



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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Government urged to extend Social Relief of Distress Grant

The grant "continues to play a significant role in supporting South Africans living in poverty"



UCT PhD student Vayda Megannon.

Photo: Lerato Maduna

To mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on people living in poverty, government introduced the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant in 2020 – at the onset of the global health emergency – in an effort to support those in need.

Yet, many eligible South Africans continue to face [barriers](#) that prevent them from accessing the grant, which leads to considerable challenges and unfair exclusions. This topic was of concern and interest to Vayda Megannon, a PhD student in the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Department of Sociology. And it's for this reason that she has based her doctoral research around it. Megannon is also the programme manager for the Family Care

of Older Persons in Southern Africa programme – a UCT-led research programme that aims to explore and provide a better understanding of the meaning of family care for older people in southern Africa.

“It was important for me to understand how potential beneficiaries of the SRD Grant were experiencing the introduction thereof and how this unfolded over the years, not just through statistics, but what is actually happening on the ground and what it means for people in their everyday lives,” she said.

Launching the research process

As the world was plunged into chaos by the COVID-19 pandemic, Megannon started her PhD research. At the time, government had just introduced the SRD Grant – the first social grant aimed at working-aged, able-bodied people with very little to no income in South Africa.

Because she understood its importance, Megannon and her colleague, Thobani Ncapai from UCT’s Centre for Social Science Research, embarked on a qualitative research process to understand the grant’s roll-out process; whether it served its intended purpose; reached those in need, and where government fell short.

Back then, she said, there was very little research available that foregrounded and documented the voices and experiences of people who qualified for the grant, and she wanted to change that. She used her research to understand how grant recipients navigated the early days of the pandemic with and without the grant; explored the conditions under which the grant was introduced; and what it meant for recipients and their families.

Valuable support for families in need

Drawing from her findings, Megannon said it’s clear that the grant continued to play a significant role in supporting South Africans living in poverty. Her research revealed that those who were able to access the grant always prioritised buying food and electricity.

“Although the SRD Grant amount of R350 is significantly low, falling below the food poverty line, it has assisted people to navigate very tough times, and not only for potential beneficiaries but for their families and the households they live in,” she said.

But accessing the grant is a challenge. According to research participants, half of whom live in Khayelitsha in Cape Town and the other half in a rural village outside of KwaBhaca in the Eastern Cape, the process is fraught with challenges. The overall application process, which requires a smart phone or another electronic device with a working internet connection, as well as digital literacy skills to complete, is not ideal. Administrative issues, travelling long distances at unaffordable rates to the nearest Post Office for assistance, and the time spent waiting for the application outcome and to receive the first payout are just a few other stumbling blocks.

Streamline and extend the grant

These drawbacks have sadly led to unfair exclusion among those who need the grant most.

“At the onset of my research, the challenges which came to the fore at the various stages of the process excluded people from accessing this grant; many of these challenges are rooted in the legacy of structural inequality in South Africa. And while the grant process has

undergone many administrative and procedural changes since its inception, these have only added to the burden of access," she said.

Based on her findings, which highlight the capacity of the SRD Grant to foster some economic relief, Megannon recommends that government extends the grant, which is expected to come to an end in March 2024. And, she added, other scholars who work in the field of social protection and civil society organisations agree.

"The research shows that the SRD Grant should definitely be extended because it's a vital form of livelihood support for people who have little or no income and are living in poverty in the country," she said. "I hope that my work will influence and inform advocacy on its importance and the need to improve procedures in order to reach every person who qualifies for this grant."

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News

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Ridovhona Mbulaheni

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 2333
Cell: (064) 905 3807
Email: ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za