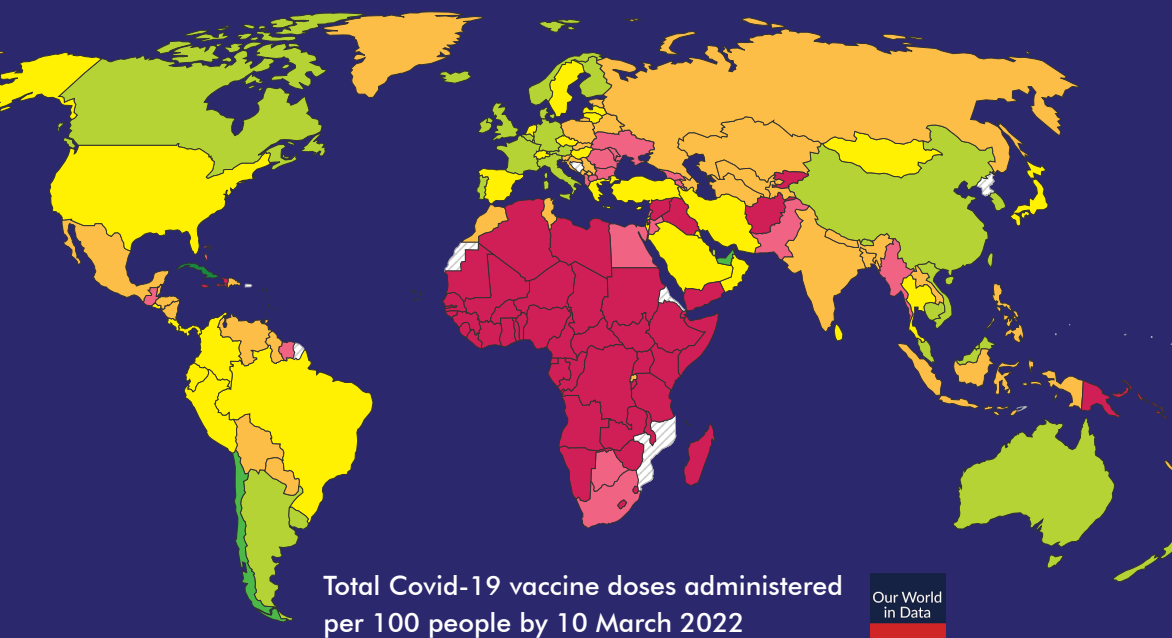


Pandemics and the illumination of “hidden things”

Lessons from South Africa
on the global response to Covid-19

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Safety nets during the height of the Covid-19
pandemic: SA's Social Relief of Distress Grant -
A perspective from the Black Sash



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Safety nets during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic: SA's Social Relief of Distress Grant - A perspective from the Black Sash

Hoodah Abrahams-Fayker

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the economic fragility of SA and created an urgency to address the triple challenges of inequality, unemployment and poverty in the context of an economic and humanitarian disaster.

The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UNCESR) in a 2020 statement acknowledged that the Covid-19 pandemic had “devastating impacts across the world on all spheres of life — health, the economy, social security, education and food production”. Lockdowns to curb transmission of the virus caused jobs losses, endangered livelihoods and heightened exposure to violence. States are under an obligation, within a human rights framework, to prevent or mitigate violations of economic, social and cultural rights and to reduce the suffering of the most marginalised

groups. Social relief and income-support programmes must be provided to ensure food and income security to all those in need.

SA offers several forms of social protection, including grants aimed at supporting citizens, permanent residents and asylum seekers with disabilities, the elderly, children and foster parents and war veterans, for example. As of January 2023, about three in every 10 South Africans relied on one of these grants.

The country responded to the pandemic by introducing further temporary social relief measures to provide a buffer against hunger and poverty. The initial package included R42 billion (US\$2.3 billion) to increase the amount of money provided through existing social grants for an initial period of six months. The Child Support Grant was, however, excluded from these increases, but recipients of the Child Support Grant received an increased amount for a limited period in the form of a Caregivers Grant of R500 (US \$28) for five months.

It also introduced an adult grant in the form of the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRDG) of R350 (US\$19) for an initial period of six months.

The Covid-19 SRDG is targeted at those between the ages of 18 and 59 years who have no income and did not benefit from other social grants or the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). Introduced initially for six months, the grant has been extended on an *ad hoc* basis and, at the time of writing, was slated to continue until March 2024. The grant's introduction is a significant intervention, representing SA's first social grant to address a large portion of its population in need but otherwise not covered by the country's existing social grant system. In implementing the Covid-19 SRDG, the SA government is beginning to address a 2018 recommendation by the United Nations Committee on the International Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to "ensure that those between the ages of 18 and 59 with little and no income have access to social assistance".

As of January 2023, the SRDG reached up to 10 million beneficiaries, or about one in six people living in the country.

However, almost three years after the Covid-19 SRDG's introduction, the eligibility criteria for the grant has become

narrower, despite provisions made to allow caregivers who receive the Child Support Grant to also qualify for the SRDG. For instance, the SA government announced that the income threshold to receive the grant has been increased from being zero rated to R624 (US\$34), limiting who can qualify within the budget allocation despite the need.

Whilst the SRDG is a small step in the right direction, it is insufficient to respond to the SA context of significant high unemployment. The amount of the grant, R350 (US\$19), is well below the food poverty line of R663 (US\$37), meaning those who receive the grant still struggle to pay for their basic needs. Additionally, since its inception, the SRDG has been plagued with challenges *vis-à-vis* administration, technical glitches in processing applications, obstacles to apply for the grant through an exclusive online system, flawed eligibility criterion, a defective verification process and a fundamentally weak recourse and appeal process for those whose applications to receive the grant were denied.

Covid-19 has underscored the critical role of adequate investments in public health, comprehensive social protection programmes, dignified and decent work, and access to food, water, sanitation systems and housing. The pandemic has also intensified the intersecting forms of income and gender within SA, for which measures have to be put in place.

While the relief measures were a small step in the right direction, they were insufficient to meet the humanitarian crisis, both under lockdown conditions and today as many struggle to recover from the aftermath of Covid-19. Many poor families continue to go hungry.

The SRDG is a constitutional imperative that aids economic growth. It is an investment in our collective future given its proven positive benefits. As a human rights organisation, Black Sash believes that income support leads to better nutritional and educational outcomes, improved health, social cohesion, job-seeking behaviour and stimulates local economies. It encourages economic activity and helps to empower women who bear the burden of unpaid caregiving work and gender-based violence.

The Black Sash has therefore demanded and advocated that the SRDG be the first step towards the introduction of permanent

social assistance for those between 18 and 59 years with no or little income with the aim of working towards universal basic income, in anticipation of our government slowly moving towards the progressive realisation of “social security”.

Hoodah Abrahams-Fayker has a legal background, which she has used to focus on advancing human rights. As the national advocacy manager for the veteran SA human rights organisation, the Black Sash, she advocates for the right to comprehensive social security with particular emphasis on social protection and social assistance to reduce poverty, inequality and unemployment. She previously used her expertise to advocate for access to justice and advance women's rights through impact litigation.



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