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UCT's contribution to expansion of South Africa's social assistance programme during COVID-19

A University of Cape Town (UCT) research into the socio-economic conditions of poor and vulnerable South Africans during the COVID-19 pandemic has been instrumental in convincing the government to expand the current social protection system.

The research took place long before President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the expansion of the social protection system in response to the pandemic and associated lockdown. Researchers associated with UCT's Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) had been asked by a team of policy advisors commissioned by the South African Presidency to investigate how different social assistance expansion measures would reach poor and vulnerable household members.

Catherine Hall, senior researcher at UCT's Children's Institute (CI), said: "The research showed that increasing the child support grant (CSG) per child was by far the most effective method to quickly distribute money to vulnerable households, including those that relied on informal sector income, though an additional special COVID-19 grant was an essential complementary measure to reach vulnerable households without CSG recipients. Interestingly, the research found that the old age grant – the other major social grant – would not be a comparably effective emergency relief measure."

These research findings were used by the broader policy team to develop proposals for the Presidency and Cabinet. However, there were concerns that the evidence on its own would not be enough to persuade the Presidency and the key departments, Social Development (DSD) and National Treasury.

Hall said the CI played a central role in policy advocacy, working in consultation with the policy advisory team and with a broad cross-section of civil society organisations to urge government to implement an increase in the CSG of R500 per month for six months. They developed a plain-language [brief](#) drawing on available evidence including the SALDRU research, and wrote an open [letter](#) to the President which was endorsed by UNICEF, the South African Medical Research Council, the Centre for Child Law at University of Pretoria, the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security and PLAAS at the University of the Western Cape, the Black Sash, Oxfam South Africa, the Institute for Economic Justice, Section27, Equal Education and the EE Law Centre, amongst the close to 50 signatories.

“Although the proposed CSG increase seemed an obvious first step and there was support for it from within the Presidency, National Treasury and some parts of DSD, the advocacy team received requests from those working behind the scenes to sustain the advocacy work and “exert maximum effort” as there was strong push-back from some senior government officials. The next three weeks were a rollercoaster of engagement, direct and indirect advocacy, and extensive media work by an ever-growing advocacy team,” said Hall.

SALDRU and the CI collaborated in compiling an urgent [submission](#) to the ministers of Finance, Social Development and Women, Youth and People with Disabilities. The submission, delivered on Freedom Day, made an evidence-based case for a per-child rather than per-caregiver increase, and was again endorsed by numerous influential organisations and individuals.

Unfortunately, government has now affirmed that the CSG increase will be implemented as a per caregiver top-up, and concerns remain about how the COVID-19 SRD will be targeted.

“Although the advocacy campaign did not fully achieve its objectives, the policy and advocacy processes were indicative of a constructive and beneficial relationship between these two UCT groupings, other academic institutions, broader civil society networks and the state,” said Hall.

“And although the disaster relief package is not as pro-poor as what was announced in the President’s initial statement, the grants increase as it stands remains a historic expansion of South Africa’s social assistance programme,” she concluded.

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