

SIMON TAUKENI & TAOLE MATSHIDISO**ACCESSING SOCIAL GRANTS TO MEET ORPHAN CHILDREN SCHOOL NEEDS: NAMIBIA AND SOUTH AFRICA PERSPECTIVE****Abstract**

In this comparative paper we interrogate the access of social grants to meet orphan children school needs in Namibia and South Africa. We noted that the two governments are committed to provide orphan children with social grants to enable them to meet the school needs. However, accessing social grant to benefit most vulnerable orphan children raised many questions than answers in the recent times. We reviewed published and unpublished documents to examine the access of social grant to orphan children in both Namibia and South Africa. We discuss how orphan children access the social grants and the challenges facing them and their caregivers to meet their school needs such as paying school fees.

Key words: Orphan children, school needs, maintenance grant, foster care grant

Introduction

The rights of all children are recognized internationally and the Namibian and South African governments are obliged to ensure that all children including orphans access education and better livelihood. The two neighboring governments offer a unique safety net for vulnerable households through the provision of social grants (Taylor, Kidman & Thurman, 2011). School children experiencing orphanhood are one of many groups of vulnerable children that need care and support (Wilson, Giese, Meintjes, Croke & Chamberlain, 2002) to meet their school needs. The definition of an orphan child varies from country to country and from one community to another (Skinner, Tshenko, Mtero-Munyati, Segwabe, Chibatamoto, et al, 2004). For instance in Namibia an orphan is any child under 18 years that has lost a mother or a father or both parents as a result of death (Smart, 2003). In South Africa, an orphan is defined as a child that has no surviving parent caring for him or her after one of the parents has died (Draft Children's Bill cited in Nkomo, 2006). It was estimated that by 2012 Namibia would have an orphan population of over 250 000 (UNICEF, 2002) translating to one in three children in Namibia will be an orphan. According to Statistics South Africa (2005) there are more than 3.5 million orphans. This is equivalent to 18.6% of all children in South Africa. The majority of these children became orphans as a result of HIV and AIDS (UNICEF, 2005). Despite the Namibian and South African governments' commitment to support orphan children in meeting their school needs, the reality on the ground seems to suggest that not all orphan children are accessing the grants and benefit from it. A study by UNICEF (2006) found that with the existence of social grants, some of the children who are beneficiaries are not going to school and many of those who are entitled to access the grant are not able to do so. Thus, the aim of this paper is to look into the access of social grants to orphan children and challenges they face in accessing the grants.

Methodology

A review of relevant documents was used to outline the findings and debates regarding the accessing of social grants to orphan children. Searches included both published and unpublished documents on social grants from both Namibia and South Africa. Existing reviews of research were examined and extensive online searches of numerous databases were conducted, including Dissertation Abstracts and Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC). Combinations of the following key words were used in online searches: social grants and orphan children support services. Studies were only included if they provided information on social grants from Namibia and South Africa only.

Key Findings

In this section we present some key findings with regard to the access of social grants among orphan children in Namibia and South Africa. The main challenges facing the access of social grants among orphan children and their caregivers are also presented. We first present the findings about Namibia perspective before we look at the one from South Africa perspective.

Namibia perspective

Accessing social grants

The Namibian government provides support to orphan children through the social grants namely: child maintenance grants, foster care grants, allowance paid to children's home and places of safety and grants for children with disabilities. Since the paper focuses only on orphan children it talks more about the child maintenance grants and foster care grants which majority of orphan children are likely to be beneficiaries. Maintenance grant is paid towards the maintenance of a child under the age of 18 years. Parents receive N\$ 200.00 for one child plus N\$ 100.00 for every additional child monthly to a maximum of six children per applicant (Ashby, Yates, Hubbard & Mkusa, 2006). In order to qualify for maintenance grant the following should apply: One or both parents receive old age pension or disability grant, one parent has died or one parent is in prison for six months or longer and the surviving parent earns less than N\$ 1000-00 before deductions (Nitsckhe, Ihemba & Nekundi, 2007).

The foster care grant is given to caregivers who undertake the temporary care of any child found to be in need of care and who have been placed in his or her custody in terms of the Children Act No.33 of 1960. Parents receive N\$ 200.00 for one child plus N\$ 100.00 for every additional child monthly to a maximum of six children per applicant (Nitsckhe, Ihemba & Nekundi, 2007). The government of Namibia through its implementation of a Plan of Action for orphans and other vulnerable children (NPA 2006-2010) in the 2009 financial year, provided more than 50,000 children with social grants to alleviate their plight whilst attending schools (Yates, 2007). The Ministry of Gender and Child Welfare, is responsible for registering and processing grants for orphans and vulnerable children on a monthly basis.

Taukeni (2011) interviewed six orphaned children about social grants' provisioning. He found that half of the participants in the study received grants from

the government. Their caregivers and relatives received the grants on their behalf. The grants were used by their caregivers to buy orphan children school uniforms, shoes, clothes and to pay school fees. There were also a few of the participants shared their grants with other family members and the money was not enough to cater for all of their needs, especially, to pay school fees. Some of their comments were as follows: "I received the grant and one of my siblings received it too. My grandmother receives my grant on my behalf". Another participant said: "I am the only one who received the grant money from government at home. I share it with my brother". A girl living in child headed household said: "My sister uses it to buy us shoes, school uniform and pay school fees". Even though most orphan children were provided with social grants to meet their school needs, some of them are facing challenges to access these grants.

Challenges to access social grants among Namibian orphan children

A Baseline survey carried out by Project Hope in 2006 in the Namibian northern regions of Omusati and Oshana found that most orphan children were not attending school cited lack of money for school fees and school uniforms as reasons. This was also confirmed in the study conducted by Taukeni (2011) in the Endola circuit, Namibia that the majority of participants experienced problems with paying their school fees. Participants were quoted as follows: A maternal orphan girl said, "It was said that my father would send me money when he got paid to pay my school fees". Another paternal orphan boy revealed: "Fees are not going very well. I can stay even a year without paying school fees. When the school starts is when I pay". He also raised a concern that: "I feel bad about my name being called to pay in class. I used to feel bad. Other learners might say I am in the class but I did not pay".

Also, in their study Mnubi-Mchombu and Ocholla (2011) found that most orphans in rural areas were faced with poverty and could not afford to pay school fees. Unfortunately they were not aware that they could apply for an exemption. A few who knew the procedures for applying for exemptions were refused permission by the head teachers or principals. Additionally, Nitsckhe, Ihemba and Nekundi (2007) quoted Lydia, a 72 years old single female in the Khomas region who said that: "In order to apply for maintenance grant, I need to take the surviving parent along. Since I do not know his whereabouts I cannot register for the grant. I find it difficult to pay school fees, since the school refuse to exempt the children from school fees". Even though the participants had not paid their fees, none of them reported being barred from attending school. The inability to pay school fees is a plausible cause part of the drop in school participation after a parent's death, to the extent that the death reduces household income (Yamano & Jayne, 2004).

Documents also revealed how not being able to get proper documentation could prevent orphan children from applying for social grants. Obtaining birth certificates, death certificates and identity documents which are compulsory for one to qualify for welfare grants, was a problem mentioned. For instance, Taukeni (2011) found that some of the participants in the study did not receive the grant because of incomplete documentation. One of the participants commented that: "I was not registered because my birth certificate could not be found. It was with my maternal grandmother". He further commented that: "My grandmother did not want to give

the papers to let me be registered by my paternal aunt. She wanted to get me registered herself”.

Another challenge noted was with regard to the criteria that when the applicant earns more than N\$1000-00 per month, he or she does not qualify for the maintenance grant. If the children are orphaned by one parent and or might be vulnerable, they do not benefit from the support available from Government just because their caregiver earns slightly more than N\$1000-00 per month (Nitsckhe, Ihemba & Nekundi, 2007) or does not have income at all.

South Africa perspective

Accessing social grants

In 2000 the South African government started provision of cash grants as poverty alleviation mechanism. Among these grants are: child support grants, foster care grants, and care dependency grants. Orphans are also beneficiaries of these grants (Ntshunshu, 2011). The child support grant is R220 per month and is payable to all children under 14 years of age whose primary care giver passes a means test (Department of Social Development, 2005). The foster care grant is provided to children below the age of 18 who have been placed in foster care and are in need of assistance. The amount provided is R690 (Department of Social Development, 2005). However, access is markedly low for foster child grants compared to the access for child support grants (Taylor, Kidman & Thurman, 2011). The grants system is managed through the South Africa Social Agency and provides cash transfers to low-income families. As of October 2010, nearly fourteen million beneficiaries were receiving grant payments (South African Security Agency cited in Taylor, Kidman & Thurman, 2011).

Challenges to access social grants among South African orphan children

In her study Ntshunshu (2011) assessed the implementation of intervention programs that ensure the right to education for orphans in schools in the King William’s Town District, South Africa. Data revealed that there were a number of challenges faced by orphans with regards to accessing social grants and this affected their school performance negatively. Some of the challenges were (1) even though orphans were receiving the social grants, it was inadequate to provide for their home and school needs; (2) there was lack of information by applicants to access documents they needed to apply for social grants; this was an impediment to access to funds from social grants; (3) the long distances travelled by people to reach social services posed obstacles to those wishing to apply for grants; (4) applicants lacked proper documentation such as birth certificates and parents’ death certificate which could impede application processes for social grants; and (5) lack of monitoring of social grants resulted in the misuse of funds by some caregivers.

Taylor, Kidman and Thurman (2011) asserts that some foster care parents have great difficulty in getting the foster care grant because they fail to produce the necessary documents such as birth certificates, the biological parents’ death certificates. This leaves many children who have lost parents without the social support at a time when they are particularly vulnerable. They also found that that it

is very difficult for child caregivers to get social grants as they are often complicated by a means test (Taylor, Kidman & Thurman, 2011). The child caregivers will only pass the test if he or she lives in either a rural area, in an informal or formal dwelling and an urban area in an informal dwelling, and has a personal income of below R1100 per month (together with the spouse) and occupying a brick or asbestos house (Department of Social Development, 2005). Many young children under the age of 18 are taking care of households and younger siblings, but they do not qualify to get foster care grant. Hence, the number of children receiving foster care grant is far below than it should be in reality (Ntshuntshe, 2011). For example, in some cases children are taking care of smaller siblings, in situations where both parents have died in HIV/AIDS related cases. In such cases the children will not qualify for foster care grant as it requires that anyone who seeks a foster care grant should stay in a stable environment and must have an income below R1100. As a result, many orphan children are left out to gain access of the foster care grants even though they qualify to get it.

Conclusion and recommendations

We conclude that even though the Government of Namibia and South Africa made provision of social grants to orphans and other vulnerable children to meet their school needs, not all orphans were able to access the grants and they were finding it difficult to pay their school fees. This is due to many reasons such as lack of supporting documentation for example: birth certificates, identity documents and death certificates. Another challenge mentioned especially with regard to accessing foster care grant in South Africa was the issue of a means test that most caregivers were finding it difficult to meet its criteria. We found that generally accessing foster care grants and maintenance grants was difficult in the two countries. It appears that some criteria to access social grants are not inclusive of orphan children who are taking care of younger siblings after the death of their parents especially in HIV and AIDS cases. We therefore recommend that the criteria to access foster care grants should include the orphans who are in child headed households in both Namibia and South Africa. Also, we noted that nearly all social grants in Namibia were N\$ 200-00 plus N\$ 100-00 for additional children to maximum of six, we would like to recommend that the amount needs to be increased so that orphan children could meet their school needs better.

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