up helped a great deal compared to what it formerly used to be before."

When the grant was coming to an end, Aphiwe was very worried: "We are really pleading that he [President Ramaphosa] may add months. It is even very difficult during this period because it is already late, at workplaces we try in vain, and they just say that 'people who belong here are not yet back, you are not welcome' you see? In other places they are is still closed, they are still complaining about that, they just turn us back. I am begging government not to stop this money because it has been extremely difficult before. I am pleading that this money, should not be taken away, but continue helping us, because there are so many families in the area, we depend on this money for survival. We don't get jobs, we are many, it is very difficult. We ask the government to continue, assist us, help us a lot.

9.2 ASYLUM SEEKERS AND SPECIAL PERMIT HOLDERS

The announcement of the social relief package in April 2020 excluded asylum seekers and special permit holders, affecting about 188,000 people. The Scalabrini Institute initiated a court case to rectify this and hold the government to account. The court application was successful and the Covid-19 SRD Grant was expanded to include asylum seekers and special permit holders in June 2020. However, not a single eligible and successful asylum seeker or special permit holder received the grant in 2020.[29] Successful applicants only started receiving the grant in January 2021, although payments were backdated as per the court order.

Asylum seekers and special permit holders experienced difficulty in registering for a Covid-19 SRD Grant because their identity numbers did not align with the SASSA application system. This lack of alignment resulted in rejections because the Identity numbers did not conform to the 13-digit barcoded standard used in South Africa. After civil society brought this to the attention of SASSA, it was eventually rectified. SASSA had to build an entirely new system to accommodate asylum seekers and special permit holders who did not have 13-digit ID numbers.

As an NDA volunteer from Gauteng described: "I think, regarding when they say it's everybody who's unemployed who can go for the R350, my concern is with the refugees and the people who have got the permit. I can't understand why they say that we can assist them as well, but as soon as you load the information, it kicks out. For me, it's sad, because it's also mothers or fathers who are not working. They also need this money. That is actually a concern for me. It just kicks out. It doesn't go through. The things that they are putting out, or telling the people, is not actually what they are practicing."

However, not a single eligible and successful asylum seeker or special permit holder received the grant in 2020. Successful applicants only started receiving the grant in January 2021.

Many asylum seekers and citizens of Lesotho, Angola and Zimbabwe with special permits have lost their income and have only been able to apply for Covid-19 relief grants since August.
Photo: Kimberly Mutandiro/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

[29] Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town v Minister of Social Development and Others, Gauteng High Court Case, no 22808/2020, 18 June 2020

CASE STUDY: SPECIAL PERMIT HOLDER, EASTERN CAPE

Lindelwa is a 44 year old mother of two children (25 and 21 year old son). She lives with her husband (48 years old), her children, and one grandchild in Khayelitsha in the Eastern Cape. Lindelwa is from Zimbabwe and has been living in South Africa for 8 years as a Special Permit Holder. She has formal status and permission to reside in the country. A Black Sash monitor, Nobuntu, helped Lindelwa apply for the Covid-19 grant in August, but her application was denied. Nobuntu followed up with SASSA and discovered that the application system is not designed for asylum seekers. Users can only input South African ID numbers, not migrant numbers, on their technological platform.

Lindelwa had a permanent job as a domestic worker two days per week for five years. When lockdown hit, Lindelwa was terminated. Her employer pled "financial constraints," saying she could no longer afford Lindelwa's salary. Lindelwa and her husband also had a small business selling brooms, mops and cleaning products on the street. They would buy the products in Johannesburg and return to sell them in the Eastern Cape. Lockdown made this nearly impossible as they could not travel between provinces to collect stock. Their business had to close for this period. Lockdown was "very painful" because Lindelwa and her husband could not generate an income from their typical activities to provide for their family — and because South Africa initially excluded them from the Covid-19 SRD Grant.

Even after the SASSA system was up and running, there was another huge hurdle. All asylum seekers and special permit holders had to have their documents verified by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA). According to Scalabrini, DHA insisted on verifying each successful asylum seeker/special permit holder before approving the payout of the grant. The verification process itself was difficult and unclear - applicants did not know what would constitute verifiable information - but what made the process more lengthy, was the Department's decision to verify applicants in small batches of 20 per week, and only to release the results in one go. This led to successful applicants waiting up to 6 months to receive the Covid-19 SRD Grant.

This placed an already very vulnerable population under extraordinary stress. There were participants who shared stories of being evicted and forced into the streets by their complete lack of income during lockdown. Some went without food for several days. As many asylum seekers and special permit holders engage in informal work and work in the service sector as street vendors, waiters and cleaners, the hard lockdown meant a sudden and complete end to their earning potential. The absence of any form of social assistance or protection during this period exposed many to extraordinary hardship.

CASE STUDY: ASYLUM SEEKER, WESTERN CAPE

Andrew, a young 26 year old asylum seeker from Somalia living in Cape Town, shared his harrowing experience of life under lockdown as a foreign national in South Africa. He described life as having already been difficult before the pandemic but said "Covid made everything worse…during lockdown everything stopped." As a result of the lockdown, he lost his job as a cleaner in one of the restaurants and his biggest and most persistent concern was eviction. He applied for the Covid-19 SRD Grant but had still not received it at the time of interview in December 2020. He said initially he kept checking his phone for the elusive SMS announcing the grant payment, but that he had now stopped because the disappointment each time he realised there was no such message was too much for him. He said the grant would have helped because he would have been able to pool the money with other migrant friends in a similar position and this would have helped prevent eviction.

With regards to living in South Africa under lockdown Andrew shared: "In South Africa I have not noticed anything positive…imagine not having any support, you are living without hope…everyone is hungry." The extreme hardship Andrew's suffering caused him to have suicidal thoughts, as he shared: "You think of leaving this world."

CHAPTER 10:
FRAUD AND CORRUPTION

The Auditor General recommended that SASSA develop a comprehensive response to minimise these avenues for corruption in the future.

During this time, there were also cases of corruption and fraud. Most of these cases concerned ineligible beneficiaries, including government officials, unduly receiving Covid-19 SRD Grants. While this issue was highlighted in report of the Auditor General of South Africa (AG) and covered extensively in the media, these cases seemed significant because of the extent of the coverage and the egregiousness of stealing money from poor people during a pandemic. However, the instances of corruption and fraud were small in comparison to the overall delivery of grants.

The Auditor General found a number of applicants who provided false information or submitted fictitious applications in order to fraudulently benefit from the grant. They also demonstrated some recipients were already receiving money from other government sources, including as salaried employees. Those who were able to pull this off could only have done so through collusion with government departments, their staff and their contractors.[30]

The Auditor General recommended that SASSA develop a comprehensive response to minimise these avenues for corruption in the future.

In our research, the only cases of corruption we found were petty. For instance, the long queues at SAPO branches created an opportunity for corruption. Security guards, SAPO officials, and opportunistic members of the public offered to let recipients jump the queue, or hold their places in line, for a fee of R50 or more. Kagiso, a monitor from the North West Province, had this to say: "you would find that the elderly person got there at three o'clock in the morning. Just to queue. Then the younger person will get there at seven o'clock and give the security guard R30 and he will go first, before the elderly person. They bribe the security guards. [The elderly] try to stop, they try to complain, and there will be some pushing, you see. Some end up in hospital, in clinics because they have chronic diseases. So they faint. [SAPO] always opens at eight o'clock, they start at nine. They delay, they go to lunch, they go to tea times. They can get paid 11, 12 pm, yes... They even tried to burn the Post Office, because they are doing others favours." While this practice seems to have been widespread, it has been impossible to establish just how prevalent it was.

[30] Auditor General. (2021). Covid-19 Audit Report. Auditor General South Africa, Pretoria. https://www.agsa.co.za/Reporting/SpecialAuditReports/Covid-19AuditReport.aspx

CHAPTER 11:
MULTIPLE HARDSHIPS IN A TIME OF COVID-19

11.1 HUNGER

Although recipients were grateful for the Covid-19 SRD Grant, all of those interviewed agreed that R350 was too little to meet their monthly needs.

Many of the people we interviewed talked about food shortages. Their households had to engage in various strategies to make what food they had last longer. Such strategies included meal rationing and skipping meals.

Although the R350 was not enough to make households and beneficiaries food secure, those who did not receive it, and those who received it late, experienced hunger and food insecurity more frequently. Recipients often wished that the government would provide at least R500. Simon from Gauteng, said: "I would appreciate it if the Covid Grant were to be permanent and increased to R500. The R350 is too little even though it does help. I wish it could be permanent."

Even R500, however, would still fall R85 short of the price of the recommended food basket for 2020.[31] The recommended food basket is a minimal measure of the amount of energy required to support a human being for a month. If R500 was the only money afforded to an individual, it would not cover their minimum caloric needs. Since the Covid-19 grant was less than the food poverty line, it was particularly insidious that SASSA required all grant claimants to have zero money coming into their bank accounts. Because the money was below basic food requirements, grant recipients had to rely on other family members to assist with their minimum caloric needs. Those receiving slightly higher grants - Old Age Pensions or Disability Grants - had to provide for extended family members that the state did not sufficiently cover. To penalise people for a small amount of income, by denying them their Covid-19 grant for the month, was not appropriate.

CASE STUDY, COVID-19 SRD GRANT RECIPIENT, KWAZULU NATAL:

Thabo is 53 years old and lives with his two adult children in KwaZulu Natal. The Stage 5 lockdown hit his family hard. He had to "scale down on a lot of things, like going out with the kids. There was no joy about it because life stops when it is like that. Being on lockdown and not being able to do anything, with money and food running out you see. It was hard, it was really hard. And people are dying because this virus really took them."

Thabo applied for the SRD grant in May, but only got his first payment in July. That meant his family had a number of months where they had no income at all. The scarcity of money meant they struggled to have three meals a day, resorting to one midday meal to carry them through the day, "Sometimes we eat breakfast at 1pm, you see?...just to have something on the stomach." Even when he finally did get the SRD grant, all the money went to buy food. He says, "it was only food that was important."

[31] Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity. (2021) Household Affordability Index, April 2021. PMBEJD, Pietermaritzburg. https://pmbejd.org.za/index.php/household-affordability-index/

Lockdown disrupted and weakened people's reciprocity networks. As many lost jobs and livelihoods, others faced job insecurity. The family members, neighbours and friends they were used to turning to for help were not available because they themselves were faced with penury. As Ayanda from the Free State explained, his relatives were usually a good source of support in times of need. But, they had to "shorten their hands."

11.2 FOOD PARCELS

Food parcels were one possible way of ameliorating hunger. Our interviews, however, suggested that SASSA food parcels were subject to intense politicisation and often did not go to people most in need. Many of the Black Sash monitors, given their position as community leaders, were asked to help in the distribution of food, either by SASSA or by other aid organisations. What they witnessed shocked them. In almost all the interviews the food parcels that came from SASSA were said to be controlled by Ward Councillors and often given to supporters, friends and allies in acts of blatant clientelism - sometimes under the cover of darkness.

As Makgadi from Limpopo told us, food parcels revealed the venality of local politicians and officials. "The problem of the food parcel, you know they latch on the people, the community, the Ward Committee you know. And the ward committee holds positions, so that is why sometimes the food parcels (are) delivered during the night. I don't want to lie, I didn't even see the food in my eyes, no, because it was a political issue. They are not open to everybody. Ja, they were not even open to everybody... its very painful. Because this is between the SASSA official and the politicians, because they want to push their people ... to serve their own people. It's really, it's painful!"

...SASSA food parcels were subject to intense politicisation and often did not go to people most in need.

Mitchells Plain residents protests for food parcels. Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

CASE STUDY, COMMUNITY MONITOR, KWAZULU NATAL

Sizwe from KwaZulu Natal was invited by the ward committee to distribute food parcels. He described that process as "pandemonium." He would be given a list of ten families, seven of which he felt were not deserving. He said that the people getting food were ward committee members.

"They will choose their friends to collect names. They will leave relevant people who should get the food off the list. I was part of that and I made noise. I felt like it was ridiculous. Sometimes the food would be delivered at night. If you can't deliver in the day, something is wrong. People were not chosen on merit, but because the councillor likes them, or they vote, or they're old friends, or family. I felt bad about that. They tried to say, 'No, lets get the rightful people.' I wasn't part of that [favoritism] — I was offloading, and checking the list, and checking there were rightful people." He also said the ward councillors were taking some of the food for themselves, such as the 10 kg of potatoes, and then reducing the size of the parcel allocated to needy families.

11.3 JOB LOSSES

Interviews done during the first wave of the pandemic revealed that the economic impact of the lockdown was disastrous. This result confirms reports from StatsSA's labor market surveys throughout 2020.[32] Around the country, businesses were forced to shut, massive layoffs took place, markets closed, and tourism ended. Moreover, the labor market has not recovered. The official unemployment rate is 32.4%, and the expanded unemployment rate, which includes discouraged work-seekers, is at 43.2% - the highest in South Africa's history.[33]

Job losses in the informal economy disproportionately affected women. With the hard lockdown, casual and piece work ended abruptly, and women were jettisoned from the workforce.

Even so, if Caregivers received a Child Support Grant on behalf of children in their care, they were not allowed to apply for the Covid-19 SRD Grant – the very grant meant to ameliorate the hardship of unemployment. Their labor as caregivers was temporarily valued through the Caregivers Grant, but their labor as members of the informal economy was not.

Additionally, job losses were particularly devastating for rural communities, which tend to be the poorest areas of the country. Even agricultural labour was "locked down" and those who depend on this seasonal income could not work. This exposed a major flaw in the government's nationwide lockdown policy and its impact upon widely differentiated, regional populations. If South Africa had more Covid-19 testing available, government could have assessed the contrasting case loads in different locations. Areas with large case loads could have been severely locked down, while areas with no cases could have been subject to less stringent restrictions. This would have helped rural areas during the first wave in 2020, which experienced few or no cases, but dealt with severe employment and economic restrictions. The ending of what little seasonal or temporary employment people depended on was financially catastrophic for many living in rural areas.

Simon, a monitor from the rural Western Cape revealed how the long-standing employment crises of these rural areas was significantly exacerbated by the lockdown. Simon said: "For most people it was harsh, especially level 5. A lot of people lost their jobs in our area. Those seasonal workers couldn't do the seasonal work because of the lockdown. Moneywise, financial-wise it was very crippling for a lot of people here. The sickness itself was less than the economic impact."

[32] Statistics South Africa. (2020). Q4 Labor Market Survey.
[33] Statistics South Africa. (2021). Q2 Labor Market Survey.

11.4 DEPRESSION AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

In nearly every interview, grant applicants' depression and stress were common themes. This confirms results from the NIDS CRAM Wave 3 Summary Report[34] that the numbers of South Africans diagnosed with depression rose during the pandemic. It is likely that even more people experienced depression than were treated for it during this time. Black Sash monitors found that the Covid-19 SRD Grant provided applicants with a small sliver of hope. Thus, when some people were declined, that hope was quashed, leaving them dispirited. The inconsistency of approvals and rejections compounded this stress. Some people who failed compared themselves with others who succeeded, asking themselves, why me? Why did I not qualify for the grant? This differentiation could cause tremendous tension within households.

Patricia, a monitor from the Eastern Cape, recounted how people were sorely distressed when their applications were denied. One household she assisted was made up of five unemployed young men, all of whom qualified for the Covid-19 SRD Grant. Before lockdown, they depended on shift work in factories or agricultural work on farms. With lockdown, there was no income in the household. Four of the young men received the Covid-19 SRD Grant without issue, but one was declined. Since he had to rely on the largess of others, the denial of the Covid-19 SRD Grant was an extreme stressor in an already precarious household. Patricia said, "Hayi... You could just see in his face the disappointment that he have. He say, 'this means I have this bad luck thing.'"

11.5 GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

The lack of work, the effect of being confined to small, often overcrowded homes, the constant privation, the myriad frustrations of lockdown and the anxiety of the threat of disease, together with the prohibition on normal socialising, fueled a substantial rise in domestic violence during 2020.

Kagiso of North West, said the loss of employment impacted brutally on domestic life. Women who had been bread winners with some power, were now unemployed and vulnerable to the violence of systemic patriarchy and crime: "Mostly it's farming, and those who work as domestic workers, and small businesses, like working in the shops. So many were retrenched. You see, the people in my area are poor, so Covid only increased the poorness. So people in this rural area are suffering. [...] It was very tough, lots of people lost jobs, lots of businesses collapsed, only crime and domestic violence increased. Because others were stealing, others were beating their wives because of anger of [the wives] losing their jobs."

200 demonstrators stood outside Parliament calling for action to be taken against gender-based violence in Cape Town. Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

[34] Spaull, N., et al. (2021). NIDS CRAM 3 Synthesis Report.

...those who developed flu-like symptoms found that they could not access testing facilities.

11.6 HEALTH CARE

Most participants had not had Covid-19 at the time of being interviewed and very few had family members or relatives diagnosed with the coronavirus. However, there were those who developed flu-like symptoms who found that they could not access testing facilities. This was particularly prevalent in rural areas where testing capacity was low, requiring external health workers to be brought in to test each time there was a suspected case. In the case of Mandla's family, in the rural Western Cape, he shared that they all had symptoms which they believed to be Covid-19, but when they visited the local health facility and asked to be tested they were told this was not possible.

Besides Covid-19 related health crises, participants struggled more than usual to access routine health services because of the strain that the pandemic placed on the health system. Some people were also scared to visit health facilities even when they needed help because of the fear of catching Covid-19. This resulted in people delaying seeking help, and others visiting facilities outside their local areas in order to avoid queues and possible infection.

Jeanine, from the Western Cape, shared that, "it is a struggle to access health services in Delft clinic... my neighbour's child was very sick and asthmatic, [she] was not assisted at the day hospital... and at the police station where I have to wait outside in the raining weather in the long queue. I was sick, but not that so serious and I went to the private doctor and she referred me to Tygerberg hospital where I waited in the long queue in early hours of the morning to test for the Covid because I wanted to know if I have the Covid or not for safety of my family."

Like Jeanine, there were participants who ended up having to pay to use private health care because they were either turned away by public health facilities as a result of being overwhelmed by Covid-19. This of course compounded their financial burden.

Pensioners getting vaccinated at Oliver and Adelaide Tambo Regional Hospital in Bizana, Eastern Cape. Photo: Daniel Steyn/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

11.7 FREE BASIC SERVICES

The South African government prides itself on the provision of social assistance that is extended to those living in the country as part of its commitment to redistribution and poverty alleviation. The social safety net in South Africa comprises both social assistance and free basic services, including housing, water, sanitation, electricity, health and education. In the interviews, many participants mentioned difficulties in accessing these other government support programs during this time and having to spend money to access those things.

For example, in three provinces a major basic service that people struggled to access was water. The need for water was exacerbated in the context of a pandemic that required constant hand washing and hygiene in order to be protected from infection. This was occasionally exploited by those with means, and residents were forced to buy this public resource from those who were accessing it freely from their boreholes. In the example given below, social grant recipients were having to spend their entire Covid-19 SRD Grant on water.

Evelyn Baloyi, like many villagers in Mabendenge, outside Louis Trichardt in Limpopo, has to purchase her drinking water from a resident who has a borehole. Photo: Bernard Chiguvare/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

CASE STUDY, COMMUNITY MONITOR, NORTH WEST

As Kagiso from North West explained: "There is no water here. You have to buy water, not from the supermarket, but from those ones with the boreholes. So they are selling the 20 litre with R2. So others don't even have that R2. So … we have to ask the king there to give water to the community. The king is very generous. He even delivers to some other families. [Otherwise] they must pay for the neighbour, or for those who are selling the water to come to deliver the water, you see they say 1000 litres is R350. So you have to pay the 350."

Drought is a common environmental crisis that predates the pandemic, but is exacerbated by it. "The villages, there is no water … maybe two years, three years. It's been long. It's been long. There are always stories from the municipality, even the administrator was here, to check what is the problem. There are always stories from the municipality about the water. Many stories. There was this place, called, Sang's Sloot. You have to dig, dig, dig, dig, and then the water comes out. So there is no more water there. You dig, you dig, there is no more water."

Development is limited and infrastructure is often in poor condition, or obsolete. Kagiso continues: "They said they were busy with the infrastructure, they will fix this pump, this pump from where-where is broken. There are always stories. Either the machines are stolen, or always stories. People don't know when it will end. [The water people] are making lots and lots of money. There are no farms anymore because of the problem of the water. You can't. See that's the problem. Even yesterday, there was a strike, for water. People were burning tires on the street. They wanted water. Water is life. They are very angry. The municipality it does nothing."

CHAPTER 12:
THE CASE FOR BASIC INCOME SUPPORT

...the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress Grants should not end, as it has done. Instead, it should be converted into Basic Income Support for those aged 18 to 59 with no or little income.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a global economic and humanitarian crisis. South Africa's already dire economic situation, with our triple challenges of systemic poverty, unemployment and inequality, became bleaker. The national lockdown exacerbated structural unemployment, led to increased food prices and placed immense strain on household resources. But, in all this, there was a small glimmer of hope. The government finally acknowledged that unemployed people aged 18-59 were not simply "lazy" or "dependent" on hand-outs. Because of the pandemic and the lockdown, people in this age cohort were for the very first time seen to be "legitimately" unemployed. As such, a number of grants were rolled out to assist them. The government was following its constitutional mandate to implement social assistance where people have no means.

Importantly, unemployment is not the result of the pandemic, but structural disadvantage. From colonialism and apartheid, South Africa's economy has focused almost entirely on the mineral, energy and agricultural sectors. South Africa's industrial development has been narrowly focused on the support of these dominant sectors. Even after the post-apartheid transition, economic policy has not focused on broad industrialisation and full-employment. Despite all the lip-service paid to job creation, South Africa never built an economy that could employ all the working age citizens of the country.

Our interviews showed, time and time again, how many people are locked out of the economy. Nearly everyone we interviewed had never been formally employed since leaving school. Nearly everyone we interviewed had never earned a permanent wage and had only ever done piece work or day labor. This structural unemployment predated the pandemic and will continue long after it is over. As such, there is no reason for government to continue to exclude people aged 18 to 59 from social assistance, on the grounds that they should be employed and not "dependent". Instead, the government must recognise that the South African economy, in almost three decades of democracy, has not grown to accommodate this cohort – and it is not their fault.

As such, the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress Grants should not end, as it has done. Instead, it should be converted into Basic Income Support for those aged 18 to 59 with no or little income. It should include all people in this age cohort without income, regardless of if they are a caregiver receiving a grant on behalf of children, or a special permit holder from another country. This is a critical step towards the implementation of a universal basic income grant to ensure that all who live in South Africa have an adequate standard of living.

On 25 January 2021, there was some indication from the Presidency that a basic income grant might finally be implemented. President Cyril Ramaphosa tweeted about the need to consider "basic income relief to unemployed people who do not receive any other form of state assistance."[35]

[35] Hallink, C. (2021). South Africa's time for a basic income grant has come - but the ANC is still apprehensive and non-committal. Daily Maverick. 2 February 2021. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-02-02-south-africas-time-for-a-basic-income-grant-has-come-but-the-anc-is-still-apprehensive-and-non-committal/

Black Sash Basic Income Support Picket outside Parliarment, October 2020.

Within a few hours, the tweet was deleted.[36] Other parts of the government, including the Department of Social Development, have repeatedly expressed an intention to work toward the provision of basic income.[37] Similarly, Section 27 of the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution makes provision for social security "including appropriate social assistance for people if they are unable to support themselves".[38] This includes income support in the form of social grants already provided to the elderly, children and people with disabilities. However, able bodied persons aged 18 to 59 with little or no income must also qualify in terms of this constitutional mandate. Once we recognise that they too are "unable to support themselves," through no fault of their own, they must be included in permanent social assistance.

While the government has publicly agreed that income support is a solution to address the challenges South Africa faces, it has not committed to an implementation plan with defined time lines. We hope this report shows why we must not let the Covid-19 SRD Grant lapse, but rather why we must expand it into a basic income guarantee for people aged 18-59. We also hope that when this Basic Income Support is implemented, it is done so in a way that is accessible to everyone. This means that in order to meet the highly diverse needs of the population there must be an accessible system put in place, with digital and face-to-face options. People should be able to apply for the grant and access it in ways that are dignified, accessible, reliable, and do not incur additional costs. It is high time to implement a Basic Income Support in such a way that it is accessible to everyone who needs it.

[36] Ibid.
[37] Department of Social Development. (2021, 12 March). The Minister of Social Development, Ms Lindiwe Zulu, participated in a National Assembly debate on the Basic Income Grant. [Press Release]. https://www.dsd.gov.za/index.php/about/ministry/deputy-minister/21-latest-news/337-17-march-2021-pretoria-the-minister-of-social-development-ms-lindiwe-zulu-participated-in-a-national-assembly-debate-on-the-basic-income-grant-on-12-march-2021
[38] Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). Chapter 2: Bill of Rights. Pretoria, South Africa. https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/chapter-2-bill-rights?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIqtyujKra8AIVx9myCh1XzA3gEAAYASAAEgIBsfD_BwE

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government must immediately introduce permanent social assistance (Basic Income Support, BIS) for those aged between 18 and 59 years with no or little income. BIS must be introduced as a first step toward Universal Basic Income (UBI).
- The amount of the BIS grant should be linked to an objective measure of need. It must start with the food poverty line, and move incrementally to the lower and upper bound poverty lines.

The eligibility of the criteria of the Basic Income Support must consider:

Any future means test for the 18 to 59 age cohort must be pegged at the same income level as the Child Support Grant. A zero means test excludes too many applicants who should qualify.

All unemployed adults, including caregivers who receive Child Support Grants on behalf of children, should be eligible for any future BIS.

All refugees, asylum seekers and special permit holders should be eligible for any future BIS and their application process should be streamlined.

- All government databases must be up to date for them to be a reliable resource of verification.
- Applicants and recipients must be able to access both digital and face-to-face services from SASSA.
- All digital application platforms must be free, meaning that those eligible should not carry any data or airtime costs to apply.
- SASSA must have a proper system in place for cash payments, which should include more options than the Post Bank. SASSA must beef up cash pay points, particularly in rural areas and peri-urban areas, where the National Payment System and SAPO have a limited footprint.
- All distribution sites must have a regular, reliable and sufficient cash flow. They must also have sufficient staff to reduce long queues.
- Recipients who receive their money through the banking system should not pay bank charges to withdraw their grants.
- The grant cycle and payment dates must be explicit so beneficiaries know when they will be paid.
- SASSA must have an effective information, communication, recourse and appeals system in place with quick turnaround times.
- Once an application has been approved, there should be no monthly verification process. This is administratively onerous and delays payments unnecessarily.
- A BIS should be an addition to, not a substitute for, a wider social protection safety net, including grants that target specific populations (children, the elderly, disabled people), free health care, education, a school nutrition program, water, electricity and other basic services.

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MAKING HUMAN RIGHTS REAL

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