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Mitigating poverty to attain SDG 1 (No poverty) in South Africa: Experiences of social relief of distress grant beneficiaries

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Abstract

South Africa is recognised across the globe for its developmental social welfare programs and progressive social security benefits. However, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant shortcomings in the government's social welfare response to vulnerable groups. To address this, the government increased monthly cash transfers for existing grants and introduced the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant to alleviate poverty. This study examined the experiences of SRD grant recipients in one South African township to analyse the grant's impact on poverty alleviation. Using a qualitative approach and case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants selected via convenience and snowball sampling. Thematic analysis showed that although the SRD grant is insufficient to fully eliminate poverty, it helps reduce hardship by supporting transport to work and meeting basic needs. The study recommends that policymakers increase the grant amount and consider making the SRD grant a permanent social protection measure. The study contributes to literature on sustainable development goal one through social protection transfers in South Africa and has potential for lessons for other countries. Limitations include a small sample size and focus on a semi-urban setting.

Keywords: *poverty alleviation, social development, sustainable development goal one, social relief of distress, social protection*

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1. Introduction

Poverty remains a major barrier to development globally, with South Africa facing disproportionately high levels due to structural unemployment. In 2022, the national unemployment rate reached 32.1%, far exceeding the global average of 5.1%, and reinforcing poverty as a deeply rooted socio-economic issue (StatsSA, 2022). According to Kuhlengisa et al. (2024), South Africa's poverty alleviation initiatives were set back in the years 2011 to 2015, despite notable progress in poverty reduction since 1994. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these challenges, particularly for informal workers and the unemployed, as lockdowns disrupted livelihoods (Kuhlengisa et al., 2024; Patel et al., 2023). To mitigate the crisis, the South African government introduced the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant commonly referred to as the R350 grant as a temporary income support mechanism (Setloboko, 2022). This intervention was consistent with the country's long-standing reliance on social grants as a poverty alleviation tool (Zreik & Iqbal, 2025; Muleya & Xweso, 2025; Patel et al., 2023; Zembe-Mkabile et al., 2015; Lombard, 2008). However, existing frameworks like the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) in South Africa do not cover and excluded many informal sector workers, leaving them without support (Venter et al., 2024).

In response to the exclusions, and under pressure from civil society groups such as Black Sash (Senona, 2022), the SRD grant was expanded to include informal workers. Despite this, poverty levels have continued to rise (StatsSA, 2022), calling into question the effectiveness of social assistance programmes. Reducing and alleviating poverty is critical to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 1, which targets the eradication of extreme poverty by 2030 (UN, 2016). Poverty in South Africa remains linked to a host of social issues, including crime, poor education, and human rights violations (Patel, 2013; Buck & Deutsch, 2014). While initiatives like the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and social grants have sought to address these issues, structural poverty persists (Zreik & Iqbal, 2025; StatsSA, 2022; Muleya & Xweso, 2025). The SRD grant, though essential, may be insufficient especially given that around 9 million South Africans depend on it as of 2024 (Paton, 2024). Although prior research has explored the administrative efficiency and impact of grants (Van der Berg et al., 2010; Tangwe & Gutura, 2013; Zembe-Mkabile, 2015; Patel et al., 2023), township-specific analyses such as those focusing on Mamelodi Community in South Africa remain underexplored, despite potentially distinct poverty dynamics in such

contexts. Mamelodi is one of the large townships in Gauteng Province, with many residents reliant on social assistance (Chatindiara, 2019), hence the focus on this research setting.

The SRD Grant is a targeted intervention aimed at providing temporary financial relief to the unemployed and informal workers. However, concerns remain about its adequacy in meeting beneficiaries' basic needs particularly as approximately 9 million people, many with dependents, relied on it in 2024 (Paton, 2024). Assessing recipients' lived experiences is thus crucial for evaluating the grant's effectiveness and informing policy improvements. While prior studies have examined social grants' role in poverty reduction, beneficiary outcomes, and administrative efficiency (Van der Berg et al., 2010; Tangwe & Gutura, 2013; Zembe-Mkabile, 2015; Patel et al., 2023), rising poverty rates suggest the need for deeper, context-specific analysis. Studies done on the SRD grant such as (DSD, 2021) was a rapid appraisal and it looked at the challenges in relation to process of getting the grant and partial looked at preliminary challenges. Other studies such as that of Kajiita and Kang'ethe (2024) looked at the paradoxes of the SRD grant from a literature review perspective and did not get the experiences and perspectives directly from the grant recipients therefore leaving a research gap around the experiences of grant recipients. Notably, research on township settings like Mamelodi remains limited, despite their unique poverty dynamics and potential for yielding valuable insights.

The question that this study sought to answer was, "What are the experiences of the SRD grant recipients regarding its impact towards poverty alleviation?". This study investigates the experiences of SRD recipients in Mamelodi to inform the development and refinement of targeted poverty interventions. To answer this question, the study aims to explore and describe the experiences of the beneficiaries of the COVID-19 Social Relief of distress grant on their livelihoods and poverty alleviation in Mamelodi Township in South Africa.

2. Literature Review

COVID-19, short for "Coronavirus Disease 2019," is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and is primarily transmitted through close contact between individuals (National Institute for Communicable Diseases, 2021). At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the SRD grant was introduced to alleviate the socio-economic disruptions caused by the virus which necessitated urgent government intervention to support vulnerable populations but also commit to ending poverty. Goal one of the United Nations Sustainable

Development Goal (SDGs) prioritises ending all forms of poverty across the World including South Africa by 2020 (UN, 2016). However, the pandemic had dire consequences especially in relation to achieving the elimination of extreme poverty goal. Even prior to the pandemic, South Africa continued to face significant challenges in reducing poverty (Kuhlengisa et al., 2024). The poverty rate remains high, with rural areas experiencing even higher levels of poverty compared to national averages. For instance, in the rural villages of Giyani, the poverty rate is 17.7%, significantly higher than the national average of 7.4% (Wernecke et al., 2021).

To mitigate poverty and attain SDG One on Poverty in South Africa, the SRD grant has played a significant role, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Zreik & Iqbal, 2025). In addition to the SRD grant, the South African government responded by expediting payments through the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), targeting individuals and businesses affected by job losses. UIF is a contributory scheme designed to provide short-term financial relief to qualifying workers during periods of unemployment and is aimed at mitigating poverty among formally employed individuals (DSD, 2021). Importantly, eligibility criteria for the SRD grant excluded those already receiving UIF benefits, ensuring that support was directed toward individuals without any form of income support, hence those unemployed and in the informal sector including townships like Mamelodi.

2.1 Social Relief of Distress Measures Across the Globe

The SRD grant in South Africa was introduced in response to the financial hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing significant attention to its accessibility, delivery, and the lived experiences of recipients (Muleya & Xweso, 2025; Kajiita & Kangethe, 2024). While many countries implemented social assistance during the pandemic, the SRD grant is distinct in its design and focus. In contrast, the United States offered emergency rental aid, tax relief, and support for businesses and homeowners (U.S. Treasury, 2023). Elsewhere, relief efforts differed based on local needs. Afghanistan provided food and hygiene supplies to families earning under $2 per day (IMF, 2021), while South Korea allocated KRW 2.4 trillion to support low-income households and childcare (IMF, 2021). These cases illustrate how social relief responses varied globally, shaped by each country's context and welfare infrastructure.

A study conducted across several African countries found that many governments responded to the COVID-19 pandemic primarily by increasing the value of pre-existing social assistance benefits (Osei et al., 2024; Devereux, 2021). This approach allowed for the rapid

disbursement of financial aid, leveraging already established systems to reach beneficiaries more efficiently (Devereux, 2021). Lesotho, for example, increased its existing social grant payments by allocating approximately 0.2% of its GDP to these enhancements (IMF, 2021). However, a significant limitation of this strategy was its exclusion of newly vulnerable groups particularly those who had lost their jobs during the pandemic and individuals working in the informal sector, such as street vendors (Devereux, 2021).

In recognition of this gap, Lesotho supplemented its response by investing an additional 0.3% of its GDP to support new beneficiaries through food stamps, cash transfers, and other short-term financial relief measures for a period of three months (IMF, 2021). In contrast, Zimbabwe provided cash transfers in 2020 to households that were labour-constrained and food insecure but planned support measures for 2021 were not fully implemented. In Ghana, Osei et al. (2024) found that, as with other social grant programs, beneficiaries experienced administrative challenges, including irregular payments, difficulties with electronic transactions, and instances where gift-giving to administrators was required. These issues diluted the potential positive impacts of the grant on recipients' well-being. Despite these efforts across the continent, South Africa's introduction of the SRD grant stands out (Megannon, 2022). It is regarded as the fastest large-scale rollout of a social cash transfer programme in Africa to date, marking a significant milestone in the region's social protection landscape.

2.2 Social Relief of Distress in Response to COVID-19 in South Africa

South Africa's SRD grant has drawn extensive research since its introduction in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Devereaux, 2021; Megannon, 2022; Setloboko, 2022; Venter et al., 2024). The constitutional foundation for social protection in South Africa is established in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996), which mandates the creation of a developmental social security system, further operationalized through the Social Assistance Act 13 of 2004 that governs the provision of assistance to those in need. The Social assistance act provided a legal framework for social assistance and ensured that individuals who cannot support themselves due to age, disability, or socio-economic hardship receive financial assistance. To address pandemic-related hardship, the Act was amended to introduce the SRD grant as temporary relief for individuals facing extreme material deprivation. Though

initially intended to be a short-term measure, the grant remains in place, reflecting its continued role in combating poverty and unemployment (Muleya & Xweso, 2025; Venter et al., 2024).

Different research has explored the SRD grant from various angles, showing both its benefits and limitations. Key themes include its impact on recipients and barriers to access (Megannon, 2022; Setloboko, 2022). Megannon (2022) found that applicants from poor backgrounds often faced technological challenges, lacked identity documents, or had to travel long distances issues worsened by low education levels and geographic location. The Department of Social Development (DSD, 2021) reported that most applicants were Black and Coloured individuals from Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. While the grant supported many beneficiaries in meeting basic food needs, the exclusion of Child Support Grant recipients, despite their loss of primary income, revealed notable deficiencies in caregiver coverage (DSD, 2021).

Existing research on the SRD grant highlights key gaps. Many studies conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown relied on online methods, excluding those without internet access or digital devices often the most marginalised for example (Kajiita & Kangethe, 2024; DSD, 2021). As such, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of all beneficiaries. Some research has focused on grant accessibility, reasons for non-application, and overall impact, with limited attention to the lived experiences of recipients, despite the grant's continued implementation (Venter et al., 2024; Devereaux, 2021). Few studies have examined specific settings like Mamelodi, a densely populated township that remains socioeconomically vulnerable. Mamelodi is one of the large townships in Gauteng Province, with many residents reliant on social assistance (Chatindiara, 2019; StatsSA, 2022). This makes it a relevant context to examine how SRD grants are experienced and whether they adequately alleviate distress under local conditions. Given the grant's ongoing relevance, exploring the experiences of beneficiaries in such contexts is essential to evaluating its effectiveness and shaping future policy. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the lived realities of SRD recipients in Mamelodi.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The social development approach offers a holistic framework for understanding how interventions like the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant can advance Sustainable Development Goal 1: No Poverty, particularly among South African youth. Unlike narrow

income-based models, it emphasizes integrated, people-centred development that addresses structural inequalities and promotes long-term well-being (Tirivayi et al., 2016; Patel & Midgley, 2023). The approach assumes that social protection is most effective when embedded in broader development strategies, empowering individuals and communities while targeting systemic disparities. However, its broad focus can complicate implementation, and temporary measures like the SRD grant may have limited impact without complementary strategies such as skills training and employment support. In South Africa, this framework underscores the potential for the SRD grant to inform more permanent, equity-driven interventions that reduce youth poverty and enhance social inclusion.

It also highlights the importance of participatory engagement, making beneficiary feedback crucial for designing effective and sustainable policies. Examining the lived experiences of youth SRD recipients shows how their insights can inform more responsive and empowering interventions that uphold dignity and autonomy (Patel & Midgley, 2023). Given the persistence of youth unemployment and poverty, integrating social assistance within a wider developmental agenda, linking grants with lifelong learning, job creation, and social investment, offers a pathway toward resilience, self-reliance, and social justice. Such an integrated model, combining social protection, empowerment, and systemic transformation, is essential for advancing SDG 1.

However, the approach has limitations when applied to the lived experiences of beneficiaries. Its broad and abstract nature can make it difficult to capture day-to-day realities, such as food insecurity, administrative barriers, and digital exclusion. Implementing integrated, people-centred strategies requires coordination and resources that may be limited in township contexts. Temporary relief programs like the SRD grant may not achieve systemic change without complementary measures, including skills development, employment support, and social investment (Venter et al., 2024). Finally, socio-economic and infrastructural differences across communities can limit the generalizability of findings from one location, such as Mamelodi, to other settings.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which is particularly well-suited to exploring complex human experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative research is characterised by the use of open-ended questions and responses, allowing for a deeper

understanding of the meanings individuals attach to particular social phenomena. As the aim was to examine the experiences of SRD grant beneficiaries, open-ended questions were used to elicit detailed, participant-driven responses.

3.1 Research Design

A research design serves as a blueprint guiding how data is collected and analysed to ensure reliability, rigour, and consistency (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study employed an exploratory and descriptive case study design to gather data from recipients of the SRD grant. This approach was well-suited to capturing the context-specific, lived experiences of beneficiaries, offering the flexibility needed to explore their realities in depth and adapt data collection methods as necessary.

3.2 Population, Sample and Sampling Procedures

A study population encompasses individuals sharing characteristics relevant to a research inquiry (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). This study focused on SRD grant recipients residing in Mamelodi who were available and willing to participate, and whom, were purposively selected. Eight participants were selected using both convenience and snowball sampling and based on accessibility and consent. To address the potential bias of homogeneity often associated with convenience and snowball sampling, the study made it a point that recruitment was conducted through multiple entry points, including different community networks, to avoid overreliance on a single group. Despite this measure, the researchers acknowledge that convenience and snowball sampling cannot fully eliminate sampling bias, and findings should therefore be interpreted with caution and situated within the specific contexts of the participants' experiences. Crucial though is that the sample size was adequate for the study's time and location constraints, and sufficient to achieve data saturation with minimal redundancy (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Participants met eligibility criteria set by the Department of Social Development (DSD, 2021): aged 18–65, any race or gender, fluent in local languages, residing in Mamelodi, and holding South African citizenship, permanent residency, or refugee status, with a household income below R6000 per month. Those not meeting the study criteria were excluded.

Table 1 indicates a summary of the demographic information of the eight participants who were interviewed. The demographic information includes their ages, racial groups,

gender, employment status and their marital status. The participants are made up men who are youth and majority of whom are black and unemployed. This may be an indication that more males are unemployed compared to females which would support the stats by the DSD (2021) which showed that of the approved beneficiaries of the grant majority were men at a high 67.6%. This is also consistent with unemployment figures as reported by the statistics body (StatsSA, 2024; StatsSA, 2022).

Table 1

Demographics of the participants

Demographic Factor	Variable	Frequency
Age	18-29	8
Race	Black	7
	Colored	1
Gender	Male	8
Employment status	Unemployed	5
	Employed	1
	Self-employed	2
Marital status	Single	8

3.3 Data Collection Method and Instrument

In this study, data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using an interview guide, which was appropriate for exploring participants' experiences, perspectives, and motivations (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The research question answered was "*What are the experiences of the SRD grant recipients regarding its impact towards poverty alleviation*?" Open-ended questions facilitated in-depth responses, and all interviews were audio-recorded with prior written consent to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in the participant's preferred language, including English and Sepedi, languages spoken by both researchers. Interviews were conducted either at participants' homes and, for those who preferred an alternative setting, at the Jesus Tabernacle of Prayer in Mamelodi East. The choice of semi-structured interviews was intentional, as this approach allows the interviews to remain focused while providing the flexibility for the researcher to explore relevant topics that may emerge during the conversation.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). This method was selected for its flexibility and suitability in identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. Initially, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by repeatedly reviewing audio recordings and field notes. Next, initial codes were generated by systematically identifying significant phrases and concepts within the transcripts. These codes were then organised into potential themes, reflecting broader patterns across the dataset. The researchers reviewed and refined these themes to ensure internal consistency and clear differentiation between themes. Subsequently, each theme was clearly defined and named to accurately represent the underlying meanings conveyed by participants. Finally, the findings were integrated into a coherent narrative, substantiated with direct quotations to ensure the analysis remained firmly anchored in participants' lived experiences. This rigorous analytical process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

3.5 Research Ethics

This study followed ethical guidelines from University of Witwatersrand Non-Medical Ethics Committee with protocol number SW24/05/06. Participation in the study was voluntary and all participants gave written informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, risks, and benefits. Confidentiality was ensured through pseudonyms and restricted data access. Interviews were conducted in safe, familiar settings, posed no emotional risk, and required no counselling referrals.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Credibility was ensured by continuing data collection until saturation was reached with eight participants, enabling meaningful conclusions (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Saturation sample is attained at a point when no new information is being collected and this guideline was followed until the eighth participant. Confirmability was upheld through systematic verification, continuous data review, and detailed audit trails. Dependability was supported by consistent data collection and peer debriefing, with regular discussions to review coding and interpretations. Coding and pattern identification enhanced objectivity and reliability. While

findings offer valuable insights, transferability is limited due to the study's small, localised sample in Mamelodi.

4. Findings and Discussion

From the interviews, the study identified three major themes which included: experiences of SRD grant beneficiaries before receiving the grant; experiences of SRD grant beneficiaries on their livelihoods; and recommendations from SRD Grant Recipients.

Theme 1: Experiences of SRD grant beneficiaries before receiving the grant

Experiences regarding the SRD grant application process. The application process has a direct effect on the receipt of the SRD grant, which ultimately impacts the livelihood of the people. The effectiveness and challenges of the application process were therefore examined to determine the experiences of those who successfully completed it.

> *"It was slow and I couldn't access the platform. And took about 3 months. We kept on re-applying"* [Mahlangu]
>
> *"Well the first month it did not come out so I had, I think it came out the second month so like for the last month and the other month too. We kept on reapplying"* [Khongoana]
>
> *"It was not bad it was something that you can easily register and apply to something, first of all you had to check if you have ID, your number and your phone. If you have those things the process will be fast."* [Moswang]

When asked about the application process, the majority of participants reported that it was straightforward, efficient, and user-friendly. This perception was further evidenced by their reluctance to suggest any improvements to the process. Out of the eight participants, only one expressed a contrasting view, describing the process as challenging and less accessible. These findings align with previous research indicating that approximately 88% of applicants experienced a successful and positive application process (DSD, 2021; Megannon, 2022).

Theme 2: Experiences SRD grant beneficiaries on their livelihoods

Increase in source of income and making ends meet. The study showed that the grant that the participants receive is not enough to cover their basic needs, thus, another source of income would be helpful for them to make ends meet. Almost all the participants indicated that

an extra source of income would be great in conjunction with the R370 SRD grant. The issue of an increase in sources of income focused on the following excerpts:

The grant as a financial booster. Participants commonly described the SRD grant as a supplementary form of support useful but insufficient as a standalone means of survival. One participant referred to the grant as helpful during unexpected financial shortfalls:

> *"It helped me a lot because sometimes I just receive money unexpectedly when you have financial problems and it can help you there and there."* [Khoza]

In this context, the grant functioned as a financial reinforcement which can be viewed as a form of financial assistance to aid business opportunity. The data suggest that while the SRD grant provided short-term relief and momentary financial cushioning, it did not adequately address the full spectrum of participants' basic needs such as food, transport, and housing. Participants who lacked regular employment or independent income-generating activities often depended on additional support from family members to make ends meet. For example, if the SRD grant was allocated to purchase toiletries, other essential needs such as food or rent were often covered through informal household or familial support networks. This aligns with broader literature highlighting the limited purchasing power of the SRD grant and its inability to serve as a primary income source (DSD, 2021; Megannon, 2022). The findings therefore support the view that the grant functions more as a financial supplement than as a reliable income stream, and that broader structural interventions may be needed to ensure sustainable livelihoods for grant recipients.

Income creation for self. The study indicated that in order to have a better livelihood, the best way would be to create another source of income. This is possible through starting a small business using the grant and/or some other capital.

> *"What can I say? Let me put it this way, mostly we didn't have a source of income. We didn't have that idea of how we going to make that money and also to take care of yourself. So R350 covered that space, it closed that gap of having to think that I have to hustle. That money can be used start a business so that you can have your own source of income."* [Moswang]
>
> *"Eish, I never thought of something like that because the money usually has its work when it comes."* [Nthodi]
>
> *"My forex account I was able to trade and stuff so now I make my own money with the money I got from the SRD."* [Khongoana]

Some participants reported that they had used the SRD grant to start small-scale businesses, with varying levels of success. Of the three participants who attempted this, only two found the income generated to be helpful in supplementing their livelihoods. One participant, however, reported that his business venture was unsuccessful due to limited support and the nature of the business itself. He expressed that the capital provided by the grant was insufficient to initiate a business with strong prospects for sustainability or growth.

For others, like Mr. Nthodi, the grant amount was too small to consider investing in a business at all, as the funds were immediately consumed by pressing basic needs upon receipt. This is consistent with data from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2024), which places the monthly food poverty line at nearly R800 more than double the R370 provided by the SRD grant. These findings illustrate that while entrepreneurship may offer a pathway out of poverty, the financial limitations of the grant often constrain recipients' ability to pursue such opportunities. Enhancing access to additional financial support or training could enable beneficiaries to engage in more viable income-generating activities, thereby improving their overall quality of life.

The study also explored how participants utilised the SRD grant to meet their basic needs, revealing that the amount was generally insufficient. As a result, recipients adopted strategic budgeting practices to stretch the limited funds across various necessities. One participant explained:

> *"Okay, if ever I need something—as you know, you need toiletries every month—no, not every month, it's a long-term thing. So if I bought enough toiletries to last me maybe two months, then if I need some sneakers or something, I take the next month's R350, then save it. Then when the other one comes, I combine it, then buy something."* [Menyoco]
>
> Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating:
>
> *"No, it is not enough. Because like the grant money for me is only enough for cosmetics."* [Nthodi]

These responses illustrate the financial strain experienced by grant recipients and highlight the necessity for careful financial planning. Participants were often forced to prioritise and delay certain purchases or combine multiple months' grants to afford basic items. Given that South Africa's minimum wage was approximately R4,800 in 2024, a figure intended to cover essential needs such as food, clothing, and education (Molotsane, 2024), the

SRD grant of which has now increased to R370 falls significantly short of what is required for financial sustainability. While the SRD is not designed to function as a wage, this comparison underscores the gap between the grant's value and the real cost of living. Consequently, the findings reinforce the need for additional income streams to enable beneficiaries to meet their basic needs more reliably. Civil social organisations such as Black Sash (Senona, 2020) have thus called for the grant to be made permanent in order to counteract this identified limitation.

Job creation. When exploring ways that the government could best empower the people so that they do not always have to rely on the government in the form of grants, the issue of job creation by the state quite a number of times.

> *"Yes, I think there would be other ways that I can be empowered by the government why I say this is because we need more jobs, we can't be able to rely on the grant always so the government will empower us as youth by creating more jobs."* [Menyoco]

The study revealed that most participants expressed a strong desire for employment opportunities rather than continued reliance on social grants. Contrary to the common assumption that young people prefer grants over work, participants particularly youth indicated a clear preference for earning an income through employment. They emphasised the value of working for one's earnings, highlighting benefits such as financial stability, a stronger sense of self-worth, and greater independence from state support. As one participant explained, receiving a salary not only enables better planning and autonomy but also provides a more sustainable livelihood than the limited support offered by the SRD grant. These findings align with those of the Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ, 2022), which found that many individuals are motivated to seek employment rather than rely solely on government assistance. The IEJ study further debunked the notion that social grants discourage job-seeking behaviour or negatively impact labour market participation, affirming that grants do not undermine the supply of labour in the economy. Other studies, such as those of Patel et al. (2023), confirm that social assistance grants play a positive multiplier effect in assistance youth look for job opportunities.

Impact of the SRD grant. The impact of the SRD grant on the lives of its recipients was a focal point of this study, aimed at evaluating whether the grant achieves the objectives for which it was introduced. Participant narratives revealed that although the monetary value

of the grant is limited, it contributes meaningfully to recipients' ability to meet basic needs. The statements by the participants highlight these lived experiences:

> *"Yes, I see the difference because the grant is even helping at home, and we can buy something, especially food and clothes."* [Matlakola]
>
> *"As I said, it helps a little. Say you are short of bath soap with the R370, you can buy two bars of soap that last about two months. You can also buy toothpaste, a toothbrush, and maybe a few pairs of pants or socks. It helps sometimes to patch up where other money from parents or uncles runs out. It bridges the gap."* [Lentswane]

These responses demonstrate that while the SRD grant may not be sufficient to sustain a household independently, it serves as a vital buffer against extreme poverty by helping recipients cover essential goods such as food, hygiene products, and clothing. Other studies confirm this (Patel et al., 2023; DSD, 2021; Lombard, 2008). In this sense, the grant functions as a short-term safety net, mitigating immediate material deprivation and offering some level of dignity to those facing economic vulnerability. For Kajiita and Kangethe (2024), the SRD grants supported childcare, improved digital skills, addressed previously underserved populations, and offered financial assistance for job searching.

When examined through the lens of the social development approach (Patel, 2015), the SRD grant can be understood as a mechanism that integrates social welfare with economic empowerment. The social development approach, particularly within the Global South, emphasises a balance between meeting basic needs and promoting economic inclusion (Midgley, 1995). By enhancing recipients' capacity to participate in local markets, even minimally, the grant supports both individual welfare and local economic activity.

This dual impact is further substantiated by findings from Mthembu et al. (2023), who observed that local sellers and small-scale suppliers experienced increased sales due to the purchasing power enabled by the SRD grant. Vendors also reported being able to reinvest in their businesses by acquiring stock using the income generated through these transactions. In this way, the grant contributes not only to household-level consumption but also to community-level economic stimulation, reflecting a key tenet of the social development approach: the interdependence between social protection and economic development. Overall, while the SRD grant is limited in its scope and amount, its role in addressing basic needs and stimulating

grassroots economic activity positions it as a critical, though modest, component of South Africa's broader social development agenda.

Theme 3: Recommendations from SRD Grant Recipients

Support for permanency of the grant. This study sought to understand participants' perspectives on whether the SRD grant should be converted into a permanent measure to address poverty and economic vulnerability among South Africans. Participants offered varied, yet insightful, views on the potential permanency of the grant, as reflected in their statements:

> *"No, I wouldn't like it to be a permanent grant. I would like to make myself a stable income instead of relying on R350, because it doesn't meet all my needs."* [Menyoco]
>
> *"Yes, I would like it to be permanent. Some people didn't go to school, so I think the social grant will help us a lot to open businesses, to type CVs, to go further in life."* [Moswang]
>
> *"I wish it could be permanent."* [Mahlangu]

The findings revealed that some participants expressed support for the grant becoming a permanent feature of the country's social protection framework. Their support was largely driven by the perceived stability and opportunities that a regular and reliable income could provide. Some participants linked the grant to the potential for small-scale entrepreneurship, access to basic services, and greater autonomy in pursuing life goals. However, one participant expressed a contrasting view, emphasising the importance of securing stable, long-term employment rather than depending on a modest monthly transfer that does not fully meet basic needs. This view is consistent with broader discussions in the literature regarding the institutionalisation of social protection measures. Mathebula et al. (2022) emphasise the need for the continuation and enhancement of the SRD grant, particularly in the context of persistent structural unemployment and economic inequality in South Africa. Further, Coleman (2022) argues that beyond the continuation of the grant, a fundamental restructuring is needed one that includes a revision of its name, eligibility criteria, and monetary value. A proposed transition is the introduction of a Universal Basic Income Guarantee (UBIG) (Senona, 2020), which would offer a more inclusive and equitable form of social assistance.

The study highlights strong participant support for the SRD grant to become a permanent intervention, not merely as a temporary relief measure but as a critical component

of a broader social development strategy aimed at promoting economic inclusion and human dignity. This aligns with a rights-based approach to social development, which advocates for comprehensive social protection systems as a pathway to social justice and sustainable development.

Skills development as a pathway to economic empowerment. Skills development emerged as a critical recommendation among some participants, particularly as a strategy to reduce long-term dependence on social grants and to empower unemployed youth. The following excerpt illustrates this viewpoint:

> *"Like I have said, they must create job opportunities in local areas. If you don't have qualifications, they must find a way to make jobs for people who don't have qualifications."* [Moswang]

The recommendation highlights the perceived need for inclusive employment strategies that account for varying levels of formal education and technical training. Participants pointed to the lack of accessible employment opportunities, especially for those without formal qualifications, as a significant barrier to achieving financial independence. One participant emphasised the importance of designing work opportunities that cater to individuals across the skills spectrum from unskilled to skilled labour underscoring the role of equitable job creation in fostering social and economic inclusion.

Although the theme of skills development was not raised consistently across all interviews, its mention is nonetheless significant. It suggests that some recipients view long-term solutions to poverty as lying beyond income support, emphasising instead the structural investments needed in education and vocational training (Venter et al., 2024). This aligns with broader policy discourses in South Africa and beyond. According to Venter et al. (2024), skills development has a demonstrable impact on reducing unemployment, especially in economies grappling with high youth unemployment rates. The works of Zreik and Iqbal (2025) and Patel et al. (2023) support this.

In the context of social development, investments in skills training can serve a dual function: equipping individuals to participate meaningfully in the labour market, and reducing future dependency on state welfare programs especially for youth who were the target population for this research (Patel, 2015). As such, skills development complements the

provision of social assistance by addressing its root cause, structural unemployment, rather than solely alleviating its symptoms.

Skills development emerged as an important theme, with participants framing it as a sustainable pathway to self-reliance. From a social development perspective, it is a strategic area through which the state can enhance the capabilities of its citizens, promote inclusive economic participation, and reduce the long-term fiscal burden of social grants.

Calls for increment of the grant amount. Another recurring recommendation from participants concerned the need to increase the value of the SRD grant. Several participants argued that the current amount of R370 per month is insufficient to meet even the most basic needs and suggested that increasing the grant would enhance its impact on their well-being and financial security. This sentiment is reflected in the following excerpts:

> "*Or maybe they should just increase the grant because it does not meet our basic needs."* [Nthodi]
>
> *"For a person to be able to sustain themselves, maybe about two thousand will be okay."* [Lentswane]

While views on the appropriate amount varied, suggested increases ranged from R500 to R2000 per month. These proposed figures reflect participants' perceptions of what would constitute a livable amount, an amount capable of covering essential items such as food, hygiene products, clothing, and occasional transport or job-seeking costs. The participants' recommendations are supported by statistical evidence. For instance, as of March 2024, South Africa's updated food poverty line stood at R760 per person per month, while the lower- and upper-bound poverty lines were R624 and R1335 respectively (StatsSA, 2024; Coleman, 2022). These figures highlight a significant shortfall between the existing SRD grant and the minimum income required for survival, underscoring the argument that the grant, in its current form, does not provide adequate support. This is against the reality of the country's negative economic growth over the years which means increasing the grant is not conducive.

From a social development perspective, increasing the value of the SRD grant would not only address immediate material deprivation but could also contribute to long-term social inclusion and human development (Zreik & Iqbal, 2025). Higher grant amounts would allow recipients greater flexibility in making productive choices, such as investing in job-seeking activities, education, or small informal income-generating ventures (Venter et al., 2024). This

aligns with the human capabilities approach, which views poverty not just as a lack of income but as a deprivation of basic capabilities and choices (Sen, 1999). Nevertheless, given the country's prolonged period of negative economic growth, expanding the grant is not presently feasible.

5. Conclusion

This study underscores the complex role of the SRD grant in addressing poverty by providing essential material support alongside limited economic agency within a social development framework that balances social protection and economic inclusion (Midgley, 1995; Patel, 2015). The application process generally facilitated access, although delays and digital barriers highlighted the ongoing need for more inclusive service delivery tailored to vulnerable populations. While the SRD grant offers critical financial relief, it remains insufficient as a sole income source, functioning more as a temporary "financial booster" than a sustainable poverty alleviation tool (DSD, 2021; Patel et al., 2023). Nonetheless, some recipients leveraged the grant to initiate small businesses or invest in skills development, illustrating social development's emphasis on enhancing individual capabilities. Coping strategies such as saving for larger purchases further expose the grant's inadequacy relative to living costs and poverty thresholds (StatsSA, 2024; Molotsane, 2024).

Job creation emerged as a priority alternative to long-term grant dependence, with participants expressing a clear preference for employment over passive aid, valuing income for dignity, independence, and active economic participation. These findings align with the Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ, 2022) and reinforce the social development perspective that situates employment as central to social inclusion. The grant, though modest, plays a dual role as a safety net preventing destitution and as a stimulus enabling limited economic engagement (Mthembu et al., 2023).

Key recommendations from participants include making the SRD grant permanent, expanding access to skills development, and increasing the grant value. The call for permanency reflects its role as consistent support and a platform for entrepreneurship or job-seeking efforts. Emphasis on skills development aligns with integrated welfare and development approaches that promote economic self-reliance alongside social protection (Midgley, 1995; Patel, 2015). The most persistent demand was for an increased grant amount between R500 and R2000 consistent with national poverty lines and informed by Sen's (1999)

human capabilities approach, which advocates for enabling individuals to expand their life choices beyond mere subsistence. These findings contribute to the discourse on social protection in Southern Africa by highlighting the need for multi-dimensional, inclusive strategies that move beyond short-term relief towards sustainable development and poverty eradication.

The small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings beyond the Mamelodi context. However, this limitation was mitigated through the purposive selection of participants representative of the broader Mamelodi population and adherence to the principle of data saturation, as recommended by Sebele-Mpofu (2022). Future research could extend to a larger sample or include comparative analyses across provinces. Moreover, subsequent studies may focus on incorporating female participants, as the current study included only male participants. While acknowledging the limitations regarding unemployed youth, the findings and conclusions presented below provide a compelling case that, although the grant is insufficient to eradicate poverty, it contributes to poverty mitigation by supporting transportation for employment and the purchase of basic necessities, among other benefits.

Despite the study's contributions, its limitations include the small sample size and the focus on a semi-urban setting. Nonetheless, the experiences of the beneficiaries add valuable insights to the scholarship on Sustainable Development Goal 1 through social protection transfers in South Africa and offer potential lessons for other countries.

6. Recommendations and Way Forward: Leveraging Social Assistance to Achieve SDG 1

The SRD grant provides essential short-term support to vulnerable South Africans but remains insufficient to address the deeper structural issues of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. To advance progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 1 (No Poverty), the government should increase the grant to align with national poverty thresholds, ensuring adequate coverage of basic needs with dignity. Making the grant permanent, potentially through a Universal Basic Income initiative, could provide greater stability for recipients and improve their economic conditions. In addition to cash transfers, integrating social assistance with skills development and inclusive job creation initiatives can reduce long-term dependency

by promoting sustainable livelihoods. Simplifying application and disbursement procedures is also crucial to ensure efficient access for marginalised groups.

Effectively tackling poverty requires a multisectoral approach that connects social grants with healthcare, education, housing, and infrastructure development to strengthen people's capabilities and overall well-being. Social grants further contribute to local economic growth by supporting small enterprises and informal trade, fostering inclusive economic participation. Within this framework, social workers play a vital role as advocates, service facilitators, and designers of empowerment programmes that enhance resilience, social cohesion, and self-reliance. They also provide psychosocial support to address the emotional impacts of poverty. Embedding the SRD grant within a comprehensive social development strategy, supported by robust social work interventions, can balance immediate relief with long-term empowerment. Achieving this vision requires strong political will, adequate resource allocation, and coordinated action across government and civil society to build an equitable society where no one is left behind in poverty eradication and sustainable development.

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AI Declaration

The authors declare the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the authors used ChatGPT AI for language editing. All content was written and proofread by the authors.

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