HALF A LOAF IS BETTER THAN NONE: SOCIAL RELIEF DISTRESS GRANT
CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS TO ENHANCE FOOD SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

Background: COVID-19-related food supply disruptions exemplified the primary threats to food security. South African government has established a social relief distress (SRD) grant as a temporary social security measure to address food and water insecurity.

Theoretical framework: A hierarchical structure of the sustainable livelihood ladder was used to represent distinct tiers of livelihood advancement, defining the progression from lower levels of vulnerability to higher standards of sustainable and resilient livelihoods.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative research approach to evaluate the significance of the SRD grant. The researchers investigated the perspectives and experiences of the general public by retrieving and purposefully selecting Twitter and Facebook comments and responses to a query titled “Does the R350 SRD grant contribute to food security, what is your take?”.

Results: Findings indicate that the R350 grant was a beacon of hope for others, particularly those without the means to ensure food security. However, there is no evidence of how the government prioritized the most vulnerable when distributing the R350 grant.

Conclusion: The paper concluded that additional government support and the permanent establishment of the SRD grant are necessary and contribute positively to improving citizens’ lives. Although the smaller grants, even with top-ups, are insufficient to keep households out of food poverty, they do make a difference.

Keywords: COVID-19, food security, social relief distress grant, households, livelihoods.

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MEIO PÃO É MELHOR QUE NENHUM: AJUDA SOCIAL SOCORRO CONCEDE DESAFIOS E BENEFÍCIOS PARA MELHORAR A SEGURANÇA ALIMENTAR

RESUMO

Contexto: As interrupções no fornecimento de alimentos relacionadas à Covid-19 exemplificaram as ameaças primárias à segurança alimentar. O governo sul-africano estabeleceu uma subvenção para ajuda de emergência social como medida temporária de segurança social para lidar com a insegurança alimentar e hídrica.

Estrutura teórica: Uma estrutura hierárquica da escala de meios de subsistência sustentáveis foi usada para representar níveis distintos de progresso de meios de subsistência, definindo a progressão de níveis mais baixos de vulnerabilidade para padrões mais elevados de meios de subsistência sustentáveis e resilientes.

Métodos: Este estudo empregou uma abordagem de pesquisa qualitativa para avaliar a importância da subvenção do DRS. Os pesquisadores investigaram as perspectivas e experiências do público em geral, recuperando e selecionando propositadamente comentários e respostas do Twitter e do Facebook para uma consulta intitulada "A subvenção R350 SRD contribui para a segurança alimentar, o que você leva?".

Resultados: Descobertas indicam que a bolsa R350 foi um farol de esperança para outros, particularmente aqueles sem meios para garantir a segurança alimentar. No entanto, não há evidências de como o governo priorizou os mais vulneráveis ao distribuir a bolsa do R350.

Conclusão: O documento concluiu que o apoio governamental adicional e o estabelecimento permanente da subvenção DRS são necessários e contribuem positivamente para melhorar a vida dos cidadãos. Embora as subvenções mais reduzidas, mesmo com pagamentos suplementares, sejam insuficientes para manter as famílias longe da pobreza alimentar, fazem a diferença.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19, segurança alimentar, auxílio social, subsídio de socorro, domicílios, meios de subsistência.

1 INTRODUCTION

South Africa is regarded as the continent's most food-secure country (Maphiri, 2022). However, not every household has access to sufficient food, nearly 20% of households had inadequate or severely inadequate food access in 2017 (Statistics SA, 2019). The greatest threat to South Africa's food security is not food availability, but rather household access to food. The lockdown measures and other COVID-19-related disruptions that led to a global recession, millions of people losing their livelihoods, or experiencing a severe decline in incomes are prime examples of a severe threat to food access (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020).

Moreover, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic only exacerbated an existing food crisis in South Africa. Thus, it was predictable that the status of national food security
would continue to deteriorate with the greatest negative effects on production networks and a significant decline in agricultural activities, tourism, trade, and industry after the pandemic (Buheji et al., 2020). Therefore, in such a dilemma social safety nets and food assistance programs were and still an essential to avoid an increase in hunger and food insecurity (OECD, 2020).

As a result, access to social grants has increased between 2003 and 2021, growing from 12.8% to 35.7% for persons, and 30.8% to 50.6% for households (Maluleke, 2022). The government introduced or enabled additional access to social grants because the restrictions on cross-border movement imposed by the lockdown regulations caused transportation delays, directly impacting the South African food supply chain, which ensures the flow of essential foods (Mthembu, Mkhize & Aurther, 2022). There is no hesitation that these lockdown restrictions caused significant economic disruptions and contributed to poor access to food and loss of income. Thus, social grants to become an important part of government expenditure in many countries.

Furthermore, poor households lacked the resources to purchase food and were unable to cultivate their own due to unemployment and layoffs caused by lockdown limitations (Rasul et al., 2021). These families were especially vulnerable to economic shocks that impacted the country's various socioeconomic sectors (Egger et al., 2021). For example, formal sector positions were precarious as a result, and many people were forced to not only abandon the labour force but also labor in the informal sector (Jacobs et al., 2021). Thus, because of their poverty, a significant proportion of the poor labor in the informal sector, and one of the occupational dangers they confront is access to quality nutrition. Informal sector earnings have a minimal impact on reducing food insecurity (Cichello & Rogan, 2017).

Consequently, the decline in production became the greatest threat to food security (Arndt et al., 2021). Many individuals lost their income and were forced to reduce their spending on food and non-food items alike (Schotte & Zizzamia, 2022). Despite these evident effects of the pandemic, it has been argued that there has been little systematic examination of how families responded to the pandemic to meet basic food demand (Pappa et al., 2020). Thus, the incidence of food insecurity at the household level during COVID-19 in South Africa is still difficult to quantify.

Moreover, the government failed to uphold the constitutional rights of those who are vulnerable and exposed to hunger. In accordance with section 27 of the South African
constitution, everyone has the right to social security, which includes access to nutritious and safe food if they cannot provide for themselves and their dependents. In a situation such as COVID-19, social grant income is viewed as the main source of household income to ensure food insecurity (Cichello & Rogan, 2017). Despite this, the national government failed miserably to feed the poor during the imposed lockdown, which exacerbated the food crisis. The national government lacked a plan, terminated its massive school feeding program, hindered its regular food parcel scheme, and failed to provide adequate cash grants for food needs (Seekings, 2020).

Thus, three months after Minister of Health Zweli Mkhize confirmed the spread of the virus to South Africa on March 5, 2021, the government assistance had already demonstrated that it was unable to maintain the pre-crisis food security level. This compelled the introduction and rollout of the social relief distress grant for unemployed adults and those in precarious social circumstances in August 2021. Its mission was to maintain the standard of living of the most vulnerable despite extreme economic hardship (Groener, 2022). This type of social assistance is provided to "a person in need" in extreme cases of food insecurity to safeguard the social welfare of South African citizens (Department of Social Development, 2021).

Consequently, the requests for R350 quickly went viral, bringing attention to the nation's food insecurity and severe economic issues (Egger et al., 2021). This prompted social media users to debate whether the government is incapable of providing a basic income to the poor and unemployed or has made a deliberate decision not to do so in response to the sudden closure of numerous businesses and the loss of jobs and income. South African households continue to experience moderate to severe food shortages due to the country's excessively high unemployment rate, widespread poverty, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Setloboko. 2022).

The hunger problem in South Africa existed before the epidemic. It exposed all of the vulnerabilities and inequalities in societies around the world, it had a significant negative impact on most sustainable development goals targets and the prospects for meeting them (Abdulkadir, Shettima, Abdullahi & Abdulkadir, 2022). Consequently, the pandemic merely highlighted the breadth and depth of hunger, as well as the necessity for proactive rather than reactive anti-hunger safety nets (Jacobs et al., 2023). Before the pandemic, approximately 17.3% of South Africans experienced moderate food insecurity, while 7.0% experienced severe food insecurity (Statistics SA, 2019).
Moreover, there’s substantial evidence that historical and contemporary socioeconomic disparities are the cause of household food and nutrition insecurity. Misselhorn & Hendriks (2017), state that unaffordable diets are the underlying cause of food insecurity, even though social grants help to alleviate household poverty. Therefore, due to the effects of covid-19 specifically loss of income, South Africa experienced a 6-12% increase in household hunger in 2020 compared to pre-2020 levels, with significant fluidity in the proportions of families entering and exiting hunger (Jacobs et al. 2023).

Thus, there has been a prominent emphasis on food and nutrition assistance for vulnerable people through livelihood protection policy measures in early 2020. This necessitated direct assistance to disadvantaged households, such as the distribution of various subsidies to increase access to food and stimulate economic activity, which was one of the solutions to COVID-19 disparities (Human Science Research Council, 2022). Nonetheless, it was evident that these responses related actions to the COVID-19 pandemic undermined food production, processing, and marketing and thus physical access to food due to the movement restrictions (Devereux, Béné & Hoddinott, 2020). This pandemic exposed unjust and unequal structures that failed the most vulnerable and marginalized populations despite the failure of public healthcare systems (Black, Spreen & Vally, 2020). Thus, it has been felt drastically by low- and middle-income countries worldwide.

The national shutdown and implementation of lockdown regulations was indeed essential to saving lives, but had a substantial impact on food access, particularly for previously chronically food-insecure households (Rasul, 2021). These factors reduced access to food and increased experiences of hunger. The situation of food access in South Africa worsened because food relief measures were not immediately in place to ensure food accessibility and stability in the face of the pandemic (Hart et al., 2022). Moreover, the stay-at-home regulations, for instance, posed a threat to the food production of the poorest households, which relied heavily on agriculture for their source of income and food security. Due to disruptions in food supply chains, the regulations reduced food availability and access, particularly in areas where households depend on daily purchases of fresh produce (Chiwona-Karltnun et al., 2021).

This is due to the substantial impact on the labor market and production, including the marketing, transportation, distribution, and consumption of agricultural products (Rasul et al., 2021). Despite emergency legislation that increased funding for social safety
nets such as food assistance programs, the pandemic further increased the number of people without reliable access to food (Fang et al., 2022). Over 64 percent of South Africa's economically active population lacked access to household income and food (Mazenda, Masiya & Mandiyanike, 2022). This proves that South Africa's social safety nets continue to be inadequate, hindering the country's ability to protect vulnerable groups from food insecurity (Fan et al., 2021). Consequently, there are still substantial gaps in the safety net and few provisions for unemployed adults (Moore and Seekings, 2019). Safety nets include emergency interventions and food aid programs that are frequently implemented during times of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as social relief distress grants for poor and vulnerable households (World Bank, 2020).

Evidently, in April 2020, the government introduced and gradually rolled out the food parcels and the COVID-19, SRD grant to combat the effects of the pandemic. In essence, the SRD grant was open to any resident over 18 years of age who had no income and was not resident in a state-subsidized or funded facility, child-headed households, and included those whose temporary disability grants had lapsed before March 2020 (Department of Social Development, 2020). The implementation of the R350 grant assisted in keeping children and adults nourished during this time of crisis enabled households to purchase more groceries and nutritious foods and provided access to healthcare facilities when a household member fell ill (Mathebula, Fish & Masvoure, 2022).

The government's reactive adjustment to the R350 grant questioned South Africa's reluctance for more than two decades to support a basic income grant for chronically poor unemployed citizens (Pienaar et al., 2021). It was just a matter of time before South Africans disregarded the efficiency of the new R350 grant. Even so, half a loaf is better than none, the R350 was a turning point for a large number of unemployed and vulnerable citizens because it attempted to alleviate food security issues (Mathebula, Fish & Masvaure, 2022).

However, the application process was unfavorable to poor food insecure citizens. Many lacked identification documents among the poorest households and there were no campaign initiatives to educate poor citizens on how to complete the application processes (Mazenda, Masiya & Mandiyanike, 2022). As a result, studies argue that many applicants were rejected due to minor mistakes during their application. Moreover, others faced delays in employment verification, thus, a disproportionately large number of SRD
grant applicants were incorrectly rejected (Goldman et al., 2021). These were gaps in the administrative capacity that created confusion regarding the correct eligibility criteria.

In addition, a sizeable percentage of households were unable to meet their daily dietary requirements due to a lack of financial resources. Some of the factors contributing to this problem were the high cost of food and the maintenance of nutritious diets (Seekings, 2020). South Africa saw an unpredictable rise in food prices during the pandemic, the R350 grant was, therefore, insufficient to meet the household food needs and achieve food security. As a result, concerns about the amount of food that people could afford to buy were raised in response to unanticipated increases in food prices as well as an overall rise in inflation (Meyer et al., 2022).

Statistics SA (2021) states that the typical household food basket cost R4401.02, while the national minimum wage (NMW) for general workers was R3 643.92. It is also estimated that the NMW covers 57% of the cost of transport and electricity (R2 075.50), leaving R1 568.42 for other household needs. Thus, R348.54 per month is the money that could feed a family of four, this is 44% below the monthly food poverty line of R624 (Statistics SA, 2021). As a direct consequence of this, it became extremely challenging to fulfil dietary and nutritional requirements with the R350 grant. Moreover, the consumer price index inflation for food increased from 3.7% to 4.4% between January and May 2020, and during the final quarter of 2020, food inflation reached its highest levels, reaching 6.0% in December 2020 (Meyer et al., 2022). Low-income families needed to cut back on their food spending, and some of them even had to borrow money or use their savings to buy food (Rasul, 2021).

Therefore, this proves that the R350 was insufficient to cover the cost of a nutritious diet every month, let alone the R4,051 that is required for a typical household's food consumer basket (Skinner, Barrett, Alfers & Rog, 2021). In addition, the high cost of food continues to have a negative impact on low-income families and their access to nutritious food, while also making families, particularly women and children, more susceptible to food insecurity. Consequently, women have been more severely impacted than men by the loss of jobs across the board, regardless of location or level of income (UNCTAD, 2021).

As a result of the pandemic, many of the women who had lost their jobs became disheartened and overburdened with the responsibilities of running their households. The pandemic had severe negative effects on the paid and unpaid care
sectors, which are dominated by women (Delle, 2021). There is scant evidence on how the most vulnerable groups such as women were prioritized in the roll-out of the SRD grant. The sustainable livelihood ladder (SLL) was used as a lens for visualizing and analysing the progression of individuals or communities through stages of sustainable livelihoods. This ladder provides a clear way to demonstrate the effect of the R350 grants on beneficiaries’ lives and their ability to access and maintain adequate food. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the following research question: To what extent did the R350 grant improve food security? This paper aims to analyze the effect of social relief distress grants on enhancing food security, assessing the benefits, and the challenges.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The sustainable livelihood ladder (SLL) proposes a hierarchical structure that represents distinct tiers of livelihood advancement from lower levels of vulnerability and poverty to higher standards of sustainable and resilient livelihoods (Amani, 2016). This hierarchical structure is widely used in development practice by policymakers, development practitioners and researchers to assess the state of livelihoods in a specific community or individual lives. It enables the design of targeted interventions and track the progress toward achieving livelihood outcomes (Scoones, 2015). Therefore, the stages of SLL represent a corresponding level of advancement through the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the household livelihood strategies before determining where they should be placed on the ladder (May et al., 2009).

Figure 1.1 Sustainable Livelihood Ladder

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Livelihood</th>
<th>Sustainable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accumulating</td>
<td>Life is going well – the household owns and controls an increasing range of assets and can cope with a range of shocks.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapting</td>
<td>Life is OK – the household owns and controls some assets, especially financial, but is not accumulating and has potential vulnerability to major shocks, for example loss of employment.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>Getting by – the household can cope with minor shocks but not major ones. There is often either a total or partial reliance on benefits and while household members may work, they usually do so informally.</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surviving</td>
<td>Life is a constant battle – the household is extremely vulnerable to both minor and major external shocks and is likely to be in debt with few social or personal assets.</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Oxfam Cymru (2013)
The progression of livelihood security in Figure 1.1 is driven by a change in assets. For instance, when assets are high one's position on the ladder rises. However, if the assets are lower, there’s a possibility of falling back down the ladder. The SLL further identifies the barriers that keep people at the bottom of the ladder and provides strategies to overcome them and ensure sustainable livelihoods (May et al., 2009). COVID-19 is a potential barrier that can position households at the bottom of the ladder. The imposed lockdown restrictions led to job losses, especially in the informal sector, which had the greatest impact on individuals, household income and overall financial assets (Bedaduri, & Pradhan, 2023). Furthermore, the R350 grant was implemented as a mechanism for individuals to sustain themselves amidst the ongoing pandemic. This was a critical provision to ensure access to food for those without employment. Setloboko (2022) concurs that the SRD grant is a sustainable livelihood for reducing food insecurity by providing means to survive and cope with the shocks of the pandemic. A livelihood is deemed sustainable when people can effectively survive shocks and emerge as winners (Karki, 2021).

Nonetheless, individuals or households in the coping stage can meet their basic needs but have little surplus for savings. For example, the SRD grant provided relief to access food, however, due to the increase in food prices the grant did not ensure adequate financial security. The lockdown and movement restrictions hampered food harvesting, transportation, and distribution. Due to this disruption, some food items were scarce, raising prices (Agyei et al., 2021). In such a situation, people develop short-term coping strategies to get by daily (May et al., 2009). However, living on the R350 grant means that individuals or households are extremely vulnerable to unexpected expenses such as the increase in the price of food. Thus, they implement various livelihood strategies to supplement their limited income (Amoah & Simatele, 2021).

Moreover, the adapting stage is characterized by a higher level of resilience and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances (Uddin, Haque, Khan, Doberstein & Cox, 2021). In the adapting stage, people have diversified income sources, a solid asset base, and access to social services. Consequently, many are better able to protect themselves from shocks and their vulnerability decreases because of their ability to adapt (Yazdanpanah et al., 2021). For example, the R350 grant during the early stages of the crisis was significant for reducing the risks associated with unexpected income loss. Households in this stage have a slightly higher hold on assets than households in the
accumulating stage (Sultana & Banu, 2022). They have the ability and resources to
moderately diversify income sources and assets, providing a risk buffer (Fazal,
Vashishtha & Sultana, 2022).

Lastly, the stage of accumulation is considered optimal since it enables sustainable
livelihoods through increased asset ownership, overall well-being, and enhanced
resilience of households against any kind of shocks (Sultana & Banu, 2022). For instance,
individuals who receive the SRD grant regularly may begin to accumulate some more
financial assets and resources which allows investment in food production by starting a
small garden or purchasing livestock. Thus, with more assets, they diversify food sources,
making them more resilient to food shocks and price fluctuations. Households at this level
have strong support from institutions and networks that allow them to participate in
decision-making processes that positively affect their livelihoods (Serrat & Serrat, 2017).
Thus, the development of long-term, comprehensive strategies that target the root causes
of food insecurity.

3 METHODS

Considering the social nature of the subject, a qualitative research strategy was
adopted for this study. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic's social relief distress grant
of R350.00 were gathered in real-time through social media platforms like Facebook and
Twitter. Researchers in the field of social science have been making greater use of data
produced by users of social media platforms, whether intentionally or unintentionally
(Jürgens & Jungherr, 2016). The primary aim of this research was to explore the effect of
the SRD grant on food security. Twitter and Facebook provided the researcher with a new
technique for interpretation, such as automatic content coding at unprecedented scales, as
well as the statistical power to conduct exploratory analysis using an open vocabulary
(Debreceny et al., 2017). The researcher retrieved and purposefully selected comments
and replies from Twitter and Facebook. These comments and replies reflected on the
researcher's Facebook timeline and Twitter post from September 5, 2021, titled "Does the
R350 Social Relief Distress grant contribute to food security, what is your take?"

These platforms allowed the researcher to explore human behavior and attitudes
toward the newly incorporated payable R350.00 social relief distress grant. According to
Singh, Halgamuge & Moses (2019), more studies have been conducted on Twitter than
any other social media platform because it is more popular and newer than Facebook.
This is because data collected from Twitter is used by researchers from various backgrounds to answer a variety of questions, ranging from simple information about specific users or events (Crymbole, 2010). The researcher accessed the public's thoughts and perceptions on Facebook and further studied different interests and distinguished user opinions.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides a thorough overview of the social relief distress (SRD) grant as a policy instrument to improve food security during a time of national and global crisis. The public's views and experiences shed light on the barriers to and possibilities for improving food security with the help of the SRD grant.

4.1 PAYABLE R350 SOCIAL RELIEF DISTRESS GRANT REQUIREMENTS AND HOUSEHOLD BASIC NEEDS

The study showed that the majority of Facebook and Twitter users perceived the R350 grant as incapable of addressing the multiple hardships that individuals and households faced such as lack of income. However, findings further indicate that access to the grant was extremely challenging for many people in the poorest areas of the country. Thus, Twitter users evidenced that the grant was less accessible and excluded those with no digital devices, internet access, and digital literacy located in remote areas. This meant that the majority of the applicants did not have a clue of how to use an online platform to make an application for any grant, thus many failed to capture sufficient information needed on the digital systems as they were not familiar with any keypads and devices. Results further argue that the language was another barrier because the all-digital systems for application were set up exclusively in English, making applying very challenging for people not proficient in that language.

Moreover, the most important qualifying criterion for receiving the amount of R350 grant required the applicant to be without employment at the time of application and to not be eligible for any other grants or sources of income. These other sources of income or grants include the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) bursary, other South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) grants, and Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) funds. Findings showed that the most affected and conflicted by this grant criteria were the grant recipients who were also receiving caretaker grants (child...
grant, disability grant, and old-age grant) considered not eligible. The expression below depicts the confusion in the exclusion of those who were unemployed but receiving other social grants:

Say if I receive the child support grant for my child and I’m also unemployed, do I still qualify for the R350 unemployment grant? most people are still not clear about this. @DearKati

What is an R350 per month to sustain an individual? I’m talking about street hustlers who were making hundreds and thousands a day from street vendors. What about moms who depended on a child grant and street hustling? What is an R350? @Ogee_iDyan

This exclusion was seen as unfair to many; however, it was to ensure income equity amongst South African citizens struggling to meet household food needs. As a result, it ensured dignity through providing humanitarian action to at-risk groups such as the unemployed youth who needed a 350 grant as a relief to socio-economic constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many users tweeted about how inconsistent the qualifying requirements were and believed it was unjust because many applicants were turned down because of their previous employment history. This included a great number of people who lost their jobs as a direct consequence of covid-19 pandemic, amongst them were some individuals who had been receiving welfare payments before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the R350 grant was introduced at a time when the country was in shambles caused of the national lockdown, many poor households were mostly concerned about their next meal. Some Twitter users indicated that there was no effective information and clear communication in rural areas in terms of access to the grant, which made it difficult to follow up on applications that were rejected because of unsuccessful applications. As a result, users’ comments showed desperation in terms of how the government was going to support the majority, especially those who depended on self-employment and another social grants such as child support grants that were insufficient to ensure adequate food access. Consequently, low-income, jobless youth receiving government grants relied on informal jobs to supplement their income (R350 grant) and ensure they had enough money for food.

The failure of the government to provide enough social protection provoked hostility and anger among its citizens. The government was deemed as failing to effectively meet humanitarian needs such as food, basic needs were not met even after the government promised to protect the nation and enhance social security during multiple...
national addresses. A majority of the users further stated that the mere reason that the grant was a temporary relief proved that the government was not capable of ensuring adequate social protection in the crisis. On the contrary other Twitter, users maintain that this grant was expanded as a social assistance framework aimed at providing a positive impact on an individual's life in as much as it can support households in achieving levels of resilience with which they can protect themselves against invasive and undesirable social ills. Consequently, few believed the SRD grant served as a ray of light for many people who were struggling with the harsh reality of food insecurity and other household needs.

4.2 THE SOCIAL RELIEF GRANT AND ITS POTENTIAL TO ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY

Findings showed that some Twitter and Facebook users commend the social security system in South Africa for the immediate response to covid-19 pandemic through the R350 grant. This grant targeted the vulnerable unemployed youth, and it came at the right time when the informal sector was shuttered, and many had lost a source of income. However, the study asserts that Facebook users argue that the primary problem with this intervention is the value (amount) allocated to the grant. The argument was that R350 is even lesser than the potential amount of family poverty grant. As a result, taking into consideration the household size and the fluctuating costs of food, and transportation to the supermarkets, the grant is regarded inadequate for achieving food security. This is supported by the expressions below:

*The grant is not enough and can never address the issue of food security, I think however R1000 could make a significant impact, and may potentially address the issue.* @Ramoka Msizi Ronald

*Not at all R350 is nothing, I need at least R1300 for groceries a month, things are expensive out there... they should increase the funds and make it a permanent thing for all unemployed people.* @Terry Nkuna

Facebook and Twitter users indicated that it was specified that the government ought to additionally take into account the necessities of families during the national crisis which was seen as an empty promise. The expression above asserts that the R350 grant may not have the capability to address food insecurity on its own; therefore, the government should strive to ensure that the limited resources to access food are made
equally available to all individuals without causing any social injustice. As a result, basic income is seen as the only solution. The following expressions supported:

“When is the Basic Income Grant going to be implemented? The people are suffering, and R350 is not a solution, if you’re able to donate R51m to Cuba for food security, what is R1200 to each unemployed South African?” @collins Ntelele

The discussion over the distribution of a basic income grant has been connected to the provision of R350 successfully. The vast majority of Facebook users who left a comment believed that if the government was successful in implementing the R350 grant on such short notice, then it would be possible to institute a basic income grant for people who are now without jobs. The majority of the responses further argue that the short duration for the provision of the R350 grant was not feasible for addressing food security, and a permanent solution is needed.

Moreover, Twitter users assert that the R350 could be used for other household needs such as electricity and water except for food because food is expensive. As a result, the devastation of not being able to provide sufficient food caused turmoil in many families, majority of tweets assert that this grant might have shed a moment of light on some of the unemployed youth. However, some of the users felt it was an insult to those who lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, instead of buying food, Facebook users attest that many young people who were beneficiaries used the grant money to buy alcohol. Their inability to find a new job and provide for their families hurt all aspects of their lives, including their relationships, and their mental health, thus alcohol was their resort as a means of coping with the stress of their situation. The following expression gives credibility to this claim:

“I certainly don’t think so, it’s not enough to sustain an individual for 30 days, and some people, only some, are using it for the wrong reasons, like drinking it all in a night @ Bheki Beekay Mnisi

This expression affirms that food insecurity hurts the well-being of many unemployed youths in our communities. As a result, many of the drug abuse statistics comprise the majority of the youth. The social security system has failed many of these individuals, including graduates. Thus, Facebook users shared that the addition of food parcels to the R350 grant would have made progress in addressing food security in rural areas. This is supported by the expression below:
Food is honestly expensive so with the R350 you can probably get a few things that might not even last a month. I think the food parcels that were provided during the lockdown were better than the R350. @Emmanual_Bila⁶

There has to be a balance between lockdown extensions and supply of the food security which includes food parcel distribution and R350 grants. Please our people will go hungry. Focus, on food security, please. @da_vinnyd⁵

The most immediate food security solution is with the food parcels and vouchers. Even the R350 will have a process. @Tessa_Dooms⁴

These expressions of support declare that food parcels have become increasingly popular in rural areas because they can enhance food security compared to SRD in the form of cash. Thus, some Facebook and Twitter users blame the government's lack of economic intelligence for introducing cash grants from the beginning. The findings show that many of the users did not take into consideration that this was a humanitarian action toward food security, to bring not just hope but dignity to those who were unemployed through cash pay-outs that will enable access to a few households’ necessities. As a result, Facebook users indicated that for those who are constantly struggling there was a positive contribution:

Since the R350 COVID-19 relief fund was introduced, I know a family of 5 that is now able to buy more food as compared to when the 5 siblings were receiving nothing. Thus, I believe the R350 grant does contribute towards food security in disadvantaged households. @Kamogelo_Tsheole¹

This demonstrated that there are people in South Africa who depended on the R350 grant to provide food for their families because of the high rate of unemployment in the country. There is no equity in the administration of social security for low-income households. Even though the R350 grant was not sufficient to achieve food security, there were still food items that could be obtained.

4.3 HIGH PRICES OF FOOD AND SOCIAL RELIEF DISTRESS GRANTS DURING LOCKDOWN

Findings indicate there is a connection between fluctuating prices and an inability to guarantee food security using the R350 grant. The study proved there is a reason for concern regarding the amount of food that recipients of the R350 grant can purchase as a result of recent price increases as well as an increase in inflation. As a direct consequence of this, Facebook and Twitter users argue that it is impossible to achieve food security with the R350 social relief distress grant due to the high cost of food. One user shared:
This direct quote establishes that the R350 grant can only cover a select few food items that are high on the priority list of households that have a low income in a limited quantity. For example, if 12.5 kilograms of maize meal and rice each cost R120.00, this leaves a person with a purchasing power of R110, which can be put toward the purchase of additional essential complementary food items. However, as shown in figure 1.2, it is expected that the R350.00 grant will cover access to essential food items as expressed in the table below, provided there is no persistent inflation that lowers the value of the currency.

Findings state that if one has a monthly purchasing power of R350, this is the food basket that person can afford to purchase. As a direct consequence of this, there would be not enough food to last until the end of the month, which is especially problematic for people who have dependent children. Thus, the study affirms that the amount of R350 is currently less than the consumer basket of food, which is R4,051, and is required for a household consumer basket (Skinner, Barrett, Alfers & Rogan, 2021). Therefore, the implementation of the R350 grant presents an even greater magnitude of difficulties to the issue of food security. The following expressions provide further evidence for this:
There is a lot to be considered and people have already mentioned a lot of important elements. It is important to first establish why the R350 was introduced. Then after that consider the current rise in food prices, transport costs, and the unending list of urgent needs that must also be met using the R350. @Wandile Shabangu

The study showed that the prices of the individual items that make up the basket, as well as the cost of the basket, are subject to change over time. This demonstrates that achieving food security with a fixed social security grant such as the R350 is not possible. The findings of the study assert that fluctuations in consumer price inflation are a representation of the changing cost of an average shopping basket. The rate of inflation further determines the effectiveness of the costs associated with traveling to markets for goods and services due to increases in the cost of gasoline.

5 DISCUSSION

Food insecurity affects 11% of the population in South Africa, which constitutes 6.5 million people. This problem has been present for a long time and has been difficult to solve (Statistics South Africa, 2019). Therefore, in this context SLL determine the extent to which the R350 grant contributes to enhancing food security and sustainable livelihoods as a whole. The findings of the study indicate that the wider spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is not the primary reason for food insecurity in South Africa, however, it has contributed to the prevalent increase here now. The COVID-19 outbreak had a significant effect on both the supply and demand of food, which led to detrimental changes in all aspects of food security, including accessibility, affordability, availability, and stability. As a consequence of this, the current study provided evidence that the COVID-19 SRD grant was intended to reduce the risk of food insecurity, in particular for vulnerable individuals and households in South Africa.

5.1 PAYABLE R350 SOCIAL RELIEF DISTRESS GRANT REQUIREMENTS AND HOUSEHOLD BASIC NEEDS

The Payable R350 grant provides immediate assistance to those in desperate need, assisting them in transitioning from the surviving stage of extreme vulnerability to a dependable livelihood coping stage. However, findings indicate that access to social services in South Africa continues to be heavily influenced by digital inequality. This is the case despite the recent progress made in providing the R350 grant. Thus, the vast majority of people who were deemed eligible for the grant were members of vulnerable
groups that resided in rural areas and had limited or no access to digital systems. The study provided further evidence that the majority of the challenges associated with development, such as high unemployment and limited access to opportunities, are a result of a lack of access to digital resources. An unequal distribution of resources for certain subsets of the population, which in turn leads to unequal access to digital technologies for the most marginalized groups of people (Tewathia, Kamath & Ilavarasan, 2020).

Results attest that those with access to digital systems had trouble overcoming language barriers and comprehending how the online system works. The online application for the R350 grant was established in English, even though the vast majority of unemployed rural candidates struggle with illiteracy. This suggests that educating people in rural areas on how to use electronic devices is more important than providing access to a personal computer, tablet, or phone with an internet connection (Arighi et al., 2021).

In contrast, the report from Social Development (2020), indicates that there was an overwhelming number of applications just a few weeks after the program was put into place. This occurred despite the difficulties encountered. In addition, findings further demonstrate that there was an exclusion of caregivers, who are typically women who receive a child grant. The SLL argues that when people are excluded from social assistance programs, they are at a higher risk of falling deeper into poverty and suffering a variety of negative consequences such as food insecurity and stability (May et al., 2009). Furthermore, the study asserts that child grant is insufficient to guarantee that their households will have access to sufficient food supplies. In a study that was carried out by Zembe-Mkabile et al. (2022), sustain families acknowledged that the caregiver’s grant is not sufficient to meet the nutritional needs of its beneficiaries, let alone the needs of the household as a whole. Thus, comments made on Twitter assert that the government failed to ensure income equity to vulnerable groups, such as unemployed young people who desperately required a grant of 350 as a relief to the socioeconomic pressures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.2 SOCIAL RELIEF DISTRESS GRANT AND ITS POTENTIAL TO ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY

The importance of food as a survival commodity in the face of a pandemic was highlighted. As a result, the study indicates that the R350 grant was utilized most
effectively for food spending, as opposed to other household needs. However, the study confirms the amount was not sufficient to ensure adequate nutrition. The study asserts that individuals or households that face challenges in obtaining essential food without external aid are positioned at the lowest rungs (surviving and coping stages) of the SLL due to their frequent dependence on temporary or informal employment for sustenance. Gronbach, Seekings & Megannon came to similar conclusions (2022), state that due to the nature of the grant, the value, and the criteria backlogs it was concluded that the R350 grant was ineffective in addressing food security. The majority of Facebook users concur that R350 can purchase a few grocery store necessities, but not an entire consumer basket.

However, the study confirms that the increased availability of food was the primary benefit of the SRD grant for individuals and families (Masamha et al., 2020). Families were unable to stretch their R350 food budget to cover even the bare necessities. The vast majority of Twitter users believe that a basic income is required to effectively contribute to the attainment of adequate food security. Thus, it is supported that the implementation of a basic income would discourage people from seeking employment and be financially unfeasible (Pienaar et al., 2021).

5.3 HIGH PRICES OF FOOD AND SOCIAL RELIEF DISTRESS GRANT DURING LOCKDOWN

Findings show that low-income rural households have been struggling with food and nutrition insecurity for quite some time. This study found that R350 does not go far enough toward covering the cost of the bare minimum of food needed. Thus, Facebook users generally agreed that the R350 grant could buy a selection of necessities but not a full week’s worth of groceries. These grants boosted the incomes of South African individuals and households (Torkelson et al., 2021). Recent studies have shown that food prices in South Africa have increased dramatically over the past few years.

The SLL indicates that shocks such as increases in food prices can further push many people to the surviving stage, whereas the grant aimed to keep people from falling deeper into vulnerability by providing a safety net during a difficult time. The increase in the price of food makes it more challenging for people to obtain food because low-income households have to spend more money on the most basic food items (Van Wyk & Dlamini, 2018). This research showed that the amount of this grant was significantly less than the food poverty line and had no correlation with any objective measure of food
security. Many Facebook users indicated that they agreed with this argument, asserting that food prices are always fluctuating (something that was also seen during the pandemic). Since food is so expensive, the SRD grant of R350 has failed to reduce hunger but could afford a few basic items.

6 CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic threw the country and the world into unprecedented social and economic challenges, weakening and undermining the survival strategies of low- and no-income individuals and households who had to endure financial hardship during the national lockdown to control the virus's spread. The pandemic may have exacerbated the socioeconomic challenges facing many South Africans, but it mostly shone a light on the already dire situation of the poor and unemployed. The Special COVID-19 SRD grant shed light on the form of payable grants that had a minimal role in access to food. The R350.00 grant may have reached many poor households, but it was insufficient to lift many out of food poverty. This study concluded that additional government support and the permanent establishment of the SRD grant are necessary and contribute positively to improving citizens’ lives. Although the smaller grants, even with top-ups, are insufficient to keep households out of food poverty, they do help. There is a clear indication that for South Africa to recover from the shocks of COVID-19, it requires not only social security grants but also a strong economy that grows and creates necessary jobs for the vulnerable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need to build a long-standing and well-developed social protection framework to achieve food security. This study recommends that COVID-19 special grants of R350 be implemented as a long-term social security strategy if not a basic income grant for achieving food security. This is possible; however, the government must ensure that the necessary systems are in place to process social assistance applications and payments promptly, avoiding backlogs and delays in payments. The government must ensure that the necessary systems are in place, such as improved communication channels and access to social security grant information for low-income groups. Continuous research is required in this area to determine whether or not the message on social security assistance
is being received well. There must be an effective design of the applications, verification, and payment processes, which will not exclude those who are eligible to participate. This is possible through a centralized citizens' registry for all government services. This is the process of establishing single registries to serve as a central repository of information for multiple identifications and social protection programs.
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Setloboko, H., 2022. An exploration of the experiences of the Social Relief of Distress grant recipients in food-insecure households in two rural communities of Matatiele, a
local municipality in the Eastern Cape (Doctoral dissertation, University of Johannesburg).


Warah, R. (2020). COVID-19 has exposed South Africa’s glaring and enduring inequalities. Available at: COVID-19 has exposed South Africa’s glaring and enduring inequalities | ONE Africa.


The datasets analyzed during the current study are available below:

Twitter comments

1. Collins Ntelele on Twitter: "@CyrilRamaphosa When is the Basic Income Grant going to be implemented? The people are suffering, R350 is not a solution, if you're able to donate R51m to Cuba for food security, what is R1200 to each unemployed South African?" / Twitter

2. Gasela on Twitter: "@TimesLIVE Lockdowns failed but some are rich because of it. Poor people suffered a loss of food security due to Lockdowns. No jobs for our people only R350. Is there any family can survive with that money? PPE money is not been returned instead Gov loan more for comrades." / Twitter

3. Da Vinci #VinnyD on Twitter: "@MorningLiveSABC @SakinaKamwendo @LeanneManas There has to be a balance between lockdown extensions and supply of the food security that includes food parcel distribution and R350 grants. Please our people will go hungry. Focus, on the food security please 😇" / Twitter

4. (24) uThixo uKhona on Twitter: "#cyrilramaphosa #SomiziMustFall What is a R350 per month to sustain an individual? I’m talking street hustlers who were making hundreds and thousands a day from street vending? What about moms who depended on a 1 child grant and street hustling? What is a R350? https://t.co/1Vsv6viXrx" / Twitter
5. (24) Vee on Twitter: "@DearKatli Say if I receive the child support grant for my child and im also unemployed, do i still qualify for the R350 unemployment grant? most people are still not clear about this." / Twitter

Facebook comments

1. https://web.facebook.com/kamogelomatthwes.tsheola?comment_id=Y29tbWVudDoyNzA2NDE3MzA5NjYwNjA3XzI4MDcyMjQ3MTI4MTMxOTk%3D&__cft__[0]_AZXDLooIAozPjtAQvqrSePnfiRtbjSJT-AvkSQAodMTPHX9DY8WmI5vGDs_0Xzjun_s6ybOJKUon0lTY-o0OCdc3m2YpPVKDYbbNO5RiVbkdrCkHIOkOQwLP8aSJslU-oBEQ&__tn__=-R]

2. https://web.facebook.com/ronald.syabonga?comment_id=Y29tbWVudDoyNzA2NDE3MzA5NjYwNjA3XzI4MDcwMzk2MDYyNjUwNDM%3D&__cft__[0]_AZXDLooIAozPjtAQvqrSePnfiRtbjSJT-AvkSQAodMTPHX9DY8WmI5vGDs_0Xzjun_s6ybOJKUon0lTY-o0OCdc3m2YpPVKDYbbNO5RiVbkdrCkHIOkOQwLP8aSJslU-oBEQ&__tn__=-R]

3. https://web.facebook.com/terryntwanano.nkuna?comment_id=Y29tbWVudDoyNzA2NDE3MzA5NjYwNjA3XzI3MDY0MzAwMjYzMjYwMDI%3D&__cft__[0]_AZXDLooIAozPjtAQvqrSePnfiRtbjSJT-AvkSQAodMTPHX9DY8WmI5vGDs_0Xzjun_s6ybOJKUon0lTY-o0OCdc3m2YpPVKDYbbNO5RiVbkdrCkHIOkOQwLP8aSJslU-oBEQ&__tn__=-R]

4. https://web.facebook.com/sibongile.manzini1?comment_id=Y29tbWVudDoyNzA2NDE3MzA5NjYwNjA3XzI3MDY0NDQ2Njkc2NTc4NzE%3D&__cft__[0]_AZXDLooIAozPjtAQvqrSePnfiRtbjSJT-AvkSQAodMTPHX9DY8WmI5vGDs_0Xzjun_s6ybOJKUon0lTY-o0OCdc3m2YpPVKDYbbNO5RiVbkdrCkHIOkOQwLP8aSJslU-oBEQ&__tn__=-R]

5. https://web.facebook.com/bheki.mnisi.7?comment_id=Y29tbWVudDoyNzA2NDE3MzA5NjYwNjA3XzI3MDY1MDQxMzI5ODUyNTg%3D&__cft__[0]_AZXDLooIAozPjtAQvqrSePnfiRtbjSJT-AvkSQAodMTPHX9DY8WmI5vGDs_0Xzjun_s6ybOJKUon0lTY-o0OCdc3m2YpPVKDYbbNO5RiVbkdrCkHIOkOQwLP8aSJslU-oBEQ&__tn__=-R]

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AvkSQaOdMTPHX9DY8WmI5vGDs_0Xzjun_s6ybOJKUnolTY-ooOCDc3m2YpPVKDYbbNO5RiVbkdrCkHIOkOQwlP8aSJslU-oBEQ&__tn__=R]}-R

9. https://web.facebook.com/sk.thanjekwayo?comment_id=Y29tbWVudDoyNzA2NDE3MzA5NjYwNjA3XzI4MDY0MjE2NTk2NjAxNzE%3D&__cft__[0]=AZXDLOoIAozPtjAqvqrSePnfiRtbjSJT-AvkSQaOdMTPHX9DY8WmI5vGDs_0Xzjun_s6ybOJKUnolTY-ooOCDc3m2YpPVKDYbbNO5RiVbkdrCkHIOkOQwlP8aSJslU-oBEQ&__tn__=R]}-R

10. https://web.facebook.com/bheki.mnisi.7?comment_id=Y29tbWVudDoyNzA2NDE3MzA5NjYwNjA3XzI3MDY1MDkzMzk2NTE0MDQ%3D&__cft__[0]=AZXDLOoIAozPtjAqvqrSePnfiRtbjSJT-AvkSQaOdMTPHX9DY8WmI5vGDs_0Xzjun_s6ybOJKUnolTY-ooOCDc3m2YpPVKDYbbNO5RiVbkdrCkHIOkOQwlP8aSJslU-oBEQ&__tn__=R]}-R