

Children and social assistance: An introduction

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Social assistance in South Africa has grown substantially over the past 20 years, driven largely by the introduction and expansion of the Child Support Grant (CSG). The CSG is the primary grant for children living in poverty, reaching almost 12 million children in 2016.¹

Studies have shown the positive impacts of social grants, and the CSG in particular, on alleviating poverty and promoting child well-being.² In the face of persistently high unemployment, social grants – together with access to quality education, health and social services and other measures – support families to care for their children, and are a core component of broader social protection strategies to enable all children to realise their full potential. This is in line with the South African Constitution, which guarantees everyone the right to have access to social security.

This introductory essay considers the questions:

- What is social assistance and why does it matter?
- Why consider children and social assistance?
- How have social assistance programmes evolved worldwide?
- What kinds of social grants are provided for children in South Africa?

What is social assistance and why does it matter?

Social assistance is material support – either cash or in-kind – provided to those who are unable to support themselves. It is one aspect of social security and in South Africa consists primarily of unconditional, means-tested social grants provided by the state to those who cannot provide for themselves due to their age (children under 18 years and persons over 60 years) or disability. The social grants system offers income support to those living in poverty and is a means of redistributing resources more equitably in society.

Poverty goes beyond a simple lack of money. But access to income is important in ensuring that children have an adequate standard of living, and are able to access and use health care services and education. The South African Constitution recognises the role income plays in enabling people to live a dignified life: It states that everyone has the right “to have access to [...] social security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependents, appropriate social assistance”.³ The state must take reasonable legislative and other measures to progressively realise this right within available resources. In the case of children,

parents have the primary responsibility for providing for children's well-being. But where families are unable to meet their children's basic needs, they are entitled to receive assistance from the state.

This is important in a country like South Africa where high levels of inequality, unemployment and poverty mean that many people do not have the financial resources to provide for their children. Almost two-thirds (63%) of the country's children live below the upper bound poverty line (see essay on p. 33), and inequalities in access to quality services and opportunities still run along racial and spatial lines.

Child income poverty is closely linked to adult unemployment. In 2016, more than a quarter of the economically active population are unemployed.⁴ Structural factors contributing to this include the legacy of apartheid, poor quality education for the majority, the lack of demand for unskilled labour, and economic opportunities that are often located far from where people live. As a result, many are unable to participate in the economy and almost a third (30% or 5.5 million) of children in South Africa live in households where no adults are employed.⁵

Low skill levels mean that many who do find work are likely to earn low levels of income, contributing to further income inequality.⁶ Even when children live in households where a household member is working, they may not earn enough to provide for themselves and their children.

The National Development Plan (NDP) calls for inclusive economic growth and employment creation as key strategies for tackling the structural causes of poverty and inequality in the country.⁷ But unemployment remains stubbornly high, and where there is little or no income from work, social assistance is essential in alleviating poverty, shielding vulnerable households from income shocks, and supporting child health and well-being.

Social grants form a vital source of income for poor families, accounting for two-thirds of household income in the poorest 40% of households.⁸ Grants have played a significant role in reducing poverty, although the impact of the CSG is limited due to the low monetary value.⁹ Social grants enable caregivers to buy food and other necessities, and the CSG has been associated with improved health, nutritional and educational outcomes for children.¹⁰ There is evidence that the CSG is associated with reduced risk behaviour among adolescents and supports caregivers to search for work and invest in enterprises (see essay on p. 44).¹¹

Why consider children and social assistance?

As in other parts of the world, children in South Africa are over-represented in poor households (see essay on p. 33). Children living in poverty often experience multiple dimensions of deprivation including malnutrition, limited access to quality services and poor living conditions. The detrimental impacts of these deprivations are well documented and can have long-term consequences for a child's future.¹² Limited choices later in life can increase the likelihood of their own children growing up in poverty, further entrenching disadvantage and inequality.¹³

Social grants provide caregivers with choice in how best to meet their children's changing needs (particularly when grants are unconditional) and can impact on a range of child outcomes.

Social assistance as a right

Children's rights to an adequate standard of living and social security are protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, Section 28 of the Constitution specifies a set of fundamental rights for children. These include the right to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services and social services; the right to protection from abuse and neglect; and the right to family or parental care, or appropriate alternative care when removed from their family environment. Section 28 also states that a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child. By specifying these rights, the Constitution recognises that children require extra protection because they are dependent on others for their safety and well-being. Unlike the right to social security, these rights are not subject

Box 1: Safety nets and social protection floors

Social assistance forms one aspect of social security.¹⁴ Social security traditionally consists of contributory elements such as private schemes or social insurance which is provided by government, and non-contributory elements such as social assistance and emergency relief.

In contributory schemes, contributions are pooled and benefits are paid out when a specific event occurs, such as unemployment, childbirth, illness or work-related injury. Examples of social insurance include the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), Compensation Fund, the Road Accident Fund and the proposed National Health Insurance. Social assistance programmes, on the other hand, are non-contributory as beneficiaries do not need to pay contributions to receive state support in times of need.

Social assistance has a much broader reach than social insurance in South Africa since social insurance mechanisms (such as UIF) tend to be linked to formal employment. They exclude many who work in the informal sector or who have never been employed.¹⁵ This framework assumes that people of working age will support themselves and their families through employment, and will only require short-term support in times of emergency. But in a country where there is widespread chronic unemployment, the limited support for unemployed adults creates a considerable gap in the social security "safety net". Expanded public works programmes provide work opportunities for unemployed adults, but these are short-term.

Increasingly, countries have adopted a broad social protection approach to preventing and reducing poverty, addressing inequalities and promoting inclusion (see box 2 for the functions of social protection).¹⁶ In 2002, the Taylor Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive Social Security System for South Africa recommended adopting a comprehensive social protection approach that "seeks to provide the basic means for all people living in the country to effectively participate and

advance in social and economic life, and in turn to contribute to social and economic development."¹⁷ The approach "embraces the traditional measures of social insurance, social assistance and social services, but goes beyond that to focus on causality through an integrated policy approach, including many of the developmental initiatives undertaken by the State".

Internationally, social protection has gained prominence in recent years,¹ and it now forms part of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. In 2012, a Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202) was adopted at the International Labour Conference, which encourages all member states to define national social protection floors. Social protection floors guarantee access to at least a basic level of income and services needed to secure a minimum standard of living for all. The National Development Plan 2030 also calls for a national social protection floor to be defined. Social grants would constitute a significant element of this social floor.

Box 2: Functions of social protection

- **Protection:** providing relief from poverty and deprivation (e.g. social assistance, social services).
- **Prevention:** averting deprivation (e.g. social insurance, savings clubs and funeral societies).
- **Promotion:** enhancing real incomes and capabilities (e.g. nutrition support programmes, microfinance).
- **Transformation:** promoting social equity and inclusion (e.g. upholding rights of socially vulnerable groups, sensitisation campaigns).

Source: Sabates-Wheeler R & Devereux S (2007) Transformative social protection. *IDS Bulletin*, 38(3): 23-28.

ⁱ However, the International Labour Organisation has noted that in higher-income countries, the difficult economic climate has led to "austerity" measures that threaten progress on income security for children and their families, with child poverty increasing in 19 of the 28 countries of the European Union between 2007 and 2012. See www.ilo.org (World Social Protection Report 2014/15).

to progressive realisation. Since poverty undermines many of these socio-economic rights, social grants provide one mechanism – in conjunction with other services and policies – through which the State can support families and uphold its obligation to realise and protect children’s rights.

Social assistance as social justice

Social grants can also contribute to upholding human dignity, a founding value of the Constitution. Recognising the country’s history of discrimination and exclusion, the preamble to the Constitution includes a commitment to equality and social justice, and to “improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person”.¹⁸ The social grants system in South Africa, together with taxes and spending on social services, contributes to building a more equitable society by redistributing income.¹⁹ Social assistance provides support to disadvantaged children and vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities, to level the playing field and promote substantive equality.²⁰

Social assistance as an investment in children and the future

A third reason for providing social assistance for children is that social grants assist households to invest in the health and education of their children, which is critical to longer-term poverty reduction.

The benefits of early childhood interventions are well documented, particularly for disadvantaged children.²¹ Adequate nutrition in a child’s formative years is essential for the child’s physical and cognitive development and lays the foundation for later life. Studies show that receipt of the CSG is associated with improved nutritional and health outcomes for children, including improved growth monitoring and reduced levels of stunting.²² The CSG, together with adult grants such as the Old Age Grant, has been found to support school enrolment and improve learning outcomes.²³ These developmental effects are stronger for children who received the grant early in life and for a continued period.²⁴ In a context of unemployment and poverty, social grants are a way of

investing in the development of children and families, and in South African society. If social grants are complemented by investment in quality public education, health care and other basic services, they have the potential to prevent poverty from being passed on to the next generation.

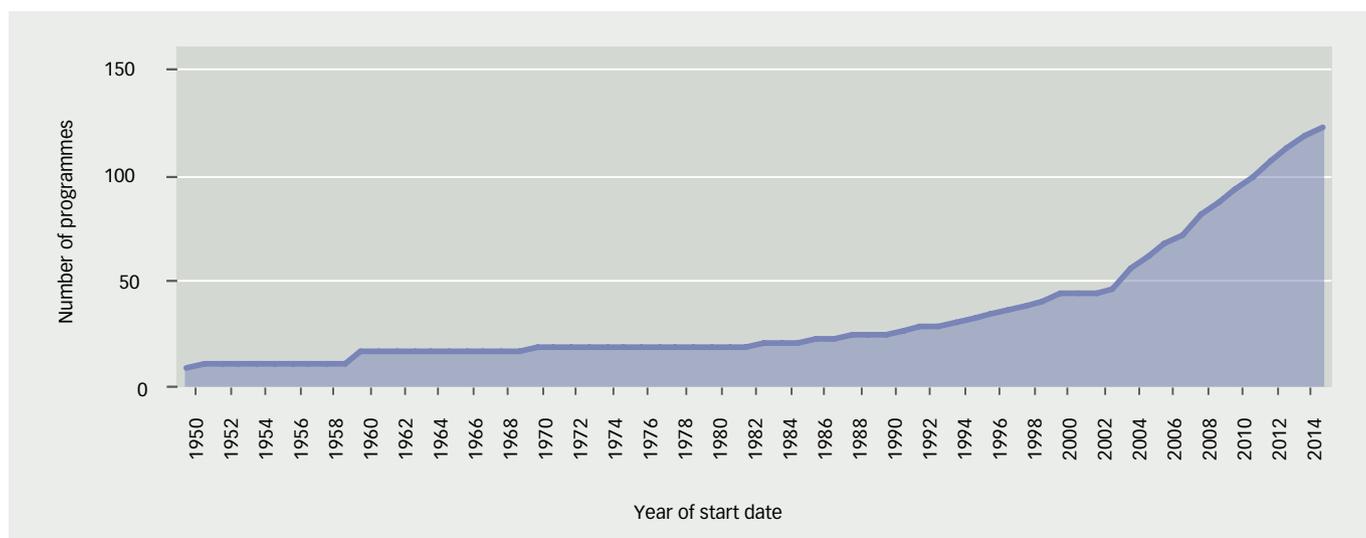
How have social assistance programmes evolved worldwide?

The last decade has seen an explosion of interest in social assistance programmes across the developing world. Today, 130 countries around the world have at least one cash transfer programme in place.²⁵ Africa is the region with the most rapid growth in the number of countries with such programmes. Unconditional cash transfers are now present in 40 African countries, twice as many as in 2010. A recent inventory mapped more than 120 non-contributory programmes on the continent, which are fully or partially financed, designed or implemented by government.²⁶ They range from emergency one-time transfers to well-established child grants, social pensions and conditional transfers with human capital development goals. Unconditional transfers are the most common form in Africa. Most are quite new, with two-thirds launched after 2000.

The upsurge in interest in social assistance, which has been likened to a “quiet revolution”, shows not only in the growing number of countries with programmes in place.²⁷ It also shows in their increasing scale and scope, the steep rise in spending, and the growing share of domestic, as opposed to external, financing. Taken together, non-contributory programmes are reaching about 1.9 billion people in the developing world. More than one-third receive cash – part of a trend to gradually move away from in-kind to cash-based assistance.

Total spending on social assistance in developing countries amounted to US \$329 billion between 2010 and 2014 – about twice the amount needed to lift people out of extreme poverty, if equitably distributed. On average, these countries spend 1.6% of their gross

Figure 1: African non-contributory social protection programmes, by start date



Source: Cirillo C & Tebaldi R (2016) *Social Protection in Africa: Inventory of Non-contributory Programmes*. Brasilia: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth UNDP.

domestic product (GDP) on social assistance – half of what South Africa spends (3.2% in 2016). Programmes are generally pro-poor; the best targeted ones devote as much as 50% of benefits to the poorest quintile. With such levels of spending and good targeting, it is not surprising that cash transfers are estimated to have reduced the global poverty headcount by 8% and the poverty gap by 15%.²⁸

Countries are investing in social transfers, irrespective of their income levels. Richer countries tend to spend more as a share of their national wealth. But even in poorer countries, there is a growing tendency to move away from small pilots funded by donors to national programmes implemented at scale and increasingly financed with domestic resources.

In Africa, children (or households with children) are the most common target of cash-based programmes (see figure 2). Only one-fifth of social transfer programmes on the continent impose conditions on beneficiaries; and even when they do, conditions are applied much less rigorously than in other regions.²⁹

South Africa has a well-established, large-scale social grants programmes for children of poor families, and remains a model for many countries. Its rights-based approach has set it apart from conditional approaches to social assistance, which prevail in Latin America. In terms of its scope, the CSG ranks fifth in the absolute number of beneficiaries behind comparable programmes in much more populous countries – China, Indonesia, India and Malaysia.³⁰

As the implementation of rigorous impact evaluations became embedded in the design, rollout and scale-up of social grants, evidence of their socio-economic and developmental impacts on families and children has kept expanding.³¹ This, in turn, has fuelled the growth of existing programmes and the proliferation of new ones, in a “virtuous cycle” of policy-relevant knowledge breeding programme expansion, which then feeds back into the growing body of evidence on impacts.

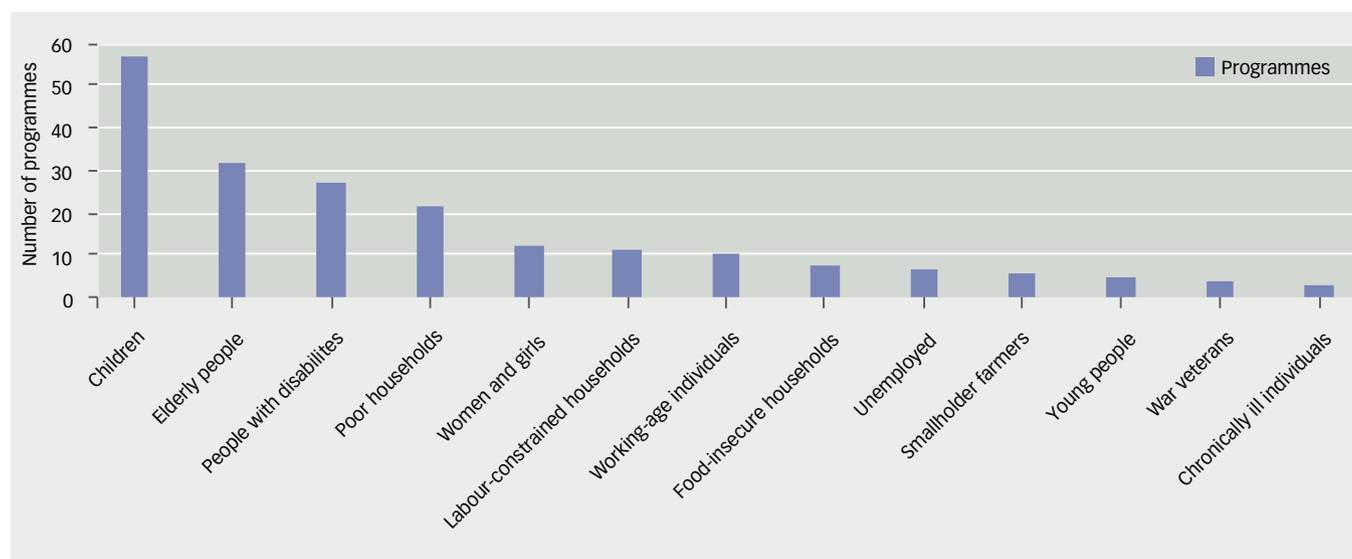
Thanks to this knowledge, it is easy to understand why social assistance has triggered a “quiet revolution” in the developing world.³² Simply put, cash grants work. A programme like the CSG reduces household poverty and inequality, improves child well-being, and can help unleash the productive potential of South Africa’s poor.

What social grants are provided in South Africa?

There are several distinguishing features of the South African social grants system.

- First, the system is more extensive in scope than in many developing countries, with social grants reaching 30% of the population.³³ This is in part due to its origin in the introduction of elements of welfare provision for white and coloured people in the early twentieth century, which were subsequently expanded to the rest of the population.³⁴
- Second, rather than being donor-driven or funded, the system is grounded in a constitutional right to social security, formalised in national legislation and funded entirely from tax revenue (income tax and VAT). This contributes to the level of political commitment and sustainability, and enables government to be held accountable for progressively realising the right to social security.³⁵
- Third, South Africa has adopted a system of unconditional social grants, which means that beneficiaries do not have to carry out certain behaviours to continue receiving the grant (see box 3 on p. 28).ⁱⁱ Many of the social assistance programmes established in Sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade have adopted this unconditional approach, with some exceptions such as Tanzania.

Figure 2: Target groups of non-contributory social protection programmes in Africa



Source: Cirillo C & Tebaldi R (2016) *Social Protection in Africa: Inventory of Non-contributory Programmes*. Brasilia: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth UNDP.

ii A “soft” condition relating to school attendance has been attached to the CSG, but compliance is not enforced.

Box 3: The challenge of conditionalities

Social grants in South Africa are unconditional, which means that beneficiaries do not have to carry out certain actions – such as attending school or immunising the child – to continue receiving the grant.ⁱⁱⁱ Conditions are different to eligibility criteria, which are the requirements for accessing the grant.

This model differs from the well-known conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes which emerged in Latin America, such as *Oportunidades* in Mexico and *Bolsa Família* in Brazil. Conditional cash transfers are provided on the condition that recipients adopt certain “desirable” behaviours, usually related to children’s access to education and health services.

What are the arguments for imposing conditions?

- Proponents argue that making grants conditional on education or health-related behaviours addresses the causes of poverty and so has a greater impact on longer-term poverty reduction.
- Conditions may be used to address disadvantage, such as providing grants on the condition that girls attend school.
- Social grants may be more politically acceptable to policy-makers and middle-class taxpayers if poor people are required to do something in return for receiving grants, rather than receiving what some see as a “welfare hand-out”.

However, South Africa’s Child Support Grant is a clear example of an unconditional social grant that has positive effects on child nutrition, health and educational outcomes – the outcomes that most conditions aim to address – without attaching specific conditions for the continued receipt of grants.

The issue of conditionalities is contentious, as there is little evidence of the extent to which conditions themselves, rather than access to cash, lead to improved outcomes. Several experiments, mainly supported by the World Bank, have compared conditional and unconditional cash transfers to address this question. Studies conducted in Morocco, Burkina Faso, Kenya and Malawi generally found little difference

between the two, or found mixed results within one study.³⁶ For example, a controversial study in Malawi compared the effects of unconditional cash transfers and transfers conditional on school attendance of adolescent girls.³⁷ The study found that both improved school attendance; later analysis suggested the effects were stronger in the CCT arm of the study. But the unconditional cash transfer was associated with substantially lower rates of teen pregnancy and early marriage, showing that UCTs provide benefits beyond the particular desired behaviour.

What are some of the arguments against conditions?

- The South African experience demonstrates that providing income support often results in increased use of public services, without enforcing conditionality.
- Social security is a right, which should not be conditional on carrying out specific behaviours; conditions also limit people’s choice on how the transfer should best be spent.
- Extremely poor households that are most in need of income support are also the households that are most likely to find conditions difficult to meet. Conditions are most likely to discriminate against those who are already disadvantaged in their access to public education or health care facilities, impeding their access to social grants as well.
- Attaching conditions to social grants makes the system more complicated and expensive, both for governments in monitoring compliance, and for beneficiaries. There are also costs involved for institutions such as schools, placing further strain on an already overburdened system.³⁷
- Given children’s inequitable access to schools and clinics and the challenges associated with the quality of both education and health care in South Africa, it makes more sense to focus on improving the quality and supply of these public services, rather than attaching conditions that could further exclude poor children and their caregivers.³⁹ This is particularly the case regarding conditions linked to school attendance, since levels of school enrolment are already high.

Social assistance consists of long-term social grants and emergency relief. There are seven non-contributory, unconditional social grants available in South Africa. There are three for children (the Child Support Grant, Foster Child Grant and Care Dependency Grant), and four for adults (Old Age Grant, Disability Grant, War Veteran’s Grant, Grant-in-aid). There are no grants available for unemployed, able-bodied adults. Most of the social grants are means-tested, which means that applicants must earn below a prescribed income threshold to be eligible. Temporary relief is also available in the form of Social Relief of Distress.

As shown in table 1, the CSG has by far the largest reach in terms of the number of beneficiaries. But despite reaching almost four times as many beneficiaries as the Old Age Grant (OAG), the budget allocation for the CSG is still lower than for the OAG due to the low monetary value of the CSG. The total social grants budget allocation for 2016/17 amounts to 3.2% of GDP.⁴⁰

ⁱⁱⁱ In late 2009 a “soft” condition relating to school attendance for children aged 7 to 18 years was attached to the CSG. This is a “soft” conditionality since non-attendance at school does not lead to the grant being stopped.

Table 1: Comparison of reach, monthly grant value and budget allocation of social grants in South Africa

| Social grants | No. of beneficiaries (Mar 2016) | Monthly grant value (Oct 2016) | Budget allocation (2016/17) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Child Support Grant | 11,972,900 | R360 | R52.0 billion |
| Old Age Grant | 3,194,087 | R1,510 | R58.9 billion |
| Disability Grant | 1,085,541 | R1,510 | R20.4 billion |
| Foster Child Grant | 470,015 | R890 | R5.5 billion |
| Care Dependency | 131,040 | R1,510 | R2.7 billion |
| All social grants ^{iv} | 16,991,634 | - | R140 billion |

Sources: Statistical report no.3 of 2016 (March), Pretoria: South African Social Security Agency. Budget Review 2016, Pretoria: National Treasury.

The Social Assistance Act (2004) provides the national legislative framework for the provision of social grants. The national Department of Social Development is responsible for policy, legislation and funding of social assistance, while the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) is responsible for the administration and delivery of social grants.

Social assistance and support for children

While the FCG and CDG have been available for many years, the CSG is a relatively new grant that was introduced in 1998. It replaced the State Maintenance Grant which was racially biased and limited

Table 2: Comparison of child social grants

| | Child Support Grant | Care Dependency Grant | Foster Child Grant |
|---|---|---|--|
| Purpose | Income support for caregivers of children living in poverty | Income support for caregivers caring for children with a physical or mental disability who require and receive permanent care or support services (requires a medical assessment) | Support for foster parents who have been legally appointed by the court to care for a child (requires a valid foster care court order) |
| Grant value (per child per month, October 2016) ^v | R360 | R1,510 | R890 |
| Means test (income threshold requirements, October 2016) | Single: R43,200 per year | Single (single income): R181,200 per year | Not means-tested (income not taken into account) |
| | Married (joint income): R86,400 per year | Married (joint income): R362,400 per year | |
| Age threshold ^{vi} | Below 18 years | Below 18 years | Below 18 years; may be extended to below 21 if foster child is in education or training |

Sources: South African Social Security Agency (2016) *You and Your Grant 2016/17*. Pretoria: SASSA.

iv The War Veteran's Grant and Grant-in-aid are not shown in the table but are included in the total number of "all social grants". The War Veteran's Grant is provided to adults 60 years or older who are in need and served in the Second World War or the Korean War. Grant-in-aid is intended for adults who are in need of full time assistance from another person due to disability and are already receiving one of the other adult grants.

v The grant amounts (and associated income thresholds for the means test) are increased each year, usually in line with inflation. The budget allocation and individual grant amounts are announced in the budget speech in February each year, and come into effect on 1 April. A further increase took place in October 2016.

vi The Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution defines a child as a person under the age of 18 years.

vii For example, the current annual value of the CSG is R360 x 12 months = R4,320. Ten times this value gives R43,200, the value of the income threshold for a single primary caregiver.

in reach, but which was higher in value and had a child component and a parent component (see essay on p. 39).

The CSG is a means-tested grant for children living in poverty. It is intended as a contribution to the cost of meeting a child's basic needs. The grant is available to children of primary caregivers with a monthly income that falls below a set income threshold (see table 2). The means test remained unchanged for the first 10 years, but since 2008 it has been set at 10 times the annual value of the grant for a single primary caregiver (or double that amount for the combined income if a caregiver is married).^{vii} Each year the grant value – and therefore the income threshold – is increased, usually in line with inflation. As of October 2016, the value of the grant was R360 per month.

The CSG was initially introduced for children under the age of seven years to support the nutritional needs of young children. However, with the active advocacy of civil society, the reach of the grant has expanded substantially. This has been driven largely by increases in the age eligibility criteria and changes to the means test and income threshold. Increased awareness of the grant through both government and civil society efforts, and improvements in implementation also contributed to the expansion. Since 2012, the grant has been available to all children under 18 years whose caregivers meet the means test requirements.

Despite this broad coverage, 18% of eligible children – and particularly infants – are still not accessing the CSG.⁴¹ And although the monetary value of the grant is now increased each year, the value started from a low base of R100 per month and remains low relative to the basic needs of a child.

Two other grants are available for particularly vulnerable groups of children with special needs. Although much smaller in reach than the CSG, both have grown in scale in recent years and are significantly higher in value.

The Care Dependency Grant (CDG) is a means-tested grant available to primary caregivers of children who (as a result of a physical or mental disability) require and receive permanent care or support services. To be eligible for a CDG, the child must be assessed by a medical officer and may not reside in a state institution (see case 2 on p. 65). The value of the grant in October 2016 was R1,510.

The Foster Child Grant (FCG) is available to foster parents who have been appointed by the court to care for a child in need of care and protection. Foster parents must be in possession of a valid court order to be eligible for the FCG. Because the grant is intended to support the child protection system rather than address poverty, it is not means-tested and is available to foster parents irrespective of their income. The value of the grant in October 2016 was R890 per child per month, more than double the value of the CSG. In the context of the HIV epidemic, the foster care system has become a source of support for family members caring for orphaned children.⁴² The effects of this are discussed in the essay on p. 68.

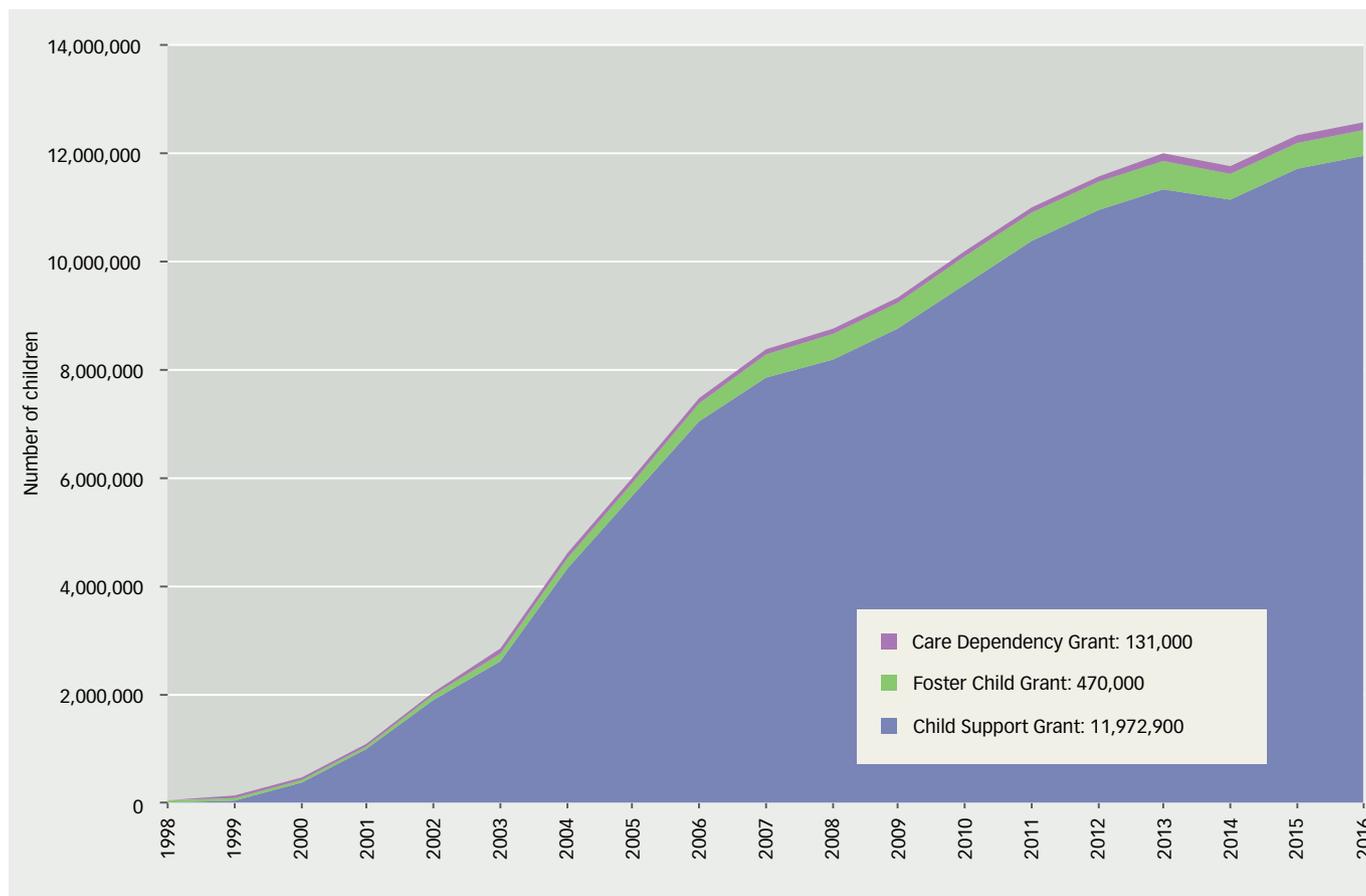
Children may also benefit indirectly from grants received by adults in their household, such as the OAG or Disability Grant, which have a greater monetary value. The OAG in particular has been shown to be spent in ways that have beneficial impacts on other members of the household, including children.⁴³ Children living in households in distress may benefit from Social Relief of Distress, a form of emergency relief sometimes provided as food parcels or vouchers. It may be paid to those awaiting payment of an approved social grant, or in disaster situations such as flooding.

Other support services for children

Social grants are the government's most direct – and largest – poverty alleviation intervention, but income support measures alone will not fully address the multi-dimensional nature of poverty. They are intended to form part of a broader package of complementary measures aimed at increasing access to services and enabling caregivers to provide for children's varied needs.

For example, CSG beneficiaries are exempt from paying school fees. Other measures form part of the "social wage": the school nutrition programme, "no-fee" schools in poor communities, free health care for pregnant women and children under the age of six, and free primary health care at public facilities. At a household

Figure 3: Access to child grants, 1998 – 2015



Sources: National Treasury (1998 – 2007) *National Treasury Intergovernmental Fiscal Review*. Pretoria: National Treasury; South African Social Security Agency (2008 – 2015) SOCPEN monthly reports. Pretoria: SASSA. Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children's Institute, UCT.
 Note: SOCPEN figures are taken from 31 March each year (the financial year-end).

level, this includes access to free basic services (such as water and sanitation) and free and subsidised housing for poor households.

Together these measures aim to enable children living in poverty to access the resources and services they need to grow, and go some way to building a comprehensive social protection system.⁴⁴ But lifting children out of poverty also requires improvements in the availability and quality of schooling, health and social services; policies that address the structural causes of poverty and inequality; and increased work opportunities for children to access when they are older.⁴⁵

Conclusion

A substantial body of evidence has emerged which shows that social grants have contributed to reducing child poverty and improving health, nutrition and education outcomes for children. Gaps and challenges remain in the implementation and coverage of social security, but social grants have proven to be a valuable tool for improving the situation of children in South Africa.

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