

**The perceived Impact of Social Grants on Livelihood
Strategies and Household Food Security among Women
in Benfarm Village, Limpopo, South Africa**

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Phomelelo Makondo

*Centre for Social Development in Africa
University of Johannesburg
E-mail: Phomelelo.makondo@gmail.com
Cell: +27 72-050-2323*



Eleanor Ross

*(Corresponding author)
Centre for Social Development in Africa
University of Johannesburg
E-mail: eross@uj.ac.za
Cell: +27 79 396 4293
Orcid: 0000-0003-4325-1283*

Abstract

Loss of livelihoods during COVID-19 propelled the South African Government to introduce the temporary Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant. The study compared views on the impact of social grants on livelihood strategies and household food security of 10 rural women in Benfarm Village, Limpopo who had received social grants and 10 that had received the additional SRD grant. Guided by the Sustainable Livelihoods approach, the study employed a qualitative, comparative case study design and data were collected via interviews. Participants in the group that had not received the SRD grant

had mixed views on whether grants enabled the creation of livelihoods. The group that had received the SRD grant felt that this additional grant empowered households that are not receiving social grants; however, it had limited impact on livelihood strategies. Both groups felt that social grants do make a difference in low-income households. It is recommended that the SRD grant be made permanent.

Keywords: *Rural women, Social grants, Social Relief of Distress Grant, Sustainable Livelihoods, Food security*

Introduction

The World Bank (2022) reports that the number of people living in extreme poverty (less than \$2.15 per person per day) increased from 648 million globally in 2019 to 711 million in 2021 (The World Bank, 2022). The sharp increase in global poverty levels from 2020 can be largely attributed to the COVID-19 lockdowns with the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2021) reporting that approximately 255 million jobs were lost following the implementation of stringent lockdowns in over 100 countries globally. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and Action Against Hunger (AAH), the loss of jobs and livelihoods leading to the loss of income, in turn led to increased levels of food insecurity with approximately 811 million people (9.9% of the global population) facing hunger in 2021 (IFPRI, 2020; AAH, 2022). Furthermore, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war with major disruptions in global supply of goods and drastic increase in fuel and food prices, threatens increased poverty levels globally, especially in developing economies (Chaliuk, 2022).

In South Africa, food insecurity, poverty, unemployment, and inequality form part of the long-term effects of Apartheid. In 2021, it was reported that South Africa was the most unequal country in the world with a Gini Coefficient of 0.63 (World Population Review, 2022). Only 10 per cent of the population share 80 per cent of the wealth with the remaining 20 per cent of the wealth distributed across 90 per cent of population (The World Bank, 2020). The advent of COVID-19 only exacerbated already existing high levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment (Francis, Valodia & Webster, 2020). For example, in South Africa 2.8 million people lost their jobs following the COVID-19 induced lockdowns (Posel, Oyenubi & Kollamparambil, 2021). A report by Statistics South Africa (2022) revealed that South Africa's

unemployment rate in the last quarter of 2021 rose to 35.3% from 34.9% in the previous quarter. According to The World Bank (2020), 55.5 per cent (30.3 million) of the population in South Africa lives below the Upper Bound Poverty Line (UBPL) of R992 per person per month and, about 25 per cent (13.8 million) of the population is experiencing food poverty.

Moreover, Statistics South Africa (2017) shows that in 2015, more than half of the population living under the UBPL in South Africa were in rural areas. In fact, it is reported that the rural population living under the UBPL makes up 65.4 per cent compared to only 25.2% in urban areas. For example, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape provinces are predominantly rural and the two poorest provinces in South Africa with extraordinary levels of poverty and unemployment. Almost half of the population in these provinces is unemployed (42.8% in the Eastern Cape and 54.8% in Limpopo) (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Poor access to basic services, poor educational outcomes, lack of investment in rural infrastructure to boost the local economy and high levels of corruption at national and local government level are among the causes and consequences of the persistence of rural poverty (Mzangwa, 2019). Studies have also shown a linkage between women and higher rates of poverty, inequality and unemployment, particularly amongst rural women (United Nations Equity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UNWOMEN), 2022).

A related issue is that of food insecurity. Action Against Hunger (2022) maintains that 264.2 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa are undernourished, with limited access to food, as a direct consequence of the high levels of poverty and unemployment. South Africa is not considered food insecure at the national level; however, at the local and household level, food insecurity is a common problem (Statistics South Africa, 2017). A recent National Income Dynamics Study-Coronavirus Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM) report revealed that in 2021, 34% of urban households and 39% of rural households frequently ran out of money to buy food while 16% of urban households and 20% of rural households experienced hunger (NIDS-CRAM, 2021). The NIDS-CRAM report (2021) further revealed that women experienced higher food insecurity and hunger compared to men and hunger was far more prevalent amongst black people compared to whites.

To reduce the effects of poverty, inequality, unemployment and food insecurity, South Africa has developed an internationally recognised social protection system that provides social assistance in the form of social grants to over 18 million beneficiaries ((South African Social

Security Agency, 2021). However, the implementation of hard national lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, propelled the government to expand already existing social grants through top-ups and introduce a new Social Relief of Distress (SRD) benefit of R350,00 in 2020 for the unemployed working age population (18-59 years) who were not receiving any other cash transfer or social insurance (Senona, Torkelson & Zembe-Mkabile, 2021). Of the R364 billion of the total national social spending budget, R44 billion was allocated to the various social grants to aid 18.6 million beneficiaries (National Treasury, 2022). Including the various social assistance grants and grant top-ups due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 18,3 million grants had been paid out by the end of March 2021 with over 11 million beneficiaries, indicating that some beneficiaries had benefited from more than one social grant (Kohler & Bhorat, 2020; Parliamentary Budget Office, 2021). These 11 million beneficiaries received the Child Support Grant (CSG), Older Persons' Grant, Disability Grant, War Veterans' Grant, Foster Care Grant, Care Dependency Grant, Grant-in-aid, and the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant (South African Social Security Agency, 2021).

Arguments against the grant system include the value of the social grants being too little and social grants perpetuating dependency, and unwillingness to look for employment among beneficiaries, especially working age adults. Winchester, King and Rishworth (2021) explored the impact of social grants on rural livelihoods and highlighted the dissatisfaction of beneficiaries with the value of social grants with most expressing the view that 'it is not enough' and does not make a significant impact on their ability to create livelihoods and achieve adequate food consumption. Similarly, Waidler and Devereux (2019) argue that the growing number of beneficiaries, combined with the rising poverty and unemployment levels might lead to unsustainable numbers of beneficiaries, thereby collapsing fragile economies, especially in developing countries.

Notwithstanding the criticisms of the social grant system, on the positive side, the provision of social grants to poor and vulnerable people has been recognized as a valuable instrument of extreme poverty reduction, especially in Sub-Sahara where the challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment are prevalent (Nnaeme, Patel & Plagerson, 2020). Devereux (2021) and Nnaeme *et al.* (2020) have argued that social grants are catalysts for poverty reduction as they enhance agency among beneficiaries leading to improved livelihood strategies, economic participation and achievement of household food security.

Although evidence shows some positive impacts of social grants in terms of human development outcomes, creation of livelihoods and access to food and basic needs, there is a paucity of research on the impact of social grants on households' ability to create or diversify livelihood strategies and achieve adequate food consumption from the perspective of women, particularly those in rural areas. Moreover, a key gap in the research literature is the views of rural women regarding the additional SRD grant. The current research endeavoured to address this research lacuna by comparing the views of women in Benfarm Village, Limpopo who received social grants, and those who received an additional SRD grant on (1) determinants of food security; (2) food insecurity coping strategies, (3) livelihood strategies employed; and (4) the perceived impact of social grants and the additional SRD grant on livelihood strategies and household food security.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach which is a method of analyzing how people living in poverty employ their abilities and the assets at their disposal to meet their basic needs and enhance the quality of their lives (Chambers & Conway, 1992). A livelihood refers to the capabilities, assets and activities that people employ to earn a living. Livelihoods are regarded as sustainable when they allow one to cope with and recover from shocks and stresses. The Sustainable Livelihoods approach considers the factors that constrain or enhance livelihood opportunities. The factors that hinder economic progress and limit livelihood opportunities in rural areas include economic, social and environmental shocks and trends such as climate change and globalisation, among others (Natarajan, Newsham, Rigg & Suhardiman, 2022). The assets and abilities that rural individuals draw upon to develop livelihood strategies include financial, physical, natural, social and human assets (Adato & Meinzen-Dick, 2002; Serrat, 2017). This framework, therefore, underpinned the study although the main focus of the research was on financial assets (social grants).

However, the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach has been criticised for its omission of some of the critical factors that link to the creation of livelihoods in rural communities (Morse & McNamara, 2013). These omissions include culture, power relations within households and the larger community as well as historical experiences of people. While cultural beliefs and practices may be turned into livelihoods, especially in terms of crafts, culture may be a hindrance to practising livelihoods as it

relates to power relations and traditional norms on the role of certain groups within the community, for example, attitudes towards women engaged in livelihood activities (Chambers & Conway, 1992).

Despite its limitations, the study adopted the Sustainable Livelihoods theoretical framework as it provided a critical lens within which the linkage of different assets and activation of livelihood strategies and achievement of livelihood outcomes could be understood in-depth in relation to women in Benfarm Village who received traditional social grants and those who received the additional SRD grant.

Methodology

Research approach and design

The study adopted a qualitative approach with a comparative case study research design. The qualitative approach allowed for a richer understanding of how people make meaning of their lived experiences (Babbie, 2021). Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) define a case study as an investigation of a concrete, contextual bounded system. The rationale for selecting a comparative case study design was to compare the livelihoods and food security of those women in Benfarm Village who received social grants with those who received an additional SRD grant.

Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling with a snowball strategy was used to select participants based on the following inclusion criteria: They had to be (i) women living in the study area of Benfarm Village and (ii) living in households that received any form of a social grant, (iii) Ten of the women needed to be recipients of any type of social grant, excluding the SRD grant, and 10 women had to be beneficiaries of any social grant plus the additional SRD grant. As it was difficult to identify potential participants who met these criteria, snowball sampling was employed whereby the first few participants were asked to assist with the identification of other participants.

Demographic profile of participants

Table 1 shows key demographic information in respect of the 10 participants who were beneficiaries of social grants but did not receive the SRD grant plus the 10 participants who received the additional SRD

grant. From the table, it is apparent that both groups were very similar in terms of demographics and sources of income with the only real difference being in terms of access to the additional SRD grant.

Table 1: Demographic profile of grant beneficiaries with and without additional SRD grant

Category	Sub-Category	No. of Participants without SRD (n=10)	No. of Participants with SRD (n=10)
Age group	30-40	3	4
	41-50	5	4
	51-60	2	2
Language	Xitsonga	10	10
Level of education	Primary	3	2
	Secondary	4	6
	Tertiary	3	2
Number of household members	3-4	4	4
	5-6	5	4
	7-8	1	2
Breadwinner	Yes	4	6
	No	6	4
Type of social grants received	Child Support Grant	10	10
	Older Persons' Grant	2	3
	SRD	0	10
Employed	Yes	4	4
	No	6	6
Sources of income received	Formal employment	2	2
	Informal employment	2	2
	Self-employment	3	5
	Social grants	10	10
	Remittances	3	4
	Local savings/stokvels	8	9
	Subsistence agriculture	8	7

Setting for the study

Benfarm Village is a rural area located in Ba-Phalaborwa Local Municipality in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The population in the

village declined from approximately 40,225 persons and 9,271 households in 2011 (Census, 2011) to 12,757 persons and 3,199 households in 2022, of which 45% are headed by women (Census, 2022). This decline is likely to be due to migration from rural to urban areas. The population consists of only black people and the main spoken languages are Xitsonga and Sepedi (Census, 2022). More than half of the population live below the UBPL (Census 2022). Approximately 91% of households receive some form of a social grant and 49% depend on social grants as their main source of income (Ba-Phalaborwa Municipality, 2021). The employment rate is 27% with more men being employed than women and the majority of employed working in the informal sector (Ba-Phalaborwa Municipality, 2021). The low level of employment can be attributed partly to the fact that only 3.5% of people have completed a post matric qualification, while more than 65% completed primary school but did not attain a matriculation certificate (Ba-Phalaborwa Municipality, 2021).

Data collection

Data collection took the form of individual interviews in the homes of the participants, as participants indicated a preference for this setting. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed in line with the research objectives and pre-tested on three women in Benfarm Village. Semi-structured interviews were selected because, although they may include specific items, they allow for the probing of unanticipated responses from interviewees that require further elaboration (Grinnell, 2021). As the study was conducted towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, visiting restrictions had been reduced but masks were still worn and social distancing was observed. Interviews were conducted in Xitsonga to allow participants to understand the interview questions.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Clarke, Braun and Hayfield's (2015) method of thematic data analysis involving six phases, namely familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report.

Trustworthiness

The study followed the five criteria for enhancing rigour and trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability confirmability and authenticity (Schwandt, Lincoln & Guba, 2007). *Credibility* was enhanced through pre-testing the research instrument, providing a detailed description of the research methodology and theoretical framework underpinning the study and the use of thick descriptions of the setting. *Transferability* of the study's findings was achieved by providing a detailed description of the context of the study. *Dependability* was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of research notes, interview recordings and transcriptions. *Confirmability* was enhanced by using direct quotations from the transcripts and through the technique of reflecting on the essence of participants' responses after they provided answers to confirm their correctness. *Authenticity* was achieved by obtaining fully informed consent from the study participants.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained through the provision of verbal and written information to participants on the purpose of the study and their rights as research participants, including their right to voluntary participation. They were assured that their privacy and confidentiality would be respected and that no identifying details would be included in the final report and any subsequent publications. To uphold non-maleficence, participants who might have experienced stress as a result of the interview were offered counselling but no one took up this offer. Finally, ethical clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg (Ethical clearance certificate no. REC-01-238-2020).

Results

In comparing the two groups of grant beneficiaries, results are presented in accordance with the objectives of the study.

Determinants of food security

When the two groups were asked about the determinants of household food security, they both mentioned household size, household income and women as heads of households, while the group that did not receive

the SRD grant also mentioned time of the month and the group that received the additional SRD grant also cited household educational outcomes.

P7 (without SRD) brought up the issue of household size as a determinant of food security in households.

When we buy food, we have to buy enough to feed seven people for the whole month but it is always a challenge to buy enough food because we are many and our food usually runs out and we have to buy more or use sparingly sometimes.

Another determinant of food security was household income.

Since we depend only on social grants and the little money I make from my small business, we really do not have much to be able to buy a lot of food because we also have to take care of other needs in the house (P11, without SRD).

P17 (with SRD) pointed out the challenge that female headed-households face with regard to meeting their basic needs, including food.

Most of the households that are led by women are the ones that struggle with meeting their needs, especially in terms of food because you will find them borrowing money from loan sharks or buying food on credit from shops.

In terms of time of the month, some households reported to be more food secure at the beginning of the month than towards the end of the month. P8 (without SRD) shared her experience:

We normally have enough food at the beginning of each month as we buy during the first week of the month but we start running out of some food items towards the end of the month.

P14 (with SRD) believed that educational status of members was linked to food security, as reflected in her verbatim response.

I think the main thing that causes food insecurity in some households is the level of education of the heads of households. Families that have educated heads of households never really experience poverty and those who are not educated are the ones that are always struggling.

Food Insecurity Coping Strategies

In terms of the two groups' coping strategies for food insecurity both groups referred to subsistence farming, borrowing food items from neighbours and buying food on credit from local shops.

P3 (without SRD) explained that she engaged in subsistence farming by producing vegetables solely for household consumption.

I grow my own vegetables so that we do not have to buy from the shops. It saves us some money and we always have access to fresh vegetables.

Households utilized their social networks to mitigate food insecurity. P12 (with SRD) explained:

I sometimes ask my neighbor for some food items like sugar, cooking oil and maize meal when they are finished.

Buying on credit from local shops also surfaced as another coping strategy.

When we need some food items and do not have money, we buy on credit from the local tuck shop. Most of the women in the community do this. We have credit books and at the end of the month, we settle our debt so we can buy on credit again" (P4, without SRD).

The group that did not receive the SRD grant also referred to participation in grocery stokvels (collective saving schemes) and consuming food sparingly while the group that received the SRD also cited buying food in bulk.

P1 (without SRD) mentioned participation in grocery stokvels as a common strategy in the community. She commented,

I could say that most of the women in the community are involved in different grocery stokvels. In the one I am participating in we save money during the year and buy food in bulk in December and distribute amongst ourselves. The food items are a lot and last around four to six months.

P10 (without SRD) highlighted the strategy of consuming food sparingly as her household's coping mechanism.

We do not really run out of food because we have adopted a food saving strategy. We do not eat breakfast early in the morning, we eat it late in the morning towards lunch time so we can skip lunch and only have dinner. This way, we save a lot and ensure that the food we buy lasts us for a full month

Another strategy was buying food in bulk, especially non-perishable items, as P14 (with SRD) narrated:

Some food items like rice, cooking oil, sugar, canned fish and beans, I buy in bulk so that the food can last for a few months.

Livelihood strategies employed by rural women in the two groups

With regard to the livelihood strategies employed by rural women, formal employment, informal employment, subsistence agriculture, and running informal businesses emerged as strategies in both groups of participants. In terms of formal employment P14 (with SRD) stated.

My main livelihood is my job because I depend on my salary to take care of everything in the house.

Informal livelihoods included seasonal work on farms, subsistence agriculture, hawkership, spaza shops and tuck shops, and domestic work. An example of seasonal employment on farms was reflected in the following response:

My main livelihood is my seasonal employment at the local farm. It is not a regular job because sometimes I stop working for three weeks and only work one week a month, but this is how I make an income for myself and my family” (P2, no SRD).

P6 (no SRD) mentioned that she practices subsistence agriculture as her main livelihood.

My way of making money is selling the surplus produce from the garden in my backyard. I sell vegetables door by door so I can also make my own income.

P18 (with SRD) described her informal business as her livelihood.

My small business is my main livelihood. I sit here and sell every day and make money.

However, the cohort that received the SRD grant also revealed the practice of informal money lending as another form of livelihood. In the case of P14 (with SRD) she lent people money in order to profit from the interest earned when they settled the loan.

I lend people money and they return it with a 30% interest, that is how I make extra money

Perceived impact of social grants, and the additional SRD grant on livelihood strategies and food security

Regarding the views on the impact of social grants on livelihood strategies, the group that had not received the SRD grant had mixed responses as some participants maintained that social grants helped them create livelihood strategies while others felt that social grants did not facilitate the development of livelihood strategies due to their low monetary value.

P10 (without SRD) highlighted the fact that social grants can assist beneficiaries to start livelihoods in the form of small informal businesses.

Social grants can help you start a business if you know how to save and are business minded. In 2018, I saved for three months from the three Child Support Grants so I could buy stock and start selling. Since then, I have been selling fruits, vegetables, snacks and other things in the township.

However, some participants felt that social grants did not have any significant impact on livelihoods, as pointed out by P6 (without SRD):

My view is that social grants do not really help us to create small businesses. It is impossible to use the money on anything other than buying food because it is too little.

The group that did not receive the SRD grant was also of the opinion that social grants enabled diversification of livelihoods, increased household income and ensured guaranteed income in the event of loss of

livelihoods. In terms of livelihoods diversification, P8 (without SRD) stated:

My view is that social grants do help people create livelihoods and some can even have different livelihoods in one household. For example, my friend sells vetkoeks at school, but now her older son opened a small haircut salon and she says they were able to do it with the help of social grants.

P1(without SRD) acknowledged that social grants improve household income.

My opinion is that for families that do not receive any income, social grants play a very important role because they provide them with an income. For households that have people who work, it helps because it adds on the money that people make.

P14 (with SRD) alluded to the empowerment of beneficiaries not previously eligible to receive grants.

I would say it helps those who were not receiving anything at all. At least now they also receive their own income

However, they maintained that social grants and the SRD grant did not have much impact on livelihood strategies. As P13 (with SRD) put it,

I think the SRD is just too small. R350 does not make a lot of difference. You cannot do anything productive with it, we just buy additional food and then it is finished.

With regard to views of the impact of social grants on household food security, both groups highlighted the fact that social grants make a difference in households with poor sources of income. P9 (without SRD) explained:

I use the money we receive from social grants mainly to buy food. We do not have any other income other than social grants so I would say it helps us have something to eat.

The group that did not receive the SRD grant further cited the differential value of social grants. P9 (without SRD) explained:

In my family we receive two Child Support Grants and one Old Age Grant. The child grants combined are way less than the Old Age Grant so I believe that the Old Age Grant makes much more difference in us having access to food than the Child Support Grants.

However, they criticised the monetary value of social grants for being too little to make an impact on household food security. P2 (without SRD) commented:

My honest opinion is that as much as I appreciate the Child Support Grants I get, I feel like the money is not enough. It does not allow us to buy enough food. If you do not have another income, it will be difficult to buy enough food with only the grant money.

The group that received the SRD grant also believed that social grants enabled households to save money to mitigate food insecurity.

I think receiving the extra R350 on top of the two child grants we received helped us to save and be able to buy some additional food items to avoid going hungry at any point during the month (P12, with SRD).

However, the group of beneficiaries who were recipients of the additional SRD grant pointed out that the SRD grant enabled them to access more food and to mitigate food insecurity. For example, while P18 (with SRD) felt that the SRD made a minimal impact on livelihood activities, she acknowledged that social grants with the additional SRD grant helped in buying extra food items.

I think receiving the SRD grant has improved our income because we now receive additional income in the household.

Discussion

Views were elicited from participants regarding the determinants of household food security. Both groups believed determining factors were household size, household income and women as heads of households. However, the group that did not receive the SRD grant also mentioned time of the month, while the group that received the additional SRD grant also cited household educational outcomes.

In terms of the link between food security and *household size*, Drammeh, Hamid and Rohana (2019) maintain that the number of

household members, their age and economic status determine the level of household food security. Larger families often must distribute resources amongst each family member and if resources are limited, members have to share and therefore consume less (Drammeh *et al.*, 2019).

Findings regarding *income* and food security are consistent with Drammeh *et al.*'s (2019) assertion that the total monthly income of households is an important determinant of food security. Households with higher income are generally more food secure than households with less income. Moreover, households with family members who contribute to total household earnings have a higher probability of being food secure than those that depend on one or two family members' income, especially in larger households, and when the respective incomes are low in monetary value (Drammeh *et al.*, 2019).

The views on *female-headed households* aligns with the NIDS-CRAM (2021) finding that female-headed households are more vulnerable to food insecurity than male-headed households. This finding may be attributed to women facing higher levels of poverty, performing unpaid care work and working in the informal sector where they are likely to earn lower wages than men. Consistent with the Sustainable Livelihoods approach, gender could therefore be considered a constraining factor hindering livelihood opportunities (Adato & Meinzen-Dick, 2002).

Similarly, the finding on education is consistent with Drammeh *et al.*'s (2019) argument that the *educational status of households* significantly contributes to their level of food security. Those with higher educational attainment have the advantage of accessing decent work and income and therefore, have better access to food. According to the Sustainable Livelihoods approach, education could be regarded as a human asset, potentially enhancing livelihood opportunities (Serrat, 2017).

Regarding *time of the month*, households generally have a greater purchasing power when they receive their income, which for many is at the start of each month. During this period, they buy household essentials, including food. Households with higher incomes are able to buy enough food and replenish their supply when some items run out. However, households with lower incomes are prone to food insecurity towards the middle to the end of the month and often wait for the next income to buy food again (Dunga 2020).

In terms of the coping strategies employed by participants to cope with food insecurity, both groups referred to subsistence farming, borrowing food items from neighbours and social networks, and buying food on credit from local shops. The group that did not receive the SRD

grant also mentioned participation in grocery stokvels (collective saving schemes) and the practice of consuming food sparingly while the group that received the SRD also adopted the strategy of buying food in bulk.

Participants highlighted the importance of *subsistence farming* as a coping strategy against food insecurity (Sonko *et al.* 2020). Producing food within the household enhances access to healthy food and allows households to save money that would otherwise be used to purchase the same food from shops. In line with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, rural households require a certain level of access to natural capital to participate in farming activities that may be used to produce crops for household consumption or for income generation (Serrat, 2017). Serrat (2017) maintains that persons experiencing poverty draw upon their financial assets to enhance livelihood opportunities.

Maintaining close *social networks* that can assist when faced with difficult situations is important for households to function effectively. In line with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, access to social networks (social and human assets) when confronted with vulnerabilities is important for the welfare of rural communities (Serrat, 2017). The positive interaction between community members, is another way in which rural communities sustain themselves, build resilience and strengthen their local collaboration (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020).

Local tuck shops are an integral part of the rural economy. Their flexibility in allowing community members to buy food on credit enables them to contribute towards household food security and the reduction of poverty, while also enhancing their own profits.

The coping strategy of *participation in stokvels* is in line with Matuku and Kaseke's (2014) finding that stokvels help community members to meet their basic needs and play a catalytic role in reducing vulnerabilities that lead to poverty in rural communities. A stokvel refers to an informal savings scheme where interested members contribute into one savings pool and share amongst each other on a weekly, fortnightly, monthly or yearly basis (Matuku & Kaseke, 2014). The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach notes the significance of household's access to financial and social capital as one of the key assets that promote food security and participation in livelihoods (Adato & Meinzen-Dick, 2002; Serrat, 2017).

Although *consuming food sparingly* may represent a common coping strategy in rural households, its weakness lies in the fact that it puts household members at risk of undernourishment or malnutrition, which may affect health, learning outcomes and productivity of members, ultimately resulting in poverty. According to the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach that human capital is critical for participation in livelihood

strategies, therefore, this food saving mechanism may affect people's productivity due to ill health.

When the rural women in the study were asked about the livelihood strategies they employed, both groups of participants indicated that they engaged in formal employment, informal employment, subsistence agriculture, and running informal businesses.

Responses from both groups speak to the importance of *formal employment* as a key livelihood strategy in households. Bonoli and Sarfati (2017) stipulated that formal work is a more sustainable form of livelihood than informal avenues of making a living as it usually provides people with stability, a decent income and social security benefits.

The finding regarding *informal employment* supports Chakraborty's (2020) view that some households mainly rely on earnings from informal work as their primary income. Rural women especially, occupy many of the jobs in the informal economy. They work within poor employment conditions without access to social security incentives such as leave, maternity and retirement benefits compared to those in the formal sector. The dominance of women in the informal sector can be attributed to the long existing structural discriminations that have led to many generations of women not accessing education, thereby being unable to compete in the formal labour market (Chakraborty, 2020).

Informal work included *seasonal employment, subsistence farming, spaza shops and domestic work*. Although seasonal employment provides some income in the period of employment, the effect is that it creates patterns of unstable wages and employment uncertainty amongst rural women (Kandilov & Kandilov, 2020). Spaza shops and tuck shops are a significant part of local economies as they enable easy access to critical essential goods and improve income in households running spaza shops. However, Kgaphola, Tawodzera and Tengeh (2019) argue that the lack of financial management skills among rural spaza shop owners often leads to poor sustainability of the spaza shops and premature closure within a few months of operation. Domestic work is a common livelihood strategy in South Africa with the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2022) report confirming that there were about 808,000 domestic workers in the country (Statistics South Africa, 2022).

The experience shared by participants on *subsistence agriculture* is supported by researchers such as Mdoda and Christian (2021) who aver that rural dwellers not only participate in subsistence farming for household consumption, but some also endeavour to produce enough to sell to the community and to enhance their livelihoods and food security. The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach highlights natural and human

capital as key elements that promote livelihood strategies. The availability of land, coupled with women's capabilities contribute significantly to the development of livelihoods that are derived from natural resources (Molosi-France & Dipholo, 2020; Natarajan, Newsham, Rigg & Suhardiman, 2022).

Perceived impact of social grants, and the additional SRD grant on livelihood strategies and household food security

Interesting findings emerged with respect to participants' views on the impact of social grants on livelihood strategies. The group that did not receive the SRD grant had mixed responses as some participants maintained that social grants helped them create livelihood strategies while others felt that social grants did not facilitate the development of livelihood strategies due to their low monetary value.

The sentiments expressed by participants suggested that the availability of social grants provides a safety net against income poverty. The SRD grant was provided to over six million beneficiaries who were excluded from social grants before the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Social Development, 2021).

In line with the findings that grants enable the creation of livelihoods, Nnaeme *et al.* (2020) maintain that social grants provide beneficiaries with the agency to be productive and actively participate in livelihood strategies. Participants' comments also support Granlund and Hochfeld's (2020) argument that social grants have a positive impact on beneficiaries' participation in diversification of livelihood strategies. However, the findings regarding minimal impact of grants on livelihoods creation, confirms Mashala's (2016) argument that social grants are inadequate as most beneficiaries still experience poverty.

With the Older Persons' Grant (OPG) having higher monetary value than the Child Support Grant (CSG), it is understandable that households would value the OPG more highly compared with the CSG. Findings from participants also affirmed Winchester *et al.*'s (2021) argument that although social grants reduce income poverty, the monetary value of social grants is not sufficient to meet the basic food security needs of beneficiaries.

In interpreting these findings, it is important to recognize the limitations of the study. While generalization is usually not an issue in qualitative research, it must be acknowledged that the use of a small non-probability sample of 20 women precluded generalization of the findings to the broader population of rural women in South Africa. The second

limitation relates to the sensitivity of the questions asked during data collection which may have led to respondent bias. This weakness was mitigated by assuring participants that all information provided would be treated as confidential, and by explaining that there were no right or wrong answers and that their receipt of grants would in no way be affected by the views they expressed. Third, the research only focused on women's views with no inclusion of the views of other members of the household. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, important conclusions can be drawn from the study.

Conclusion

The main drivers of household food security were household income and household size. While social grants are an important source of income in poor households, social grants alone cannot facilitate the creation of livelihoods and cannot ensure household food security. However, they are able to supplement existing sources of income to enhance total household income and increase people's agency to participate in livelihood strategies and improve household food security. Households that depended only on social grants tended to use social grants to develop livelihood strategies and they were less food secure compared to households that had access to other sources of income in addition to social grants.

Hence, among the conclusions drawn from the research was that social grants did not exert a significant impact on livelihood strategies and household food security in households that had access to stronger sources of income. However, they had an impact on household food security in households that were dependent solely on grants. Livelihood strategies were influenced by people's need to generate additional income and their ability and willingness to actively create and sustain livelihoods, especially informal livelihoods. Although the study focused on the impact of social grants (financial capital) it emerged that in line with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, a combination of other capital assets such as social and human assets are critical in enabling women's access to income, participation in livelihood strategies and achievement of household food security.

Recommendations

To ensure that women participate optimally in small businesses as livelihood strategies, it is important for local government authorities to

provide entrepreneurial training and support to ensure that women, especially those in rural areas, are equipped with skills for business management. To enhance women's prospects of finding formal employment and participating in entrepreneurship, strategies include improving access to education in rural areas, particularly for young girls. Uneducated adults need to be encouraged to attend adult education classes. Government should also consider the extension of social security benefits to women informal workers to enable them to access benefits such as pension, paid leave, maternity leave, and unemployment insurance.

The study recommends that women practicing subsistence agriculture, receive support through the Presidential Stimulus Fund to sustain their self-employment, and access markets to generate income while ensuring household food security. It is further recommended that households that do not practice subsistence farming be encouraged to do so and be provided with the necessary skills and tools for effective and efficient farming so that they can directly contribute to food security. The Department of Social Development and the South African Social Security Agency should consider increasing the value of social grants, especially those of lower value such as the SRD grant to enable households to better meet their basic needs. Moreover, government should further consider calls by civil society organizations to make the temporary SRD grant a permanent grant with its value set at least at the Food Poverty Line and adjusted according to the inflation rate to enable households to have sufficient income to buy food.

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