

Civil Society Organisations' Advocacy in Policy Reform: The Case of the Child Support Grant During COVID-19 Lockdown (Level 5: 26 March 2020 – 30 April 2020), in South Africa

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Abstract

The Child Support Grant (CSG) is one of South Africa's most successful social security programmes to eradicate poverty among children. Since its inception, the CSG has enhanced the capacity of children and their caregivers to take control of their living conditions. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are well known for their contributions to policy reform. This study aimed to explore the strategies employed by CSOs in advocating for the CSG top-up during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa. The study adopted an interpretative approach and qualitative methodology. Desktop research was utilised with a sample of relevant primary and secondary documents selected through purposive and theoretical sampling. Data was collected from academic books, journals, government documents, government legislation, newspaper articles, and reports from government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and research institutes. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. The key finding is that advocacy strategies such as evidence-based research, media campaigns, online petitions, letter submissions, and coalitions were employed by CSOs to pressure the government to top up the CSG. The study concludes that virtual consultative platforms should be recognised as effective spaces for policy advocacy.

Keywords: Advocacy, Child support grant, Civil society organisations, COVID-19 lockdown, Policy reform

Introduction

The primary goal of the Child Support Grant (CSG) is to alleviate poverty among children in South Africa and ensure that caregivers of young children living in extreme poverty can access financial assistance in the form of cash transfers (RSA, 2004). The CSG contributes to a basic minimum standard of living, and also assists with bringing about better income distribution in unequal societies (SASSA, 2020/25:22; Children's Institute, 2017:108). The CSG benefits

eligible children from 0 to 18 years of age whose caregiver income is less than R55,200 (single) and R110,400 (married) per year (Department of Social Development (DSD), 2023:40). According to the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) Annual Report (2020), approximately 12,787,448 recipients received a CSG in the 2019/20 financial year. R440 was transferred electronically to every beneficiary each month in 2020 (SASSA, 2020). Since the emergence of the CSG, CSOs have played a significant role in the implementation of the grant, including challenging the means test criterion and advocating for increases in the amount and age coverage (Seeking, 2016:10). Multiple studies have found that the receipt of a CSG is linked to improved food security, school attendance, and nutritional and health outcomes for children, and many other positive effects, in addition to reducing income poverty (Mtshali, 2018; Department of Social Development (DSD), SASSA and UNICEF, 2012:120; Ngcongco, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted people's health and livelihoods in South Africa. The Disaster Management Act, 2002: Amendment of Regulations issued in Terms of Section 27(2) were promulgated on 25 March 2020, affecting the movement of citizens and access to goods and services (RSA, 2020). To mitigate the spread of the virus, the South African government introduced a national lockdown from 26 March to 30 April 2020. It implemented a COVID-19 risk-adjusted strategy comprising five distinct levels of regulations, ranging from Alert Level 5 to Level 1 (the least restrictive) (RSA, 2021). Under Level 5 of the COVID-19 lockdown regulations, movement and gatherings were prohibited except for "performing an essential service, obtaining an essential good or service, collecting the social grant or seeking emergency life-saving or chronic medical attention" (RSA, 2020). Hard lockdown (Level 5) resulted in persistent issues of food insecurity. It increased the exposure of children to many forms of deprivation, affecting their well-being (Children's Institute, 2020:2). The SASSA (2020/21:24) reported that disruptions in livelihoods occasioned by the sudden loss of income and unemployment directly increased reliance on the social assistance programmes, particularly the CSG and the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant. According to the C-19 Peoples Coalition (2020), the ability to afford basic nutritious food was a significant concern amongst CSG beneficiaries as the food basket increased by 7%, or R220, during the Level 5 lockdown – equivalent to half the monthly CSG. Bhorat et al. (2020, p.4) noted that during the Level 5 lockdown, policymakers, researchers, and CSOs were most concerned with mitigating the lockdown's effects on vulnerable individuals who were unlikely to access unemployment insurance or private income safety nets. As a result, prominent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) directly operating in the fields of child care, social security, and children's rights, such as Black Sash, Children's Institute, CINDI, Section 27, PLAAS, SPII, C-19 Peoples Coalition and many more, advocated for an increase in the CSG to match the cost of living. They initially proposed a monthly rise of R500 for all beneficiaries, almost 13 million individuals, to mitigate the COVID-19 lockdown-related impact on CSG beneficiaries (C-19 Peoples Coalition, 2020).

This article explores the strategies employed by CSOs in advocating for the CSG top-up as a resolution to the severe impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on CSG beneficiaries in South Africa. The research focuses on the period of Level 5 lockdown, which was the most restrictive. The article first discusses the concept of policy advocacy and the various types of policy advocacy activities. It then examines the research methodology, including the research approach, sampling, and data collection and analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the findings, which include the advocacy strategies adopted by CSOs in

terms of the CSG during the pandemic (especially during the hard lockdown), the successes achieved, and the advocacy challenges faced. The article ends with a conclusion and recommendations.

Policy Advocacy

Policy advocacy is defined as intentional activities initiated by the public to affect the policymaking process (Gen & Wright, 2013, p. 165). For policy advocacy to be genuinely effective, it must also include citizen participation, allowing local communities to participate actively in policy reform. Policy advocacy is embedded in the RSA Constitution through its provisions of public participation in policymaking, implementation, and reform. Chapter 2 of the RSA Constitution (1996), sections 17 and 18, provides everyone with the right to "freedom of expression, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions" (RSA, 1996). These provisions acknowledge the rights of CSOs and citizens to communicate their ideas and concerns openly. Section 59(2) provides that legislatures may not exclude the public and media "unless it is reasonable and justifiable to do so in an open and democratic society" (RSA, 1996).

Sharma (1997) alludes that the crucial goal of policy advocacy is to allow stakeholders, including researchers, service providers, beneficiaries, and members of the public, to participate in the decision-making process. Therefore, policy advocacy generally prepares decision-makers and policymakers for the next policy window or even pressures them to open one so that action may be taken. When promoting the subject, Brinkerhoff and Crosby (2002:202) stress the need to have access to a range of communication channels and activities, as they emphasise that no single technique will be beneficial for all concerns and audiences. Furthermore, an advocacy effort can be significantly strengthened by incorporating diverse stakeholders. Policy advocacy initiatives must offer sufficient opportunities for target audiences to be engaged, hold discussions, and ultimately take ownership of the presented ideas (Young & Quinn, 2012, p. 112). Policy advocacy activities may comprise:

Evidence-based Research

According to Young and Quinn (2012, p.31), evidence-based research produces pertinent data and arguments that may be utilised to promote a particular problem or perspective. As a result, research-backed information is essential for creating a compelling narrative that engages the public. Young and Quinn (2012) argue that by incorporating the strongest available research findings into the development and execution of policies, evidence-based decision making assists individuals in making well-informed judgments about policies, programmes, and projects. The submission of evidence-based research allows CSOs to influence and shape the policy agenda, thus giving them value as prominent actors in policymaking, especially if the evidence produced is realistic and proposes attainable solutions to the identified problem (Court et al., 2006, p. 33). As a result, informed decisions are made regarding policy change.

Media Campaigning and Petitions

The media play a role in policymaking as information providers and transmitters, agenda setters, and attitude shapers (Anderson, 1997, p. 76). The media is a tool that can facilitate more effective involvement in a civil society framework and assist in putting civil society concepts into practice. Many advocacy groups choose to include a public dimension in their campaigns because they believe that external or public pressure on decision-makers is

required to achieve results (Young & Quinn, 2012, p. 29). This is a common tactic employed by civil society watchdog groups that monitor government actions. According to Sprechmann and Pelton (2001, p.91), the media is an essential tool in delivering advocacy messages and influencing public opinion and that of policymakers and groups involved in the political process. Brinkerhoff and Crosby (2002, p.202) caution that it is important to consider which media outlets are influential with policymakers.

Lobbying

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (2009:11), lobbying clarifies the public's concerns. It influences decision-makers, government officials, or policymakers to support or oppose particular laws or regulations. Interest groups can also debate policy problems in public-private discussion forums, town hall meetings, public hearings, and through submissions (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002, p. 202). Many groups protecting the interests of a particular group of people utilise face-to-face meetings with decision-makers or influential individuals as a common strategy (Young & Quinn, 2012, p. 29). These groups are more likely to have easy access to influential individuals and to concentrate their efforts on being present and visible during government and public debates about their interests. Cloete (1998, p.147) argues that by submitting written letters to specific political offices and/or public officials, interest groups and individual citizens can engage in the policy-making process and policy reform by expressing their preferences, interests, or complaints regarding specific subjects.

Coalitions

In strengthening advocacy, creating coalitions may be beneficial to groups in achieving their goals. Whether through permanent or temporary alliances with different organisations, this strategy might be advantageous for gaining support and persuading government officials (Sharma, 1997, p. 88). For long-term effectiveness, advocacy organisations need to collaborate with other organisations that have similar policy core beliefs (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002, p. 201). Collaboration can effectively persuade stakeholders and government officials that the presented interests are not limited to a special interest group. Cloete and De Coning (2011:150) contend that clients and coalitions are significant implementation variables that require the integration and interaction of governments, the private sector, civil society, and communities for successful policy implementation. Moreover, Cloete and De Coning (2011:145) assert that the success of policy reform and implementation is strongly dependent on the major commitment of the actors accountable for it and their understanding of the value of participatory decision-making.

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm is an approach used to understand and interpret everyday happenings (events), experiences, and social structures, as well as the values people attach to these phenomena (Rubin & Babbie, 2010, p. 37). The interpretive paradigm is appropriate for this study as it explores CSOs' advocacy role in policy reform. This paradigm enabled the researchers to better understand the CSOs' advocacy strategies, experiences and challenges encountered while advocating for the CSG top-up during the COVID-19, level 5 lockdown in South Africa.

Research Design

The study used a qualitative research design. Creswell (2014:32) defines qualitative research as exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.

The study's main objective was to explore and interpret the advocacy strategies employed by CSOs in advocating for the CSG top-up as a resolution to the severe impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on CSG beneficiaries. Therefore, the qualitative research approach enabled the researchers to learn about and comprehend the experiences of CSG beneficiaries, the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown regulations on them, and CSOs' advocacy efforts.

Sampling

According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014, p.137), non-probability sampling is used when it is nearly impossible to determine who the entire population is. Purposive sampling is one of the non-probability sampling methods where the components to be observed are selected based on a researcher's judgment by choosing which ones will be most appropriate or representative (Wagenaar & Babbie, 2010, p. 193). The sample for this study consisted of a selection of relevant primary and secondary documents. Purposive and theoretical sampling were used to select documents related to the CSOs' choice of advocacy activities and challenges encountered while advocating for the CSG top-up.

Data Collection

This study used qualitative content analysis as a data collection method. According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al (2014), qualitative content analysis is both a data collection and data analysis technique. The authors state that qualitative content analysis as a data collection method allows the researcher to collect and analyse a large amount of data, and there is no particular structured way of collecting data (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al, 2014, p. 236). Additionally, this method is most effective when looking at narratives in texts from relevant documents, news reports, as well as visualised narratives (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al, 2014, p. 236).

This is a desktop study using primary and secondary data; therefore, data were collected from academic books, academic journals, government legislation, online news sources, and reports from government departments, NGOs, and research institutes. Some of the primary and secondary data that were utilised include:

Government legislation (primary data) comprised: RSA Constitution (Act No.108 of 1996), White Paper on Social Welfare 1997, National Development Agency Act No. 108 of 1998, Framework for Social Welfare Services of 2013, and Covid-19 Lockdown Regulations: Amendment of Regulations issued in terms of Section 27 (2).

Secondary data included: reports from the Department of Social Development (DSD), the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), and studies from Amandla. Mobi, Budget Justice Coalition, Children's Institute, Chilenga-Butua, COVID-19 Peoples Coalition, Democratic Works Foundation (DWF), Development Policy Research Unit (DPRU), Dullah Omar Institute, South African Social Policy Research Institute, and online news sources.

Online news sources included:

1. News 24
2. Daily Maverick
3. Mail and Guardian
4. Ground Up
5. The Citizen

Data Analysis

Neuman (2014, p.457) describes thematic analysis as a process of detecting, categorising, and coding recurring patterns and themes within qualitative data, such as texts, images, and observations, to uncover hidden meanings and ideas. The study used qualitative thematic analysis to analyse the data extracted from the primary and secondary documents. The data were categorised into specific themes related to the aim of the study. The themes focused on CSOs and spaces of participation, the CSOs' advocacy role and strategies, the successes of the CSOs' advocacy on the CSG, and the challenges faced when advocating for the CSG during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Findings and Discussion

The study's findings substantiate the general understanding that CSOs play an integral part in policy-making, deepening democracy, implementing pertinent programmes, and increasing government efficiency and accountability. They also reflect that CSOs are essential players in policy-making and policy reform due to their innovative and complex nature. Their proximity to the communities is lauded for their capacity to convey the concerns and opinions of citizens, especially those of the marginalised, to reach government ears and gain recognition on the agenda. Through advocacy, CSOs promoted the CSG top-up for CSG beneficiaries to overcome the challenges associated with the COVID-19 lockdown and pandemic. Therefore, it is worth noting the strategies and tactics employed by CSOs to advocate for the CSG top-up during the Level 5 lockdown in South Africa.

Advocacy Strategies Employed by CSOs During the COVID-19 Lockdown

The White Paper on Social Welfare, section 3(23)(e), highlights that civil society organisations are particularly well positioned to “*represent their constituencies in structures such as policy-making and program coordination at all levels of government, ensuring that interventions are appropriate and effective*” (RSA, 1997). According to Young and Quinn (2012, p.112), policy advocacy interventions must offer sufficient opportunities for target audiences to be engaged, hold discussions, and ultimately take ownership of the presented ideas. Having realistic and comprehensive strategies in various settings is frequently the key to influencing policy implementation (Court et al., 2006, p. 10). CSOs further issued evidence outlining the dire situations faced by CSG beneficiaries through submissions of evidence-based research.

- ***Advocating R500 CSG Top-up Through Evidence-based Research***

Evidence-based research is lauded in South Africa by the National Development Agency (NDA) Act No.108 of 1998, which promotes partnerships between CSOs and the South African government. One of the objectives of the NDA Act is to establish an enabling environment that encourages the public and constituencies to participate in policy-making and policy reform through consultations, debates, and dialogues based on the experiences of the relevant stakeholders (RSA, 1998). Research reports submitted by the Development Policy Research

Unit (DPRU) and the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit created the basis for the government to be made aware of the severity of the lockdown problem, the urgent attention it deserved, and for the government to make an informed decision on the social assistance response (University of Cape Town, 2020). The National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey investigated the socio-economic impacts of the national lockdown associated with the state of disaster declared in South Africa in March 2020, and the social and economic consequences of the global coronavirus pandemic (Bassier et al., 2020, p. 7). The study aimed to collect information that could be useful for policymakers in understanding the difficulties people were experiencing during these challenging times. Participants were interviewed via telephone, and their participation in the study provided researchers with important insights that informed South Africa's social assistance policymaking during the lockdown (Bassier et al., 2020, p. 1). This resonates with the sentiments of the NDA, which emphasises the importance of research and publication in improving development policy, highlighting their fundamental role in ensuring effective implementation (RSA, 1998).

Additionally, the DPRU, in its research, compared the progressivity of the CSG per child and caregiver, the COVID-19 grant (the SRD grant), and the post-October policies (Bhorat & Kohler, 2020). The research analysed how expanding the existing grant system could alleviate poverty among informal workers and their households. The three grant options that were investigated were: (i) a top-up to the existing Old Age Pension (OAP) Grant; (ii) a top-up to the existing CSG; and (iii) the introduction of a new Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant, all broadly targeting the unemployed and those in informal employment (Bhorat & Kohler, 2020, p. 8). The policy question analysed in the research concerned the extent to which expanding existing social assistance programmes or introducing new ones would compensate for the negative impact of labour market shocks on household welfare (Bhorat & Kohler, 2020, p. 10). The Children's Institute (2020) lauded the CSG as the most straightforward and most efficient means to send money to millions of impoverished homes that would otherwise experience food insecurity and crippling poverty. In this case, CSOs attained the essential role of disseminating information by involving citizens in the collective pursuit and defence of their interests and values (Diamond, 1994, p. 10).

- ***Media Campaigning and Online Petitions for Urgent Increase of the CSG by R500 for six months (May-October 2020).***

2002 the Gauteng Provincial Legislature played a key role in enacting the Gauteng Petition Act No. 5 of 2002, which regulates petitions. According to this Act, a petition is a complaint, request, representation, or submission presented by a petitioner to the Committee. The Act emphasises mass or group petitions, which consist of individual or group submissions from multiple petitioners addressing the same or closely related complaints or requests (Gauteng Legislature, 2002). This type of petition became particularly prominent during the Level 5 lockdown as media campaigns and petitions by CSOs proved to be an effective technique for gathering the public's views and ideas on specific concerns related to the COVID-19 lockdown and the pandemic itself, particularly in the absence or closure of other public participation and policy advocacy channels. Petitions also served as an advocacy tool to bring CSOs and individual citizens together to convince the government to advance the CSG during the lockdown—some respondents to the Children's Institute's Amandla. Mobi petition for the CSG top-up of R500 stated their reasons for signing it. According to one respondent:

"I signed because when lockdown started, we were retrenched from work therefore social grant is currently my only source of income" (Amandla.Mobi, 2020).

The R500 top-up of the CSG was also highlighted as a major constitutional obligation of the government within its available resources, and it appeared that the CSG beneficiaries were deprived of certain basic services during the lockdown.

"It is a child's constitutional right to be protected from hunger and poverty" (Amandla Mobi, 2020).

The focus of public participation in this petition was to urge the government to consider the CSG beneficiaries, particularly children, as the most susceptible to the unintended or unexpected effects of its mitigation measures when developing COVID-19 response initiatives (Van Bruwaene, 2020, p. 1). Additionally, Masweneng's (2020) article in *Dispatch Live*, reported that the purpose of asking participating CSG beneficiaries to state their reasons for signing the petition was to gather descriptive insights into how they were affected and why the R500 increase would be the best policy option to help them cope during the hard lockdown. This approach of getting beneficiaries to sign and state reasons for participating in the petition also resonates with the CSOs' role, as argued by Davids (2014, p.65), who notes that CSOs employ participatory and bottom-up approaches to influence various stages of public policy-making and implementation. Numerous submissions by CSOs were also made to the president and relevant departments as an advocacy strategy during the Level 5 lockdown.

The media play a role in policymaking as information providers and transmitters, agenda setters, and attitude shapers (Anderson, 1997, p. 76). Both the public and the government rely on the media as a significant source of information, using their ability to raise awareness of an identified problem. Citizens become aware of what is happening and how they are affected (Anderson, 1997, p. 76). The C-19 People's Coalition issued a media statement, "A call for social solidarity in South Africa", on 24 March 2020, to emphasise their commitment to protect the vulnerable, stating that:

"We [CSOs] have a particular duty to safeguard those who are most vulnerable, those who are already living with hunger, weakened immune systems, and poor access to health care. Greater restrictions and shutdowns are coming, but they will only work if full support is provided to working-class and poor communities. Drastic measures are needed if we are to avoid disaster. Each of us must act now" (C-19 People's Coalition, 2020).

Emphasising the same sentiments, the Democratic Works Foundation connected the CSOs with decision-makers and public representatives in provincial legislatures, facilitated their access to national and provincial networks, and helped the organisations amplify their views (Dutschke, 2020). The Foundation further initiated a virtual consultative forum where all CSOs and NGOs could meet under one roof to optimise the function of the provincial legislatures, ultimately providing an avenue through which citizens could participate in their democracy and actively address some of the serious challenges faced by communities during the lockdown (Dutschke, 2020). Gen and Wright (2013, p.72) assert that an effective advocacy strategy should involve multiple engagement and mobilisation tools, both online and face-to-face.

- ***Lobbying for the R500 CSG Top-up through Submission of Letters***

Cloete (1998, p 147) argues that by submitting written letters to specific political offices and/or public officials, interest groups and individual citizens can also engage in policy-making by expressing their preferences, interests, and complaints regarding specific subjects. The RSA Constitution of 1996 complements submissions as a mechanism of public participation. According to the RSA Parliament (2022), a submission is the presentation of views or opinions on a matter or piece of legislation under consideration by a committee of Parliament or a relevant department. The RSA Parliament (2022) also outlines that most submissions are written. If the individual or organisation submitting the material can speak before the committee, they can support their arguments in person (RSA Parliament, 2022). By submitting their ideas, any member of the public can suggest amendments or alternatives that could help ensure the laws established by Parliament or any other topic being discussed are effective (RSA Parliament, 2022). In a letter submitted to the president, the C-19 People's Coalition (2020) urged the government to increase the CSG by R500 to help people who had lost their income due to the COVID-19 lockdown and further emphasised that:

"Social grants are an extremely effective mechanism for protecting children and families against the effects of poverty" (C-19 People's Coalition, 2020).

Sharing the same sentiments, the Budget Justice Coalition (2020, p.2), in the "Submission to the Committee on Cooperative Government and Traditional Affairs", argued that:

"Access to sufficient food and relief from economic hardship are fundamental rights entrenched in the South African Constitution alongside the right to access healthcare services and education" (Budget Justice Coalition, 2020).

On 27 April 2020, CSOs submitted a letter to the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Social Development and Women, concerning the social grant component of the disaster relief package. The letter emphasised the need for rapid reform of the package due to its unfairness to women and children, and how it further reinforced existing inequalities. In advocating for the CSG increase per child, CSOs emphasised the effectiveness of the strategy as a mechanism when compared to other alternatives, stating that:

"The original proposal, to increase every CSG, was not only to protect the children who receive them but to use the CSG as a conduit to protect the poorest households. For this reason, every CSG needed to be increased substantially, as the starting value of the CSG was already well below the per capita food poverty line" (C-19 Coalition, 2020, p.9).

Similarly, the Budget Justice Coalition (2020) highlighted that the demonstrated projections revealed that, given the recent increases in other grants, assigning the R500 CSG increase to the caregiver instead of per child would lead to an additional "2 million" households falling below the food poverty line. Therefore, attaching the CSG top-up to the caregiver could negatively impact many households, pushing them deeper into poverty, particularly in their ability to afford basic needs and sufficient food. Coalitions were also formed to reinforce this message to the government.

- **COVID-19 People's Coalition**

The COVID-19 People's Coalition is formed by civil society members who wanted to ensure that South Africa's response to the COVID-19 crisis was rooted in social justice and democratic principles. The COVID-19 People's Coalition also wanted to give special attention to the most

vulnerable people during the lockdown and the pandemic (C-19 People's Coalition, 2020). One of their mandates was:

"The C19 People's Coalition is committed to ensuring that the South African response to the COVID-19 virus is effective, just, equitable, and meets the needs of the most marginal in our unequal country" (C-19 People's Coalition, 2020).

During Level 5 lockdown, the C-19 People's Coalition was made up of 245 civil society organisations that included community structures, trade unions, informal workers' organisations, civics, social movements, rural groups, national and provincial NGOs across all social sectors, frontline responders such as community health workers and shelters, migrant and refugee organisations, public interest law firms, and faith-based organisations (C-19 Peoples Coalition, 2020). This aligns with the perspective of Cloete and De Coning (2011, p.145), who argue that the success of policy reform and implementation is largely influenced by the strong commitment of those responsible for it and their appreciation of the importance of participatory decision making. The Coalition was mostly made up of human rights groups representing the interests of the marginalised. It was established to exert pressure on the government to implement fair social relief measures for South Africans who were most at risk during the pandemic (C-19 Peoples Coalition, 2020). By providing government officials with knowledge, CSOs can reclaim some of their indirect power over agenda-setting (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002, p. 197).

Sharma (1997:88) alludes that strengthening advocacy through the creation of coalitions may be beneficial for groups in achieving their goals. Whether through permanent or temporary alliances with different organisations, this strategy may be advantageous in gaining support and persuading government officials. The White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) highlights the role of CSOs in social welfare programmes, emphasising their responsibilities in areas such as direct service delivery, advocacy, information systems, accountability, and participation. CSOs are also tasked with sharing knowledge and motivating local communities to take action to address their needs. Through numerous submissions to the president and ministers of pertinent departments, the C-19 Coalition held the government accountable for achieving the progressive realisation of children's rights by creating reasonable legislative and other measures within its available resources during the precarious time of the COVID-19 lockdown (Hendricks et al., 2020). The C-19 Coalition emphasised the message to be communicated through the various media campaigns it implemented. Campaigns such as #PayTheGrant, Amandla.Mobi and the Programme of Action Campaign were among the key efforts calling for an increase in the CSG. These campaigns demonstrated that coalition building was innovative in improving the chances of success and enhancing the capacity of the government to promote its social assistance policy priorities during that precarious time (C-19 Peoples Coalition, 2020). Having numerous campaigns emphasising one, or a similar message, pressures the government to launch an effective intervention to solve the identified problem (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002, p. 198).

Successes of CSOs' Advocacy of the CSG

The Framework for Social Welfare Services of 2013 traces the success of delivering progressive social welfare services to CSOs and their organisational structures. Civil society organisations are praised for their contributions to human rights initiatives, such as interventions for preserving the rights of marginalised groups, promoting rights via education on rights and

obligations, facilitating access to rights, and challenging policies and social structures that compromise rights through advocacy (FSWS, 2013, p.13). Topping up existing social grants as a policy option was aimed to ensure that the most vulnerable South Africans were covered, immediately alleviating the consequences of the lockdown, including hunger and unemployment (DSD, 2020). Advocating for the top-up of the CSG was one of the key efforts by CSOs to support vulnerable populations, particularly children, in coping with the financial hardships caused by the lockdown and its associated regulations. Changes to the CSG during the lockdown marked another victory for CSOs' participation in policy reform.

- ***CSOs and the CSG Top-up***

Chilenga-Butua (2022, p.13) asserted that civil society is not often afforded the space to contribute meaningfully to policymaking in South Africa. However, during lockdown, the space for policymaking opened up for some organisations to participate in the social assistance response. One research institution interviewed stated:

"Some proposals that we put forward were adopted in some form. The pandemic was thus a unique opportunity in the policy space as 'there were lots of voices' ... that assisted with the decision making" (Chilenga-Butua, 2022).

According to Hall (2020), the grant increases and the new grant came after several weeks of desperate advocacy attempts by civil society organisations and teams of researchers, led by the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town.

During the lockdown, topping up the CSG entailed:

"[An] increase of R300 for the Child Support Grant to be paid in (only) May 2020 per child. Thereafter from June – to October 2020, an R500 grant will be paid to caregivers of the Children on the Child Support Grant. The amount per child will revert to R440 per month from June. All existing caregivers will automatically qualify and receive this benefit along with the existing CSG monthly benefit. All other existing social grants are increased by R250 per month from May to October 2020" (DSD, 2020).

There were efforts and engagements from relevant stakeholders to ensure payment of the grants. Before the announcement of social grant top-ups, the SASSA had discussions with the relevant parties to find a workable solution for paying social grants early to alleviate congestion at retail stores and other pay points (DSD, 2020). The most important agreement was that banks would drastically lower their fees for recipients of social grants, enabling them to access more pay points where they could collect their grants during the lockdown. These interventions and improvements were to support maintaining social distance in queuing at bank branches and retail stores (Banking Association of South Africa, 2020). Furthermore, the SASSA introduced staggered payment dates for the recipients of different types of grants to avoid overcrowding at pay points, post offices, and ATMs (SASSA, 2020). This reflects what Cloete and De Coning (2011, p.150) contend: that clients and coalitions are significant implementation variables that require the integration and interaction of governments, the private sector, civil society, and communities at large for successful policy implementation. The negotiations between prominent implementing departments and agencies also resonate with Cloete and De Coning's (2011, p.145) assertion that the success of policy implementation strongly depends on the major commitment of the actors accountable for it and their understanding of the value of participatory decision making.

Notwithstanding the gaps in public participation and decision-making processes during the stringent lockdown measures, South Africa is applauded for having one of the most progressive constitutions in the world – one which promotes the participation of citizens and interest groups in policymaking. The changes implemented in the CSG programme highlight the impact of CSOs on policy reform and resonate with Heller's (2009, p.125) assertion that civil society is an essential part of democratic deepening, as it allows for the efficient exercise of citizens' and political rights. Therefore, civil society is seen as a necessary component of democracy and policymaking.

While technological and virtual platforms proficiently enabled CSOs' advocacy to influence decisions made, they also encountered challenges.

Advocacy Challenges

CSOs encountered challenges while advocating for CSG beneficiaries during the COVID-19 lockdown.

- ***Limited Available Spaces for Advocacy***

Runji (2020), in a *Daily Maverick* article, asserted that the implementation of the lockdown in South Africa to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus demonstrated the importance of placing civil society at the centre of any democratic discussion to advocate for the rights of the vulnerable and to represent the concerns of the community it serves. However, because gatherings were prohibited, advocacy capacity was limited due to the absence of the usual avenues for activism, such as protests and demonstrations, town hall meetings, visits to constituency offices, and direct contact with relevant stakeholders and policymakers (Runji, 2020). Furthermore, Jobson et al. (2021) reported that:

"In the early days of the pandemic, civil society was absent from the consultative processes, as medical experts, scientists, and the private sector were prioritised. Even in the establishment of entities such as the Solidarity Fund, the government turned primarily to the private sector rather than to disaster relief entities or civil society experts".

The lack of spaces for participation was a barrier to CSOs' advocacy. In South Africa, Parliament is mandated to facilitate public involvement in its legislative and other processes and to conduct its business openly, thus, representing the people and ensuring that the government delivers on its promises and undertakings to the public (People's Assembly, 2020). During the lockdown, this was scarce. Chabana (2020) argued that

"The oversight work of Parliament cannot be efficient or effective outside of the involvement of the public or society. Members of Parliament were not visible, as far as oversight is concerned, for a considerable time after the state of the disaster declaration. The executive went on about its business without due accountability".

Concerning government collaboration with civil society in addressing social welfare challenges, the preamble of the White Paper on Social Welfare identifies the lack of developmentally appropriate and integrated strategies to address economic and social exclusions in vast sectors of the population as a setback to the delivery of social welfare services (RSA, 1997). According to the White Paper, "An intersectoral response is needed

within government and between government and civil society to adequately address welfare needs" (RSA, 1997).

- ***Lack of Response from Relevant Stakeholders***

Civil society also had difficulties in obtaining a response from the government and the departments to which they had issued submissions. The Budget Justice Coalition wrote to the National Treasury on 9 April 2020, asking many questions about the role of civil society, transparency, and public participation in decision-making processes regarding the impact of COVID-19 on public finances. However, they found that the forms of participation were not accommodative:

"Treasury's closed media briefing on 14 April didn't answer the majority of our questions. Since the BJC was not given access to the briefing, we did not have the opportunity to put our questions directly to the minister and his team" (Budget Justice Coalition, 2020).

Furthermore, blocking civil society engagement reflects a lack of respect for transparency and public participation. While the mechanisms for participation are developed, it is transparency itself that encourages public engagement, as it remains a constitutional requirement (Budget Justice Coalition, 2020).

- ***Lack of Public Awareness of Online Petitions***

The lack of public awareness around the petition process and the non-attendance of key stakeholders at hearings plague delays in processing petitions (Peoples Assembly, 2019). An article in *The Citizen* (2020) reports that Amandla. Mobi's petition calling for an urgent R500 increase in the CSG sparked mixed reactions on social media. The majority of people claimed that households were already receiving adequate assistance and that the government was providing food parcels during the lockdown. Most online petitions, however, fail to reach their goals and gather enough signatures to have an impact (Berg, 2017). In contrast, Masweneng (2020), in a *Dispatch Live* newspaper article, reported that the campaign to persuade the government to urgently increase the CSG by R500 for six months received 557,707 out of a target of 600,000 signatures. Furthermore, Moosa (2020), in the *Mail and Guardian*, identified the language barrier as a hindrance to the online petition. He reported that in campaigning for social assistance reform through online petitioning, "... most South Africans without the means to sign petitions in English or to ensure the elected representatives hear their opinion, remain excluded". Wright (2012) argued that the success of an online petition appears to depend on media attention, highlighting the significance of actively securing media attention before starting a petition.

- ***The Digital Divide and Lack of Data***

The lockdown forced everyone to rely almost entirely on digital platforms overnight (More & Dutschke, 2021). Due to inequalities in South Africa, however, not everyone has access to internet platforms for an alternate form of advocacy. Methods for reaching out moved online, making it difficult for CSOs and research organisations to access relevant participants for the cause and gain momentum (Sangonet Pulse, 2020). The study by Adelle and Haywood (2021, p.22) indicated that access to technological platforms and enabling gadgets became a barrier for CSOs in accessing the target population and communicating with each other. Access to

data was also highlighted as a contributing factor hindering participation, as online platforms are data-heavy. One of the CSOs interviewed stated that:

"Zoom also became an important platform for communication but is data heavy. There's a lot of people who don't attend [a Zoom meeting]. They will save up money to get data to watch the recording... I haven't found a way of getting past that technology barrier yet, to be able to include everybody" (Adelle & Haywood, 2021, p. 22).

While some CSOs would normally have relied on free Wi-Fi from public libraries and other facilities, these were now closed (Adelle & Haywood, 2021, p. 22). Along the same lines, the Dullah Omar Institute (2020:12) highlighted that data and airtime are expensive in South Africa, and network coverage is still uneven in many areas (especially in townships and rural areas), making it difficult for the public and CSOs to participate in virtual meetings and consultations. Similarly, Cloete and De Coning (2011) highlight limited technological literacy and inadequate access to technological resources as significant barriers to the equitable adoption of electronic technology infrastructure in developing countries.

- ***Lack of Communication***

Seekings (2020), in a *Ground Up* article, reported:

"Under the lockdown, it has been difficult to get information on what the national government has been doing. There has been a severe lack of transparency".

The Dullah Omar Institute (2020) stated that the lack of communication and access to information was marked as a major contributing factor hindering civil society participation in the response to the pandemic. During the Level 5 lockdown, in particular, effective participation was hindered. Brinkerhoff and Crosby (2002, p.65) argued that one of the challenges faced by CSOs is the possibility that policymakers may restrict the information that the general public should have access to. Furthermore, the Dullah Omar Institute (2020) contended that:

"Providing notice of only one day, or even two to three days significantly limits people's ability to observe or participate in committee meetings" (Dullah Omar Institute, 2020).

Brinkerhoff and Crosby (2002, p.65) argued that having access to timely and accurate information encourages citizens and the government to participate more effectively by explaining and communicating the reasoning behind policy decisions. This is echoed by John et al. (2022), who highlight the value of persistent efforts to inform the public with credible, accurate, timely, and empowering information during times of crisis. The White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) identifies the participation of the public and all welfare constituencies in decision-making about welfare policies and programmes as a means to promote democracy (RSA, 1997). Therefore, appropriate and effective mechanisms, such as consultation with all role players, including beneficiaries and service providers, through their representatives and organisations where possible, must be conducted (RSA, 1997). This will not only deepen democracy and public participation but will also be beneficial in the implementation of the programmes or policies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aimed to explore and interpret the advocacy strategies employed by CSOs in advocating the CSG top-up as a resolution to the severe impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on CSG beneficiaries. In the South African context, public participation legislative frameworks stress that the government is required to engage both the public and CSOs in policy-making, ensuring informed decisions through available participation mechanisms. Through various public participation platforms and policy advocacy strategies, CSOs play a crucial role in influencing decision making and driving policy reform. CSOs are well known for their innovative nature and ability to provide platforms where citizens can share their experiences, concerns, and ideas that can inform the development of appropriate and effective responses to an identified problem.

The commitment of actors involved in the delivery of social assistance is crucial in handling crises or disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, especially when creating and executing responses connected to these, such as the CSG top-up. During the hard lockdown, the public and CSOs had limited opportunities to interact with policy and decision-makers; this restricted their ability to voice concerns and have an impact on the preparation and execution of disaster response plans. However, advocacy strategies such as evidence-based research, media campaigns and online petitions, submission of letters, and coalitions were utilised by CSOs to pressure the government to top up the CSG and the public to contribute to the design of social assistance response policy.

CSOs' propositions around the CSG R500 increase from May to October 2020 were not adopted exactly as recommended, but their proposals, appeals, and findings from evidence-based research became the basis of the implemented CSG top-up response executed by the government. While technological and virtual platforms proficiently enabled policy advocacy, CSOs experienced challenges such as limited available spaces for advocacy, lack of response from the relevant stakeholders, lack of public awareness of online petitions, the digital divide, lack of data, and lack of communication between stakeholders. These issues negatively impacted some of the CSOs' advocacy efforts as well as the participation of the targeted population.

The study recommends that virtual consultative platforms should be recognised as proper spaces for policy advocacy and policymakers should formalise these mechanisms regular CSOs input in policy reform processes. The government needs to conduct decision-making issues openly, especially in the absence of the direct interaction mechanisms of participation. Furthermore, CSOs should be invited and notified in advance of the issues needing attention by circulating an agenda before meetings take place. This will enable CSOs to provide evidence-based information on the subject matter, strengthen their advocacy message, and develop relevant policy alternatives together with the government. A collaborative approach between the government and CSOs will enhance the effectiveness of policies related to social assistance, leading to more comprehensive and impactful policies that provide better support to the marginalised especially during crises like COVID-19..

The issues of internet connectivity barriers, access to data, and enabling gadgets are complicated, and innovative collaboration between government and internet service providers is of utmost importance in this regard, especially in rural areas, which are also associated with a large number of vulnerable population groups. Addressing the above issues will not only facilitate a better quality "reach" to the vulnerable but will also enable the government and CSOs to gather informative data to design and implement relevant response

strategies. CSOs need to collaborate with service providers in adopting bulk messages and email systems to notify the public of ongoing or upcoming media campaigns and online petitions. Furthermore, the issue of language barriers is equally complex but an innovative strategy should attempt to include voice messages that are accessible in different languages. Public and non-governmental institutions must combine efforts to effectively meet social welfare needs.

Declarations

All authors have read and approved the published final version of the article.

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