



Grants must break poverty cycle

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BY NOW we all know that 17 million South Africans receive some form of social grant. We know this because of the fiasco earlier this year when it was unclear if grant beneficiaries would receive these monies on time.

Thanks to the Constitutional Court, millions of poor families were able to continue with life as normal when the South African Social Security Agency and Cash Paymaster Services were instructed to administer the payment of grants for a further 12 months.

It was during this time that I wrote an opinion piece disclosing how I am a former beneficiary of a social grant as I was a foster child following my mother's death when I was 12. My late aunt was able to use this grant to supplement her own income to enrol me into a good boarding school and to provide other needs for me.

The grant helped her to take me out of the abusive and toxic environment an orphaned child often finds themselves in when raised in an extended family. It is therefore my conviction that social grants can help to take poor children out of poverty but this cannot and does not happen by chance.

I am well aware of the privileges I enjoyed that other children who find themselves in my circumstances do not. I had an aunt who had a profession and didn't solely rely on the grant to take care of me. Millions of children today wouldn't have food or clothes if it wasn't for these grants.

Perhaps it is a recognition of this privilege that I will remain an ardent proponent of social grants and I will stand up to anyone who argues that these are a waste of state funds. I also passionately support the national school nutrition programmes which provide meals at schools for millions of children who otherwise would die of hunger.

However, I also believe it is my responsibility to keep reminding us that a grant should not be seen as an end but rather as the means. In my view, a government has an obligation to take care of its most vulnerable citizens particularly those who cannot care for themselves. Government also has a duty to make sure that citizens can live a life they value. I refuse to accept that anyone wants to live on a measly state grant for the rest of their lives and I know that parents who receive these grants for their children wish they could do more for them.

Childhood

I often wonder how different my childhood would have been if my 18-year-old mother was able to finish school, receive further education and training and eventually a job where she would be able to provide for herself and for me. I believe that's what most children and parents want.

I believe that we are moving away from this vision as we appear to view social grants as a way of life. Social grants should not perpetuate the cycle of poverty, grants should end the cycle.

I often compare social grants to the government's Extended Public Works Programmes. These provide jobs and help people put food on the table but let's not kid ourselves: this is a mild relief to a long term illness. Sure, such programmes can lead to a better skilled labour force in the same way that social grants can help provide basic needs for children. But what happens when these programmes end? What happens when a person is no longer a minor and therefore doesn't qualify? The patient will die.

It is abnormal for citizens to be dependent on the state for life. It should be the citizens who are driving their own country's progress. At 27.7%, our country has record levels of unemployment and millions of households literally depend on old age pensions and child care grants to meet their daily needs.

We must not be satisfied with the status quo and we must put our leaders on notice that we deserve and demand better. We must also be ready to put in the hard work of saving ourselves instead of accepting that there is a magic money tree out there that will sustain us forever.

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